

# VOICES

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TO YOU ...**

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THEIR LAND**

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**OXFAM**  
Australia



# Connections

with Lyn Morgain, Chief Executive

I'm sure few would disagree that the year 2020 was a challenging one. Both here at home and globally, the pandemic took a huge toll on public health, and the implications for our social and economic wellbeing — worldwide — are ongoing. In many places where Oxfam works, local economies were already unstable before 2020, and public health already fragile. The onset of a deadly pandemic could well have plunged these communities deeper into poverty and hardship.

But as you'll see in this edition of *Voices*, the future looks bright thanks to the kindness and compassion of people like you.

Through these difficult times, I've been deeply moved by the steady show of solidarity, generosity and altruism from Oxfam supporters — it's been truly phenomenal. And when I see the tireless efforts of my Oxfam colleagues and partners, rallying against all odds to tackle poverty and curb the spread of this dreadful virus, I'm filled with hope, inspiration and optimism for the year ahead.

We know we have our work cut out for us in 2021. As I write, multiple humanitarian crises are unfolding and the climate emergency looms large, impacting water access and food security for millions of people around the world. All the while, our pursuit of self-determination for First Peoples, fair economies and gender equality goes on. But no matter how hefty these challenges may seem, I have full confidence that, together, we can and will make great headway this year towards a more just world without poverty.



Photo: Eddie Carbonell/OxfamAUS



**OXFAM**  
Australia

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Our life-changing development programs and life-saving humanitarian efforts are made possible by the generous support of donors like you and the Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade.



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Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade

Oxfam Australia acknowledges Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples as the original custodians of the land, and respects the rights they hold as the Traditional Custodians. We also recognise the dispossession of the land and its ongoing effects on First Nations Peoples today.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander readers should be aware that this publication may contain images or names of people who have since passed away.



ACFID  
MEMBER



## Thanks to you ...

In the last year, our life-changing programs empowered more than **19.4 MILLION PEOPLE** in **84 COUNTRIES** around the world with the training, resources and opportunities they need to lift themselves out of poverty. Molie (pictured) is one such person.

Worldwide, we reached **12.3 MILLION PEOPLE** affected by disaster or conflict with life-saving aid. See how we're innovating our emergency responses on page 20.

Here at home, we empowered and inspired more than **16,000 PEOPLE** with our programs, campaigns and coalition initiatives for Australia's First Peoples.

East Sepik, Papua New Guinea: Having received water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) training from our local partners, Molie now takes part in her local WASH group to improve health outcomes and water access in her community. Photo: Patrick Moran/OxfamAUS.

Cover photo: Central Sulawesi, Indonesia: Umiyata harvests corn on the ancestral farming lands that she reclaimed — with help from Oxfam's local partner — from palm oil companies. Photo: Ilvy Njiokiktjien.





"We used to be so afraid of our rights, but now I have grown more confident and can actually speak up about it."

— Sara, Pakistan

## Demanding her fair share

Access to clean water is a contentious topic in Sara Solangi's village in Pakistan. But thanks to you, women like Sara are standing up to demand their fair share.

"It has been very difficult for us to live here," Sara says.

"We lack access to basic amenities, like gas and water. To fetch water, we have to cover miles of distance."

"The water doesn't flow down from the source ... They use it all further up the line and it never reaches us. Feudal lords have made dams and they keep all of the water that is supposed to flow down to us."

"The lands lay uncultivated owing to the scarcity of water."

"We have argued our case with feudal lords but they simply turned us away in contempt."

In 2019, we reached out to our supporters to help women like Sara tackle poverty — and the response was nothing short of amazing. Thanks to the generous support of people like you, Oxfam's Women, Water and Peace-building project empowers women in Pakistan with the skills and resources they need to access clean water and lift themselves out of poverty.

Inspired by the leadership training she received from her Oxfam-supported community group, Sara has decided to take a stand. She spent the last three years campaigning for her village to gain fair and equal access to water, leading the way for other women to speak up and be heard by feudal lords and local Ministers.

Sara once feared talking to strangers and politicians — but that has all changed.

"I no longer tremble at their sight," she says.

"We used to be so afraid of our rights, but now I have grown more confident and can actually speak up

about it. At first, I wouldn't even be able to open my mouth. Wherever they take us now, we are ready to go and talk about it."

Sara did not have equal access to education as a child, but she wants a better life for her kids (pictured).

"My son goes to school, he's in Class 4. It is really important to me that my children have an education.

