

ADB

Priorities of the People

HARDSHIP IN VANUATU

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Asian Development Bank

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Introduction

Although absolute poverty in terms of starvation and destitution is not a problem in Vanuatu, many people have incomes below the international poverty line of US\$1 per day. Recent estimates suggest that 40% of all Ni-Vanuatu and 51% of those living in the rural areas have incomes below this level.

Disadvantaged Ni-Vanuatu suffer from “poverty of opportunity,” in terms of a lack of access to basic services, jobs, and education. To address this, the government is striving to understand the nature of hardship in Vanuatu and develop ways to combat it.

In 2002, the government initiated a “Participatory Hardship Assessment.” Ni-Vanuatu from all walks of life, especially the poor, were asked to describe poverty and hardship from their point of view and suggest the most important priority actions to improve their lives. Interviews were held at the household level, and focus group discussions and workshops were held with the communities.

The Department of Economic and Social Development led the effort to consult with traditional and elected officials and women and youth leaders in 12 village and settlement communities in Torba, Penama, Shefa, and Tafea Provinces. The sites were

Disadvantaged

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selected to represent both rural and urban areas, various levels of access to services, and geographic regions. The assessment was funded by the Asian Development Bank (ADB).

The results of the assessment were consistent with the national priorities contained in the Vanuatu Government's Medium Term Development Framework (MTDF), which are to

- improve governance and public service delivery,
- improve the lives of people in the rural areas,
- increase private sector investment,
- enable greater participation, and
- increase income equality.

**The traditional
system is
strained by
modernization**

**Houses made
of scrap
materials**

Is Hardship Really a Problem in Vanuatu?

The existence of hardship in Vanuatu is difficult for some to understand and accept. Communities have always taken care of all their members, sharing food and goods between the richer and poorer people. But this traditional system is strained by modernization, especially the growing need for cash, the shift away from subsistence farming, a growing population, and movement of people to towns.

There has been considerable debate about the presence of



Male Farmer, 49 Years Old

"I was born here in Kweyegmagde village and have lived for most of my life here as a farmer. I attended primary school and finished in year 6. I am married with 6 children. It is not easy supporting a big family like mine in this village. We live quite far from our food gardens and coconut crops. We are confronted with food problems every day as we can only carry so much from our daily visits to our gardens.

"We do not have any water supply, and have to depend on rainwater all the time. Any water that is found in the village is strictly for drinking and cooking. Activities such as washing of clothes are done using very little water and most people from this village swim in the sea rather than taking freshwater baths.

"In terms of finding cash income, we depend on copra and fund-raising whenever the need arises. The trading vessels that used to pick up copra from these islands are not doing this anymore and rumor has it that the Vanuatu Commodities Marketing Board is not purchasing copra from farmers anymore. This is sad because first we do not get regular shipping service to these islands to pick up our copra and now they are not going to buy copra from us again.

"Without money from the sale of copra we can not pay our children's school fees and the teachers from the schools are threatening to put some of our children out if we do not pay. We are currently working and talking with our village chief to solve this with the teachers and come up with a solution that will make everyone happy."

poverty in Vanuatu and the increasing number of out-of-school youth, youth unemployment, and lack of access to training and job opportunities, especially on the remote islands. Hardship, however, is widely perceived to exist, primarily through lack of, or limited access to, basic services such as education, health, good roads, and safe drinking water.

The personal stories in this booklet show the desperate situations some people face. Those who do not have jobs, skills, or any way to earn cash are suffering. Their dignity and pride are wounded, and some have turned to crime, prostitution, and drugs to survive. It is important to listen to their stories and strive to understand the nature of hardship in Vanuatu. Only then can effective strategies be developed to improve the lives of the poor and disadvantaged.

**Hardship is
widely per-
ceived to exist**

What is Hardship?

The primary goal of the assessment was to identify the people's perceptions of poverty and hardship by talking to key community leaders (chiefs, elders, church leaders),

“Having nothing,” “being hopeless,” “struggling for survival”

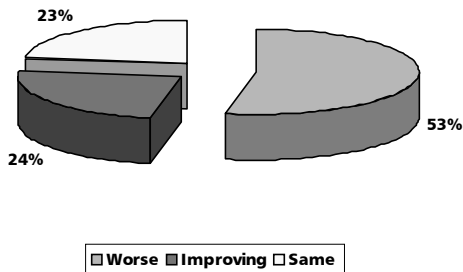
women, youth, and people who were identified as suffering from poverty and hardship. Most people consulted defined poverty as a state of “having nothing” (*no gat samting*), “being hopeless,” and “struggling for survival.” Communities described hardship (*Laef I had tumas*) as “temporary and manageable life difficulties.” Hardship was defined as

- poor living conditions,
- inability to get jobs,
- cannot afford prices of goods,
- cannot afford school fees and materials,
- struggling to provide for family needs,
- difficulty accessing health services, and
- “worrying about lack of money all the time.”

