

Australia commits 39 billion vatu for COVID vaccines for the region

By Australia's High Commissioner to Vanuatu, Her Excellency Sarah de Zoeten

The COVID-19 pandemic is the most profound health and economic crisis our region has faced in a century. And it is one we all share. Globally the virus has cost more than one million people their lives, the world economy is predicted to shrink by 4.4 per cent in 2020 and global debt has ballooned. Our own region has not been immune. We have seen New Zealand, Papua New Guinea, Solomon Islands, Fiji, Guam and French Polynesia facing the virus head-on. In Australia, there have been over 27,000 cases and over 900 deaths. The Pacific region's economy has also been disproportionately affected and is predicted to shrink by 6.1 per cent.

I applaud Vanuatu for responding early to COVID-19 and its status as one of the few countries in the world where no cases have been recorded. Australia has been proud to stand with Vanuatu in partnership to support COVID-19 preparedness and mitigate the economic shock. We have pivoted our aid program to help strengthen Vanuatu's health system, to support social stability and essential service delivery, to promote economic recovery, and to protect the most vulnerable including women, girls and people with disabilities.

We have also invested an additional 1.3 billion vatu in health security and economic support measures, including funding for front line health workers, medical equipment and health infrastructure, and supporting schools, communities and vulnerable households, including through cash-transfers. Of course, responding to Vanuatu's broader priorities, our partnership also continues in traditional areas of education, skills, policing and justice, security, economic governance, agriculture, infrastructure and humanitarian response.

While we will continue to provide this broader support, there is no higher priority right now for Australia – and for our Pacific partners – than a COVID-19 vaccine. Across the world, scientists are racing to produce a safe and effective vaccine as soon as possible. Once it is developed and approved, and its safety rigorously assessed, a vaccine will enable our economies to reopen and will help to keep our people healthy.

Australia believes that once a safe and effective vaccine is developed there is a moral responsibility that it be shared with the world. That is why our Foreign Minister, Minister for International Development and the Pacific and Health Minister have announced a new 39 billion vatu Regional Vaccine Access and Health Security initiative to ensure Vanuatu, as well as other Pacific island countries and Timor-Leste, can achieve full COVID-19 vaccine coverage. Australia will also make a significant contribution towards meeting the needs of Southeast Asia. This is an important step towards ensuring our region can recover, rebuild and prosper.

Building on our long-term partnership to strengthen Vanuatu's health system, Australia will also provide support for Vanuatu to assess the safety and effectiveness of vaccine candidates, as well as helping to ensure health systems and workforces are ready to deliver vaccines as soon as they are available.

This new initiative is in addition to Australia's 6.3 billion vatu commitment to the multilateral COVAX Facility, which will support access to sufficient doses to meet the needs of the highest risk populations globally.

These commitments build on and complement Australia's existing partnership with the Vanuatu Government to fight the impacts of the pandemic.

Our joint efforts will help to save lives. They will promote regional stability and economic recovery. And they will allow us all to get back to a more normal existence as soon as we possibly can.

Just as we always have, in good times and in bad, Australia will continue to stand shoulder-to-shoulder in solidarity with Vanuatu and the rest of our Pacific Family.