"My prayer is that he comes to Australia to see you in your home town, that is how successful I hope he becomes. I hope he becomes independent and is able to travel the world."

"I wish for prosperity and development to come to my village ... I firmly believe that education is the key and that we will be able to achieve prosperity with education."





# Thinking inside the box

Many rural communities have no easy way to give crucial feedback on the programs that support them, so Oxfam Timor-Leste is bringing a feedback and complaint mechanism to them.

Any organisation that takes program quality and improvement — as well as safeguarding and misconduct — seriously, should have a system for feedback and complaints.

For our country office in Timor-Leste, this feedback process comes in the form of a perfectly simple, accessible and mobile box, safely strapped to the back of a motorbike.

“Partners should bring [the feedback] boxes to all of their activities, including trainings, socialisations, meeting with communities, workshops and research,” says Floren D. X de Oliveira, Program Quality and Partnership Support Manager at Oxfam Timor-Leste.

“For activities undertaken at the community level, partners need to explain why we have the complaint process; not only the box we have provided but we also have hotline numbers that are on posters and stuck to the box.”

The feedback can be anonymous, but participants are invited to include their details with their feedback, so they can be informed of any actions taken to address their complaint or concerns.

Floren hopes the box will “improve our activity implementations in the field, [encourage respect] in relation to safeguarding, and also ensure that transparency and accountability is applied in our

partnership relationships”. It also helps the team meet its strict safeguarding requirements.

Having the mechanism in place has also been useful for the Oxfam Timor-Leste team in other ways during the pandemic.

“This process is helping us update each other on information relating to programs, safeguarding and fraud during the period of COVID, because sometimes government announced the state of emergency by applying social distancing, but we can still contact each other via the box and the hotline numbers provided.”

It’s early days, but the initial response to the mobile feedback boxes has been positive, quite literally. While they were intended to create an essential channel for whistleblowing, thus far the boxes have contained nothing but compliments.

“We just established [the process] in July 2020 and, so far, we have received at least 25 [pieces of] feedback from communities and partners, but all of those feedback related to appreciation or positive feedback of the program implementation.”

Oxfam strives to create a safe working environment for all. Find out more about how we keep people safe at [oxfam.org.au/oxfamsafe](https://oxfam.org.au/oxfamsafe)



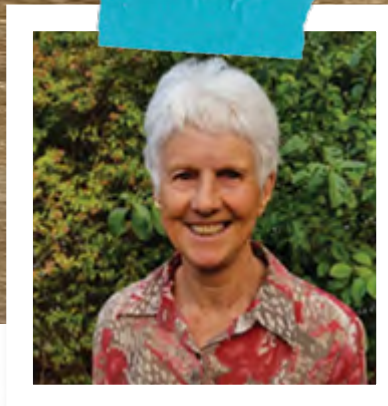
“We just established [the process] in July 2020 and so far we have received at least 25 [pieces of] feedback from communities and partners.”  
— Floren D. X de Oliveira, Timor-Leste



Photos: Supplied by Oxfam Timor-Leste







## Vale Louise Evans

The world lost a kind and caring soul with the passing of long-time Oxfam supporter Louise Evans. But in leaving a gift for Oxfam in her Will, Louise's legacy lives on.

Louise first became involved with Oxfam — then known as Community Aid Abroad — in the 1960s. She had always been interested in Asian languages, belief systems and cultures and, in 1966, she took a cultural exchange trip to Papua New Guinea (PNG), where she helped women sew shirts on manual sewing machines (pictured).

After completing her graduate studies in Librarianship, Louise became a keen traveller and adventurer, returning to PNG for one year as an Australian Volunteer Abroad librarian. She also visited Asia whenever she could, immersing herself in the cultures and philosophies that she encountered. Alongside her vocation, Louise also taught English as a second language and helped others to read.

In 1985, Louise spent three weeks in India, under the auspices of Community Aid Abroad. She was inspired by what she saw, explaining how the program worked at a local level to support villages in developing countries to become more self-sufficient.

Di Evans reflects upon her late sister's many virtues: "Louise valued simplicity and trod ever so gently on the earth. She recycled everything and had the lowest of low carbon footprints — long before the word was invented.

"Through her, many were encouraged to think globally and tread more gently on the earth. She was admired for her integrity and respected for her depth of knowledge and commitment to the causes of the developing world, especially women's rights and the plight of refugees.

"Louise always saw the bigger picture, and believed in justice for the poor and the oppressed in the world."