Ni-Vanuatu mentioned difficult situations such as rebuilding after a cyclone and not being able to afford to buy goods, especially when the price of copra drops or they lose their jobs. They also cited the difficulty of coping with bad roads and the absence of ships or vehicles to transport their produce to the market.

Most communities consulted said that hardship has worsened over the last five years, while a smaller number said it has improved (see Figure 1). The reasons cited were higher prices of goods and services. Those who perceived that life has improved cited the installation of much needed power lines, telephone facilities, and better roads in their communities as reasons for improvement. This was particularly true in Tanna in Tafea Province and South Ambae in Penama Province. Women’s situations were seen to be slowly improving. This was mainly due to recognition of women’s involvement and increasing role in community and church activities as well as improved access to education and, therefore, improved job opportunities.

Figure 1. Perceived Hardship Trends Over the Last 5 Years



Who is Facing Hardship?

Those consulted identified the following groups of people as suffering much more from hardship than the rest of the community:

- jobless,
- landless,
- widows and single mothers,
- orphans,
- disabled,
- elderly,
- settlers, and
- “lazy people.”

In many instances, such as the case of the people from Futuna Island and Vātrata Village in Torba Province, those consulted said that

Provincial Chief, 39-Year-Old Male

“I was born and grew up in this village. I went to a primary school and finished in year 6. I am married and have two children. Our daily living depends on the land we have and the food crops that we grow. Our food gardens are located a good 1 to 2 hours’ walk from the village. Areas around the village are currently used for cash cropping with coconuts and cocoa.

“We do not worry about food too much as we have big food gardens (taro, banana, vegetables, etc.) and this can support us for quite some time. Our main concern is cash income for school fees, soap, kerosene, clothing, and transport costs for bringing goods to the village.

“Although we have coconut plantations, the money earned from copra production is low compared to people who are earning money through the sale of kava. Some people within this village do earn income through the sale of their food crops, mats, and baskets.

“My family’s only source of income is the sale of copra. The little money we earn is used for what we need at home, some is given to the church, and some is set aside for the future or an emergency such as a sick child.

“The other problem that we have had in this village for quite some time is water. We currently depend on rainwater. Long dry spells and shortages of water means we have to walk long distances to get to the nearest creek or spring along the sea coast.

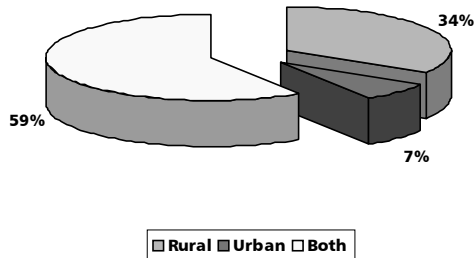
“The rural water supply section of the provincial government built a concrete water tank for this community and that had helped out a bit. Each household is also building its own concrete tank to reduce the pressure on the community tank. I hope that one day the provincial government and central government can come up with a proper water supply system not only for this community but other communities around this part of the island.”

**In many areas,
the whole
community is
suffering**

the whole community is suffering. Everyone suffers when the ship that delivers goods to the island arrives only once or twice a year to bring kerosene, gasoline, food, and other basic items as well as to buy cash crops such as copra from the local producers.

Hardship was viewed to be present in both rural and urban areas (see Figure 2 below). The main difference was that in urban areas, particularly Port Vila and Luganville, most basic services are available. Limited sources of income and jobs were the most commonly cited hardships in the urban areas, while lack or limited access to basic services and limited sources of income from agriculture, fishing, and forestry were mentioned in the rural areas. There is an emerging trend of high dependence on cash income even for the very isolated communities in the rural and outer island communities.

Figure 2: Perceived Distribution of Hardship by Area



What Causes Hardship?

Hardship is a complex problem with many different causes. Overall, the people consulted said hardship is caused by limited opportunities to earn money, obtain education and job skills, and access health and other basic services. Specific causes were cited for three especially affected groups: children, the youth, and women.

