



**BROKEN  
CHALK**

Submission to the Universal Periodic Review of the United  
Nations Human Rights Council 4<sup>th</sup> Cycle – 46<sup>th</sup> Session

## **Right to Education**

### **Country Review: Vanuatu**

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**Submitting Organization: BROKEN CHALK**

**October 2023**

**By Inja van Soest**

**Kingsfordweg 151, 1043 GR**

**Amsterdam, Netherlands**

**+31687406567**

**[upr@brokenchalk.org](mailto:upr@brokenchalk.org)**

**[www.brokenchalk.org](http://www.brokenchalk.org)**

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**Broken Chalk** is an Amsterdam-based NGO established in 2020 that monitors and minimises worldwide human rights violations in education. We aim to promote universal and equal access to education for all.

We encourage and support achieving societal peace with our international sponsors and partners by advocating for intercultural tolerance, preventing radicalism and polarisation, and tackling educational inequalities.

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## I. Introduction

1. Vanuatu's Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) administers and manages the country's formal education system composed of two years of preschool, six years of primary school, four years of junior secondary education, and three years of senior secondary education. [i] The six years of primary education have been compulsory and universal since 2010. Over 98% of elementary schools are public or government-aided Christian schools. [ii]
2. Vanuatu has significantly raised the share of government expenditure dedicated to education compared to the total government spending. In 2020, 20.98% of the total expenditure was dedicated to education, increasing to 23.76% by 2021. In the progress report for 2021 and 2022, the exact government expenditure still needs to be mentioned. Nevertheless, the report describes progress in the education support program as satisfactory and anticipates that approximately 28% of the total government expenditure will be allocated to the education sector in 2022. This shows Vanuatu's dedication and commitment to meet domestic educational funding objectives. [iii]
3. Local educational groups encompass Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Technical Assistants (TAs) who provide specialised technical knowledge and assistance in educational projects or programs. These actors actively participate in evidence-driven policy discussions and monitor equity and learning outcome efforts to improve educational results. [iv]
4. The multilingual character of the community has a significant impact on education. Bislama, the local pidgin language, is the prevalent means of communication nationwide. Children receive their education in French or English schools with a language policy promoting students to start their early education in their native vernacular before transitioning to French and English. [v]
5. Vanuatu comprises 83 scattered islands, with 64 of them being inhabited. It is considered the most disaster-prone country globally, frequently encountering earthquakes, tsunamis, volcanic eruptions, cyclones, and flooding. This poses unique challenges to ensuring education, educational materials and access to continuous education in emergencies. [vi]

6. With about 50% of Vanuatu's population being of schooling age, the educational system has considerable influence and responsibility. The primary education sector accommodates most students, making up approximately 59% of the total student population within the education system in any given year, with enrolment rates increasing. Participation levels in pre-school and secondary school are somewhat lower. Although registration has risen recently, many students drop out at the junior secondary level. [vii]
7. Broken Chalk is delighted to see Vanuatu's dedication to advancing Gender Equity and Inclusion in Education. This commitment is evident through initiatives to increase awareness of Gender-based Violence and foster equitable educational opportunities, particularly by enhancing the participation of girls and women in higher education through the Gender Equity in Education Policy (GEEP) reviewed in August 2018. The policy aims to secure equal opportunities and rights for every individual in education and training, with its overarching objective being to cultivate a proficient and capable human resource pool that can contribute to the nation and the global community. [viii]

## II. Brief overview of the last UN-UPR cycle

8. In its national report prepared for the State's 2018 UN Periodic Review, Vanuatu emphasised the National Sustainable Development Plan until 2030 to realise fundamental human rights through sustainable development, awareness raising and developing curriculum materials accordingly. [ix]
9. Since 2014, the Education Act stipulates the inclusion of women in the National Education Advisory Council and aims to eradicate educational disadvantages that stem from a child's gender or ethnicity. The Ministry of Education has also formulated eleven policies that promote and implement the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), which governs child protection and rights to education and inclusivity. [x]
10. Vanuatu stressed its efforts through a new curriculum covering the following key areas: the endorsement of international human rights treaties, promoting gender equity, fostering inclusive education, addressing climate change and disaster risk reduction, enhancing water and sanitation knowledge, understanding the functioning

of the judiciary, advocating for child rights, promoting family life education, and emphasising health and physical education. [xi]