Leaving a gift for Oxfam in your Will is a powerful way to make a difference. For more information, visit [oxfam.org.au/bequests](https://oxfam.org.au/bequests)

## Staying apart, walking together

With vulnerable communities needing our support more than ever in 2020, thousands of amazing Oxfam supporters rose to the challenge of participating in an event during a pandemic.

While many an event in 2020 was sadly cancelled, we got creative and forged ahead with a new take on an old favourite: Oxfam Trailwalker Virtual. For the first time ever, the event was held online, with participants creating their own trail.

Oxfam Australia Fundraising Manager Sonya Kennedy says thousands of people embraced the challenge.

"Over 3,000 participants walked almost 380,000 kilometres to raise over \$530,000 for our most vulnerable communities," she explains.

Sonya says the format enabled participants to be creative with how they tackled the challenge.

"[It] was designed to be as flexible and as engaging as possible. Participants were invited to walk or run 100 kilometres, in whichever way they chose — on nature trails, in their neighbourhood or on the treadmill.

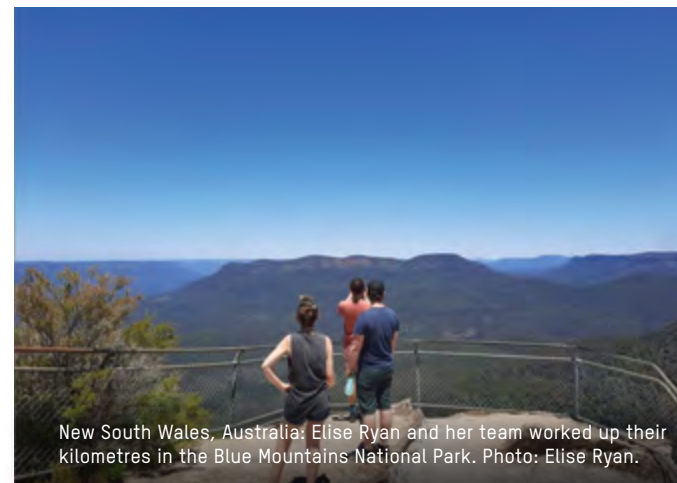
"We had people of all ages participate in this Trailwalker challenge for the first time — from eight year olds to 87 year olds."

Young Trailwalker Harrison and his teammates took full advantage of the chance to participate.

"I did Oxfam Virtual Trailwalker this year with my three friends," says Harrison. "We are all eight years old. We had fun doing the walks and raised over \$2,000.

"I didn't know about Oxfam before this or why fundraising was needed. My sisters want to do it when they are in Grade 3."

Plans are currently underway for Oxfam Trailwalker to return as a live event in some states this year. Find out more at [trailwalker.oxfam.org.au](https://trailwalker.oxfam.org.au)



New South Wales, Australia: Elise Ryan and her team worked up their kilometres in the Blue Mountains National Park. Photo: Elise Ryan.



Victoria, Australia: Erin Saunders and Jo Higgins starting their 100km challenge in true pandemic style. Photo: Supplied by Strong Base.



"I went to Canberra in 2015 — and it blew my mind ... just to know what's happening at Capitol Hill. Oxfam really opened up my world to that."

— Rae Cottam, Australia

## Leaders in the making

Wongutha woman Rae Cottam attended a National Straight Talk Summit in 2015. Then, in 2019, she became the youngest First Nations woman to be elected to local government.

Over the last decade, our Straight Talk program has had the privilege of hosting hundreds of passionate Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women — and many have gone on to become inspiring leaders in their communities and beyond.

Straight Talk connects women with the political system, empowering them with the skills, confidence and know-how to effect positive change.

For Rae Cottam, Councillor for Rockingham, Straight Talk solidified a long-held desire to bring about change. "When I was a young person [growing up in Perth on Noongar Country] I wanted to become a student councillor. I had a Councillor living up the street from me and she said, 'You can be a councillor if you wanted to'," recalls Cottam.

"It really resonated with me that I could do that. So primary school, I became a student councillor and then in high school I went on student council and became a school captain."

After school, Cottam worked in various social sectors — parenting support, education, disability support — and her desire to help her community intensified. "I'm a problem solver," she says.

"So I figured out I could do something here in my community and I knew that, to make change, the first step would be as a Local Government Councillor. And then I knew the next steps from there would be a Federal seat for Parliament."

Cottam had heard strong positive feedback from other women about Straight Talk, so in 2015 she applied for and attended the National Summit.