Children

Limited and decreasing access to education was the most common hardship affecting children, particularly those who live in rural areas. People said most children walk long distances (5 km or 2 hours daily) to the nearest school. The bush path can be dangerous when heavy rains flood the river crossings. Distance and affordability increase drop-out rates, while some children are “pushed-out” of the school system when there are too few schools.

Poor access to health services was cited as another concern for children, particularly those in rural areas and outer islands. Most common illnesses were treated by local village healers due to lack of transport to reach the nearest dispensary or hospital. In some areas, people had to walk at least 4 hours to get to the nearest health center, which may not have the medicines needed to treat their children.

Abandonment or placement for adoption of young children by their parents is an emerging trend in both rural and urban areas. Traditionally, these children were left in the care of relatives, usually grandparents, by young parents who were either unmarried, divorced, or had too many children.

Lastly, most communities consulted said children in the rural areas are suffering from poor nutrition due to parents’ low levels of awareness. Meals are almost always prepared with too many carbohydrates and very little protein and vegetables.

Youth

Inability to continue schooling, especially to the secondary level, and poor trade skills for youths who have dropped out or been “pushed out” from the educational system were the most commonly mentioned causes of hardship among the youth. Some mentioned the very limited number of affordable and effective rural training centers as another cause. Most youth who cannot continue their studies go back to their villages without hope of receiving further educa-

**Children suffer
from poor
nutrition and
health care**



**School drop-out
and “push-out”
rates are rising**

tion or training to get better jobs. Those in the rural areas end up either in subsistence farming, marrying early, or migrating to towns in search of unskilled jobs. Meanwhile, youth in the urban areas stay in the settlements and *spierim pablik rod* (walk aimlessly around town the whole day).

Lastly, weak leadership and poor organization for expressing youth concerns were also cited as reasons why there is a lack of effective youth programs and projects.

Women

Single parenthood, unplanned pregnancies, and domestic violence were the most commonly identified hardships among women. Communities consulted stated that an increasing number of young women were giving birth at an early age and most are not married. They attributed this to insufficient information on family planning due to the absence of qualified personnel and limited availability of contraceptives, as well as cultural taboos inhibiting discussion of reproductive health.

In the case of married women, people consulted said that a considerable number of husbands leave the main responsibility of providing for the family’s needs to their wives. This includes tending the garden, selling the produce, preparing the food, and doing most domestic chores while the husbands drink kava. Thus, women’s concerns about access to basic services such as education,

**Many children
are left with
grandparents
while parents
look for work in
Port Vila or
Luganville**



health, credit, and market facilities were closely related to their role as household income earners and subsistence providers. Women use the money they earn from selling produce to pay for food, children’s school fees, and medical needs of their families.

However, most communities consulted said that in family situations, joint decision-making by the husband and wife was increasingly the common practice. These include joint decisions on how to spend money, such as how much to allocate for school fees and medical fees, and the number of children to have.

Women consulted said that physical abuse suffered by wives from their husbands was a normal part of married life. In some cases, they claimed it had resulted in death.

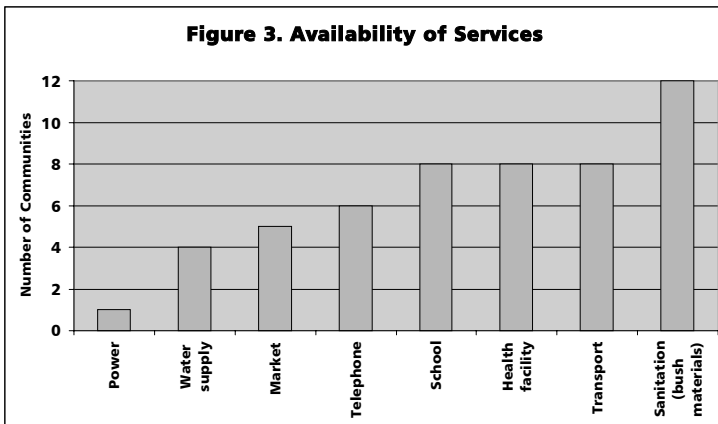
Women asked for skills training to organize and unify themselves as a group to prevent their exclusion from community activities, raise awareness on women’s issues, reduce vulnerability to domestic violence, and improve their access to services and facilities such as education, training, marketing, and credit through representation.