11. In collaboration with religious institutions, the government has also made strides in improving access to education. [xii]
12. In the last UN UPR cycle, Vanuatu received 20 recommendations regarding the right to education. The recommendations primarily focus on creating a more inclusive and equitable educational system by addressing existing educational barriers, eliminating discrimination, and promoting access and equal opportunities for children, particularly those with disabilities and girls, while emphasising the importance of literacy and supporting broader sustainable development goals. Broken Chalk notes that Vanuatu supported 19 of the 20 recommendations. The noted recommendation concerns developing a disaster-sensitive protection system for children with disabilities, entailing school infrastructure for physical safety and resilience to ensure students' well-being during disasters. [xiii]

### III. Socioeconomic Challenges

13. Socioeconomic challenges play a significant role in education in Vanuatu. With only universal primary education, parents must meet school fees for any other type of education. In addition, many primary schools request additional contribution fees for school uniforms, lunches or materials [xiv]. Notably, early childhood and secondary education have low enrollment and high dropout levels, often due to the school fees. Low income is critical in causing school dropouts, with fee affordability being a primary concern, especially for families with multiple children [xv].
14. A significant number of survey comments (26%) highlighted the difficulty of paying school fees as a barrier to education [xvi]. In 2010, the urban-rural financial divide was evident as the average monthly household income ranged from 53,500 Vatu (VT) in rural areas to 97,500 in urban areas. With this variation comes a different ability to pay for school fees, which results in higher dropout rates in rural areas. An average of 2,808vt goes towards monthly education expenses [xvii]. In rural areas, essential expenses like firewood and mobile phone charges precede education [xviii].

15. Since most Vanuatu households are subsistence households, income poverty and drastically changing commodity prices significantly impact the financial state of many families. Subsistence households often rely on small-scale farming or informal labour, which may offer limited income-generating opportunities. This typically results in a lack of financial savings or insurance mechanisms, making them highly vulnerable to economic shocks, such as crop failures, illness, or loss of additional income opportunities. Fluctuations in commodity prices, such as crops or livestock, can also result in limited income and struggles to invest in new income opportunities. With about 75% of Vanuatu's population living in rural areas, children participating in monetary activities is much higher, and the needed commitment to pay for and attend school is also higher. Especially for low-income families or families with disabled family members, the additional income or help is crucial [xix]. These families rely on the support of the youth with household work or in family-owned agricultural practices [xx].
16. The financial constraints, such as the inability to afford school fees, disheartens some students [xxi]. In urban areas, the dropout rates towards secondary school are more linked to students seeing peers earning money. They are attracted to immediate income, whilst school is a longer journey with less clear outcomes [xxii].
17. Additionally, not all parents support their children going to school. With the financial burden of paying for school fees and uniforms, many parents do not see the value of education beyond the primary school level. Furthermore, having children in school also means they have homework to complete outside of school, which is an additional time investment. [xxiii]

#### IV. Gender and Cultural Barriers to Education

18. Including people with disabilities, women, and different cultures in the curriculum and schedule are challenges the educational system in Vanuatu faces.
19. With disability ranking as the fourth highest barrier to education and school attendance in Vanuatu, after parental perceptions about the worth of education, cultural or social norms and gender, with an attainment gap of more than 53

percentage points between primary school children without a disability and those with a disability. [xxiv]

