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## **COVID-19 vaccine rollout reaches Vanuatu's remote islands as Australian social enterprise leads the way**

### ***Respond Global empowering local communities to deliver health programs***

A social enterprise founded by Australia's leading emergency response practitioner, has embarked on a 4-month mission to support the rollout of the Vanuatu Government's COVID-19 vaccination program across remote islands.

Respond Global is working with Vanuatu's Ministry of Health to deliver the vaccine rollout. The 4-month vaccination program will cover the country's six provinces, and include 63 permanently inhabited islands, starting in areas with the lowest vaccination coverage.

The program is a critical step in supporting the health needs of the local community and enabling the country to reopen to international tourism, the backbone of the local economy, which accounted for 50% of GDP pre-COVID.

"We established Respond Global to forge new ways to work across public and private sectors to better plan, prepare, respond and recover from public health emergencies", said Respond Global Founder and Managing Director Dr Ian Norton.

"Through our partnership with the Vanuatu Government Ministry of Health, communities and provincial health teams, we look forward to contributing to the country's efforts to rebuild its economy, and empowering the people of Vanuatu to take ownership of sustainable health program delivery, through improving local capabilities", he continued. "We believe that a local response is the best response."

A passionate humanitarian, Dr Norton led the World Health Organisation's response to disease outbreaks, including Ebola, diphtheria and measles, as well as earthquakes, cyclones and conflicts, for six years from 2014.

Dr Norton is leading the mission's team of medical practitioners and emergency health experts to support the needs of Vanuatu's remote populations including the rollout of COVID-19 vaccine to low coverage, hard-to-reach areas, transport of essential pharmaceuticals and health materials, and the rollout of Rapid Antigen Testing for diagnostic and surveillance purposes.

Joining the mission are provincial health teams who are best placed to guide the health operation and ensure the best possible interaction and understanding among community members.

To reach Vanuatu's hard-to-reach areas, a former Australian expedition cruise vessel, HELPR1 has undergone an extensive transformation to be fitted as a medical response ship. With an onboard medical centre for intensive care stabilisation as well as a medication and vaccination storage and preparation room, HELPR1 provides medical equipment, personnel, training and supplies.

Managing a complex logistical challenge, Respond Global is providing cold chain logistics expertise to transport the temperature-sensitive vaccines to the remote locations. The program is supporting the very first roll-out of the Moderna vaccine to adolescents, helping restore access to critical health services and further building on the Ministry of Health's vaccination program.



In addition, the program includes establishing multiple temporary vaccination clinics for COVID-19 vaccines for target populations, while providing access to existing childhood vaccine programs that have been interrupted over the past two years.

HELPR1 will also carry local health experts in specialist areas like Ophthalmology, Ear/Nose and Throat, Dental, primary care and Non-Communicable Diseases, like diabetes and high blood pressure, as well as specialist in surgery, obstetrics and child health when required. These teams will provide specialist services that have stalled due to the COVID response. Discussions on how HELPR1 can continue to support outreach services will occur over the next weeks and months.

“As COVID outbreaks occur in outer islands the vessels arrival has been timely. Our first request from the Ministry of Health was to carry urgent supplies of oxygen bottles, fuel, medical equipment from the MoH central medical stores and oxygen concentration machines from a DFAT donation to the island of Pentecost, site of the most recent outbreak of COVID-19. The vessel then moved to Luganville to prepare for deployment up the west coast of Santo. Also called the ‘weather coast’ this remote area has little or no road access and very rarely has received medical support over the last 2 years”, said Dr Ian Norton.

Importantly, Respond Global is putting in place training and infrastructure to empower local healthcare teams and communities to continue delivering vaccination programs, supporting the second round of vaccinations for those delivered in Sanma, Torba, Malampa and Penama and will be available for the continuation of essential service visits, essential resupply and other priorities according to the COVID-19 epidemiological situation.

As part of the collaborative program’s legacy the HELPR1 will remain in Vanuatu for use in ongoing local response delivery in the Pacific.

Respond Global Founder and Managing Director Dr Ian Norton said, “We have worked closely with the Vanuatu Government’s Ministry of Health to assist in the delivery of this critical vaccine roll-out program and are delighted to be able to contribute to the Ministry’s primary mission to protect and promote the health of the Vanuatu people.”

“Our work in Vanuatu is part of our broader commitment to protect the health of those in less developed nations, particularly those in remote communities who bear a significant and disproportionate burden of the impact of disease outbreaks and other disasters,” said Dr Norton.

Vanuatu Minister for Health Mr. Bruno Leignkone visited the vessel in Port Vila and said, “This ship will be vital for our national health teams to reach our hard-to-reach areas, especially for COVID vaccine coverage before our borders reopen on the 1<sup>st</sup> July 2022. We are delighted to welcome HELPR1 and Respond Global to Vanuatu, especially as we know the ship will remain and be flagged in our country for years to come”

The Vanuatu program built on Respond Global’s work redefining emergency health response management in Australia. The social enterprise has helped governments and the private sector manage some of the biggest challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is providing rapid antigen test training and support to the aged care, disability and Aboriginal health sectors for the Federal Department of Health, and recently completed its support of the rollout of COVID-19 vaccinations in South East Queensland on behalf of for Queensland Health. Previously Respond Global supported Australian Border Force’s Ruby Princess crew quarantine response, and they were asked to assist the Commonwealth and Victorian health authorities in supporting the Victoria Aged Care Response Centre (VACRC) during the aged care crisis in 2020.



In the private sector, Respond Global provided daily virtual health support and rapid antigen tests to enable the Commonwealth Bank to safely reopen branches to the public at the height of the pandemic in Greater Sydney. It also supported Coral Expeditions an Australian-based cruise company to continue sailing in Australian waters throughout the pandemic.

For more information on Respond Global please visit [www.respondglobal.com](http://www.respondglobal.com)

**ENDS**

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**About Respond Global**

[Respond Global](http://www.respondglobal.com) was founded in early 2020 by Australia's leading emergency response specialist Dr Ian Norton (formerly with the WHO), with the aim of empowering countries and organisations to provide localised responses to emergencies in health, including the current Coronavirus pandemic. Respond Global's international network of emergency response experts provide solutions that are a direct result of their field-based experiences, adapted to the specific context of a country, industry or organisation. This gives them the unique advantage of being able to translate global, national and state health policies into practical and implementable responses. The team collectively have decades of experience and have been responsible for managing some of the world's largest outbreaks and disasters. Bringing experience gained from responses to Ebola in West Africa and other health and humanitarian crises, Respond Global utilises a traffic light system of protective measures to assist businesses and organisations to operate safely in the age of COVID-19. For more information, visit [www.respondglobal.com](http://www.respondglobal.com).