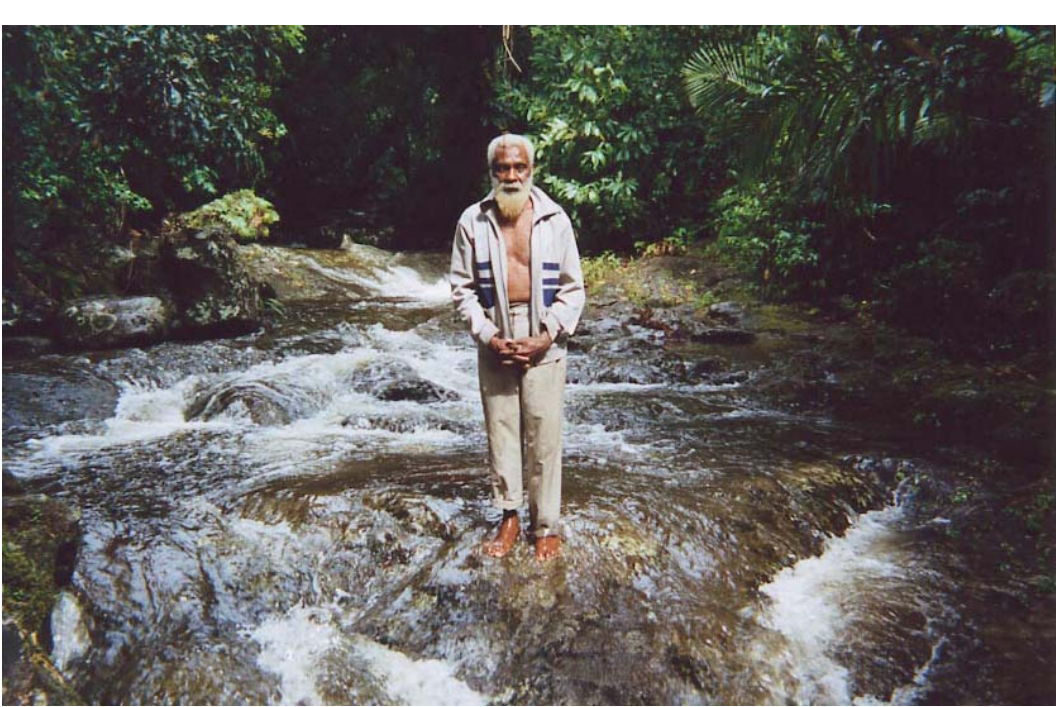
Poor Service Delivery

The people consulted stated that the lack, or poor quality, of services has significantly contributed to hardship in the communities (see Figure 3). They said the government’s lack of commitment to prioritize delivery of these basic services was the primary reason for this, making life more difficult for most rural and urban communities.

Most basic services were available in the urban areas and/or provincial centers but limited or not available particularly in the

The poor quality of services has significantly contributed to hardship





This river is the only source of water for Qatamele village in Penama

remotest rural areas and outer island communities. Improvements in the delivery of basic services were mentioned by some people, but others expressed frustration with the lack of water supply, farm-to-market roads, markets, formal education and training, and health facilities.

Health. Eight of the 12 communities consulted said they have access to health facilities. However, they said these facilities, particularly in the rural areas, were either understaffed, lacked a regular supply of medicines, and/or were located far from the community. Sick patients have to travel by boat or walk an average of 5 km or more, climb steep mountains, and/or cross rivers to reach the nearest hospital or dispensary. Since most roads are in poor condition, transportation charges are very expensive for most people. To cope, most people rely on traditional medicines to treat common illnesses and only bring people to the health center or hospital when they are extremely sick.

Transport. People in 8 out of 12 sample communities said they have access to transport services, but they are usually expensive and the schedules irregular due to bad road conditions. Rural communities rely heavily on private transport services to market their produce. The transport cost is about one third of their usual gross sales. Seven out of 12 communities had access to gravel or feeder roads. During the rainy season, they become either inaccessible or

full of holes, making it very dangerous for most vehicles.

Water. Less than half of the sample communities said they had access to piped water supply. The others in both urban and rural areas still rely on collecting rainwater, rivers, and springs for drinking and domestic use. Most said they need to boil their drinking water. Those living in rural areas said they were satisfied with their sanitation facilities, which are mainly constructed out of bush materials. People in the urban areas were generally not satisfied with the sanitation facilities available to them—most people rely on a few flush toilets or bush and shrub areas.

Markets. Forty-two percent of the communities said they have access to markets for their products. These communities were located within urban centers or less than 30 minutes away by public transport. Those outside this radius found it difficult to market their produce and said often when they go to the market, they only sell half of their produce. People said it was very discouraging for farmers to plant more since it was difficult to receive substantial income from their produce due to the absence of local markets.