20. Infrastructure and road accessibility issues often pose significant hurdles, making it difficult for these students to reach schools physically, and additionally can expose students to situations of assault.
21. Furthermore, the curriculum does not adequately accommodate diverse learning needs, and teachers frequently lack the training to teach children with disabilities effectively. Discrimination against individuals with disabilities remains pervasive, and the absence of solid community support exacerbates their struggles.
22. Moreover, the limited availability of crucial assistive tools such as braille or sign language further compounds the barriers these students face, creating a multifaceted challenge to inclusive education in the country. [xxv]
23. Students and parents with impairments experienced significant problems during COVID-19. Students with physical disabilities, hearing impairments, visual impairments, or intellectual disabilities who require specialised ways to accomplish their assignments did not receive adequate help. Regardless of impairments or particular learning requirements, most HSPs took a consistent strategy, excluding those with special needs or assistance. [xxvi]
24. School officials noted obstacles in disability inclusion within schools, such as the shortage of inclusive instructors, a lack of accessible facilities, and the necessity for students to be accompanied by carers. [xxvii]
25. Women comprise 49% of the population in Vanuatu, with 48% of the youth population being female. While the majority consensus among parents and teachers is that girls should receive education, some still believe that the investment into girls' education is lost due to the chance of girls marrying and moving away, which reflects the historic prioritisation of education for boys. [xxviii]
26. A conflicting point is that some parents expressed concerns about girls engaging in sexual relationships at school or during the commute to school, leading to teenage pregnancies that limit the girls' prospects. Others see girls' education as crucial for them to adapt to the changing lifestyle and professional opportunities for girls. [xxix]

27. The educational system in Vanuatu also faces challenges related to cultural factors. Some parents perceive the system as Eurocentric. The idea of this potentially causing a disconnect between students and their cultural heritage leads to hesitation in enrolling children into further education after primary school. [xxx]
28. Additionally, the influence of custom beliefs and ceremonies occasionally precedes education, leading to short-term school withdrawals for some students. Although such interference is less common, a few communities prioritise custom practices over external education systems, underscoring the delicate balance between traditional customs and contemporary education in Vanuatu. [xxxi]

## V. Educational Challenges in Emergencies (Covid-19)

29. As of March 23<sup>rd</sup> 2020, Vanuatu faced the first lockdown and closure of schools due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Islands were additionally hit by the Tropical Cyclone Harold in April 2020, causing significant damage to community buildings and schools. Both these incidents caused an abrupt shift to remote learning. [xxxii]
30. The Ministry of Education and Training instructed teachers to develop homeschooling packages (HSP) for students. Most of the teachers needed to be trained to create homeschooling materials. Additionally, there needed to be more explicit guidelines on the HSP format, which resulted in most teachers depending on their versions and frequently photocopying information and activities from textbooks. [xxxiii]
31. Due to the impact of the Cyclone, there needed to be funds for new photocopiers, paper and toner, or fuel for generators, making it difficult to produce copies of the HSP. [xxxiv]
32. Additionally, there were significant disruptions in the distribution of the HSP to remote areas that are already harder to reach in the best conditions. Physically distributing the HSP caused difficulties for many with high costs and hazardous journeys. [xxxv]
33. With two emergencies impacting Vanuatu simultaneously, one instructor mentioned how their attention was concentrated on recovering their homes and communities after TC Harold and teachers needed more effort towards HSP support. [xxxvi]