Power. Only 1 community out of 12 had access to electricity. Most still use kerosene lamps, coconut oil, dry coconut shells, and firewood to light their homes. People in a small number of communities said they use solar power for lighting. A significant issue

**Less than half
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piped water**

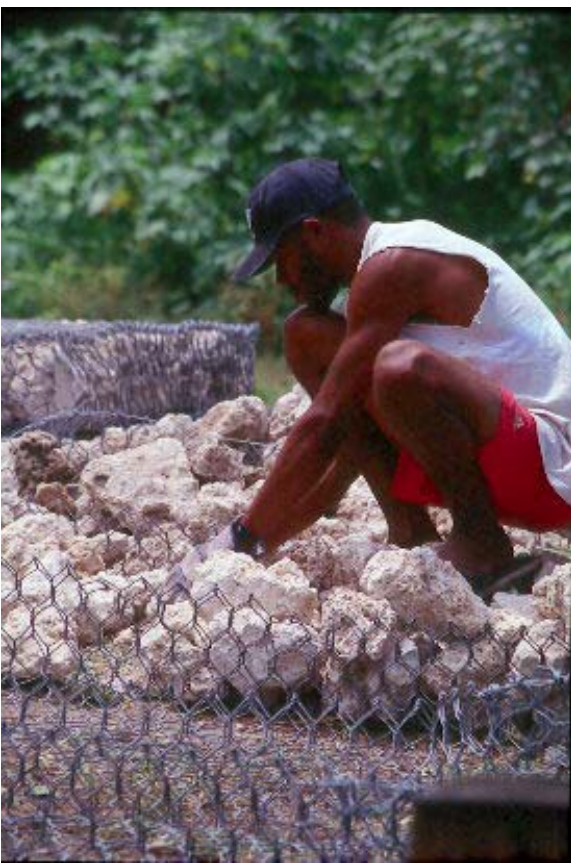
Female Prostitute, 17 Years Old

“I was born in one of the biggest villages in Shefa Province. I went to primary school on the island, but as I had no moral and financial support from my parents I finished at Class 4 and stayed with my poor parents in the village.

“I didn’t enjoy village life and so in 1998 I moved to Vila town, thinking that life would be so much easier and enjoyable. However, I started to see things differently and experience life in an environment so different from my life back on the island. The family I lived with didn’t like me. I could tell because I was treated harshly and differently at all times. I did not even have decent meals and enjoy life like other youths in the settlement. I often thought of support-

ing myself but I didn’t have any skills to be employed in Port Vila.

“When I was 14 I started going with my friends to the *nakamal* (bar where kava is served). From there I was directed to a different lifestyle, which is to give my body for money and kava. So I had sex for the first time through some arrangements made by my kava-drinking friends. At the beginning it was frightening but as it was an easy means of making money I discovered the habit couldn’t be stopped. I earn money to get by and so that I can continue to drink kava. I don’t even have time to think about my parents on the island, as I know that what I am doing is actually very wrong. They would not be happy.”



Bridge construction will improve transportation

raised by the communities was affordability. Although power lines were installed in Isini Village in Tanna, most households still use kerosene lamps since they can not afford the connection fees and other charges.

Communications. Half of the communities consulted had access to communication facilities, usually a telephone situated in the middle of the village or in the town center. However, they said the telephone service was unreliable, especially in the outer islands. During the assessment in Torba Province, the telephone lines throughout the province were not working for about two weeks, effectively cutting them off from the rest of the country. The provincial government relied on a teleradio at the Vanuatu National Bank to communicate outside the province.

What Can Be Done?

Work with those facing hardship to plan and prioritize action

After listening to the stories of the poor and understanding the nature and causes of hardship, what can be done to address it? Working together with those facing hardship to plan, prioritize, and implement solutions has a good chance of leading to successful, lasting initiatives.

During the consultations, people prioritized the most important actions that the government can take to alleviate hardship. The government has identified a number of strategies in the MTFD to address the priorities listed below.

People's Priorities

To reduce the incidence of hardship in Vanuatu, the people consulted recommended that the government prioritize improvement of service delivery such as water supply, health, education, and roads in both rural and urban areas; and the creation of job opportunities in the urban areas through skills provision and access to credit. The people consulted developed the following list of specific priorities:

Services

- Improve access to education (primary and secondary level as well as technical skills for unemployed youth),
- Health (especially nutrition and family planning),
- Better roads, shipping services and air strips,
- Rural training centers,
- Water supply connections,
- Telecommunication facilities (e.g., telephone aeriels), and
- Banking and credit services (especially in the outer islands).

Income Generation

- Facilitation of markets for local produce (both local and international), and
- Establishment of a fish canning factory.

Although most people said they know which government

**Improved
services and
income genera-
tion are high
priorities**

**Job creation
is a high
priority**



agency to approach to access needed services, they have not actually contacted the agencies. They said they need more information about available government programs and funds, simplified procedures to access them, and better transportation to reach the agency offices, which are mostly located in the urban and provincial centers. The people consulted also said they need help in resolving land disputes and addressing social issues such as excessive kava drinking.

Help is needed to develop local entrepreneurs

Capacity Building Needs

People said business management, cattle farming, and fund-raising skills are needed to develop local entrepreneurs. Information on how to obtain clean drinking water and proper nutrition is needed to prevent the spread of illnesses and improve health. Knowledge and skills to improve schools was identified as necessary to improve the quality of education for village children. Road maintenance skills were seen as crucial for maintaining village access to markets and services. Improved knowledge of fishing and farming would generate more income for rural households. Lastly, access to techni-

Male Criminal, 42 Years Old

"I was born in Shefa Province into a family of 10 boys and 5 girls. We moved to a settlement in Port Vila when I was 8 years old. I went to school in Port Vila but never made it to Class 6 due to lack of money to pay for my studies. I was 12 years old when I left school. My parents were struggling to raise us, to make sure we had food, clothing, and other necessities while other families seemed to have very comfortable lives. I was very jealous of these families because I had such a hard life.

"I became an obnoxious youth, going to nightclubs and getting drunk, looking for ways to enjoy my life, but somehow always ending up in fights. As a result, I was thrown into jail frequently. Soon I became involved in a lot of break-ins as well as stealing kava and

green snail that I would trade for cash to buy alcohol, cigarettes, and more kava. The police were getting tired of seeing me in prison regularly so they asked my Chief to intervene. I was already ranked as one of their worst criminals. The Chief sent me to my home island for five years where the community there saw me as a threat. When I returned to Port Vila, I resumed my activities of stealing and street fighting.

"Then, I got married and had five children. Watching them grow up made me think about my lifestyle. I don't want my children to follow in my miserable footsteps. I still think, however, that I have a hard life and must fight to survive; even if it would mean sending someone on the streets to the hospital for their wallet. How else can I support my children?"



**Livelihood skills
need to be
strengthened**

cal skills such as carpentry and auto mechanics, and secretarial, cooking, and dressmaking skills would benefit the increasing number of youth drop outs and “push-outs” in the villages and urban settlements.

Roles

Participation of the community in development is important to ensure that all sectors of society have a voice in decision making and a stake in the success of the initiatives. By working together to agree on priorities, establish roles, and monitor progress, real improvements can be made in the people’s daily lives. During the consultations, the people suggested that the government adopt a program to enhance the delivery of information to communities and feedback on community issues and priorities. They also suggested that the government assist communities to organize themselves, prepare plans, and implement activities to ensure their active participation in future development projects or initiatives, perhaps through the provision of leadership skills and project management training.

Most people expect the government to provide financial assistance, equipment, and facilities, as well as for government officials

**Everyone has a
role to play in
reducing hard-
ship**

to be physically present in their communities. The government may want to take these expectations and views into account when developing new initiatives.

Most communities expressed willingness to provide free labor, land, food, accommodation, materials, and funding assistance as their contribution to support government community development programs.

Current Initiatives to Address Hardship

Before planning new initiatives, it is useful to consider what communities have done to address hardship and how they perceive current programs. This can help improve the effectiveness of future efforts.

The most commonly cited community initiatives to address hardship were

- representation to provincial governments and members of parliament to access needed government services; and,
- community fund-raising activities, for example, selling kava and *laplap* (made from taro, banana, or cassava) to raise money for school fees, and organizing youth and women's groups.

Regarding government initiatives, most community members were aware of the Rural Economic Development Initiative (REDI) Plan to help address poverty and hardship; however, they said they are still waiting for its actual delivery. They said the following government agencies were providing services to improve the standard of living of the communities: Department of Public Works, Ministry of Health, and Ministry of Agriculture, Quarantine, Forestry & Fisheries.

During crises, community members said they generally do not depend upon the government for assistance. Instead, they rely mainly on their family and community institutions, such as churches, tribes, women's and youth organizations, and traditional leaders.

People depend
on their family,
church, and
tribe rather
than the
government



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