- 34.** The two emergencies came together, and the lack of educational facilities equipped to face such a situation became clear. Additionally, the missing support for students and parents, especially for students with disabilities or special needs or parents with no or low literacy or education levels, resulted in students being left out and falling behind. Teachers noted that even if students and parents could speak a language, they needed to be literate enough to handle written materials in Bislama or English. [xxxvii]
- 35.** For HSP to function well, parents must actively participate; therefore, parental support is essential. It might be difficult for parents, particularly in remote locations, to find the availability to assist their children [xxxviii]. As Vanuatu has high subsistence households, conflicting commitments can make homeschooling harder [xxxix]. Furthermore, families need more financial resources to assist in learning at home. In addition, many families have insufficient access to electricity and lights, especially after a natural disaster. [xl]
- 36.** Most students received an HSP, mostly in hard copy form, with just 9% obtaining it online and 6% receiving both. However, access to devices was very restricted [xli]. Internet access was also an issue, with just around a third of students having an internet signal at home. Nearly half of those surveyed reported poor or very poor internet dependability [xlii], and few had appropriate computer devices for online learning. Many communities, particularly those with small leased flats, needed more suitable rooms for children to study, limiting remote learning experiences [xliii]. Nonetheless, most students found a space to learn at home, with 50% checking in their bedrooms [xliv].
- 37.** Although most schools and students participated in the HSP, various obstacles arose throughout its implementation [xlv]. Many students stated that they were never contacted by their professors during the four weeks of complete school closure, with urban and peri-urban students more likely to be approached than rural and distant students [xlvi]. Surprisingly, most children and families did not seek help from their instructors [xlvii]. Only 35.5% of pupils completed the HSP work, while 40.8% completed more than half of it, leaving the others with much less progress [xlviii]. Teachers also faced difficulties because many pupils still needed to return or complete

their assignments. In several cases, it was clear that the work had been performed by someone other than the student. [xlix]

38. Besides the HSP, the MoET broadcasted home-schooling radio shows between April and September 2020 to support inclusive education during the lockdown. However, in six months of broadcasting, the maximum number of plays per age group was 8 [l]. In a survey on the homeschooling package, the participants were still waiting to mention the radio shows [li], indicating that the HSP or a different type of emergency education plan must be designed and reviewed for possible future emergencies.

## VI. Recommendations

**Broken Chalk recommends the following measures to address the challenges that Vanuatu and the education system face and promote the right to education for all:**

39. Broken Chalk encourages the Vanuatu Government and Ministry of Education and Training to allocate more government spending to education, focusing on subsidising school fees, especially for early childhood education and secondary schools, through scholarships or grants.
40. Broken Chalk encourages further awareness campaigns to express education's long-term benefits and to explicitly address parents' concerns about the value of all education.
41. Broken Chalk recommends community outreach programs to promote the importance of education for girls, dispel myths, and implement safety measures, such as school-specific transportation to protect students, especially girls, during their commute to school.
42. Broken Chalk sees the necessity of additional specialised training for teachers for inclusive education and strategies for addressing discrimination against individuals with disabilities.
43. Broken Chalk recommends ensuring the availability of essential assistive tools, like braille and sign language interpreters, in schools.
44. Broken Chalk recommends further revision of curriculums to include and promote cultural content and sensitivity and adapt teaching methods to diverse learning needs,

including those of students with disabilities, to balance custom practices with formal education.

45. Broken Chalk recommends the development of explicit and standardised homeschooling materials available to students in emergencies, which are accessible and versatile for students with different learning capacities and surroundings, especially in rural areas.
46. Broken Chalk recommends investments in equitable devices and internet access in remote communities for students to participate in online learning experiences, especially in rural areas with low literacy rates. Adults can also use devices and the internet to access educational material.
47. Broken Chalk sees the necessity for training and incentives for teachers to engage effectively with students in emergencies and to ensure the student's educational progress whilst keeping in mind the mental health effects of lockdown or other disaster situations.
48. Broken Chalk recommends investments in digital infrastructure, the expenditure of radio shows and access to radios for educational content during emergencies.
49. Broken Chalk encourages parental involvement in children's education through awareness campaigns and support mechanisms, especially for single and low-income parents.

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Kingsfordweg 151, 1043 GR  
Amsterdam, Netherlands

+31685639758 | [info@brokenchalk.org](mailto:info@brokenchalk.org) | [www.brokenchalk.org](http://www.brokenchalk.org)

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