"I heard that women go, come back to our communities, and transform themselves and the work that they do.

And I thought, 'I want to get on board with this'. "I went to Canberra in 2015 — and it blew my mind ... just to know what's happening at Capitol Hill. Oxfam really opened up my world to that."

Cottam says she learnt a great deal about the political system, the First Peoples pioneers who dedicated their lives to bringing about change, and how to be a change-maker herself.

"Straight Talk helps you recognise your responsibility to yourself, to your community, to your people, and recognise what you can do within that space," says Cottam. She adds that the sisterhood created by the program is also powerful.

"Being connected to a network of women that are like-minded, who are positive, strong women who can back you up and give you a little bit of fire to ignite you, that is something really strong to belong to and I've never found that with anything else that I've done in my life."

Cottam was so inspired by the National Summit she returned two years later as a facilitator — an experience she relished.

Then, in 2019, Cottam won her second bid for local government. Now she is busy learning processes and procedures and trying to feel comfortable with the idea that "you can't be a saviour, that things take time, and that you need to work within this framework to make things change".

Looking at Cottam's history, it's likely that profound, positive change won't take her long.

Find out more about our Straight Talk program at [oxfam.org.au/straighttalk](https://oxfam.org.au/straighttalk)



# TREK THE OUTBACK WITH OXFAM

Join us for the challenge of a lifetime as you trek the iconic Larapinta Trail, one of the most popular wilderness walks in Australia. Here, you'll connect with the land, the local community and the tight-knit team of adventurers travelling with you. You'll also meet some of the proud Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander women who've taken part in Oxfam's Straight Talk program, and are now making positive change happen in their communities.

To find out more and register, visit

[oxfam.org.au/larapinta](https://oxfam.org.au/larapinta)



Photo: Kate Bensen/OxfamAUS

## Partnering with champions

Our many years of tackling poverty around the globe have shown that teaming up with local partners, who understand the unique challenges on the ground, is the best way to make meaningful change happen. That's why we partner with social and environmental champions — like Paul Sein Twa.

Paul was recently awarded the 2020 Goldman Environment Prize and UNDP Equator Prize for his work preserving both the environment and indigenous Karen culture.

As co-founder of KESAN, our partner organisation in Myanmar, Paul led the establishment of Salween Peace Park, a 1.35-million-acre ecosystem of community forests and indigenous lands in the Salween River basin, supported by Oxfam through the Mekong Water Governance Program (MWGP).

"My involvement with Oxfam started way back in 1997," Paul says. "This relationship helped me grow my own environmental group — the Karen Environmental and Social Action Network (KESAN) in 2001."

The MWGP works, through partners, with communities affected by large-scale water construction projects across the Mekong and Salween river basins. The river basins are important biodiversity zones and home to the region's indigenous people, who have long sought self-determination and cultural preservation.

Indigenous knowledge and participation have been essential to Paul's work. He explains, "Our long-term vision for the Salween Peace Park is to demonstrate what truly good governance could be for the Salween River Basin and provide a people-centred alternative to top-down, militarised development."

These prestigious awards shine a spotlight on Paul's vitally important work, boosting recognition and respect for the Salween Peace Park." They bolster our efforts at the national and international level in ways that encourage lawmakers and policymakers to learn from



Photo: Supplied

indigenous sustainable development approaches, to protect indigenous rights, and to actively involve Indigenous peoples and respect for their autonomous ways of life in international and national development strategies.

"We hope that not only the Salween Peace Park but other Indigenous and local communities' conserved areas will be fully acknowledged by a future federal democratic State which will protect the rights of custodian communities to have a peaceful and sustainable life."

Visit [oxfam.org.au/oxfammekong](https://oxfam.org.au/oxfammekong) to find out how the Mekong Water Governance Program is changing lives in the Mekong region.



## Taking back their land

Palm oil is an extremely versatile oil with many different properties, so it is widely used in everything from donuts to deodorant. But as global concerns about climate change have peaked in the last decade, so too have concerns about the sustainability of palm oil production.

Palm oil is a major driver of deforestation of some of the world's most biodiverse forests, destroying the habitats of already endangered species. Between them, Indonesia and Malaysia supply more than 85% of the world's palm oil. Industry expansion in Indonesia has been linked to very high carbon emissions from drained peatlands which, as the soils dry, become increasingly fire prone, causing further environmental harm.

And the environment is not the only casualty of palm oil production. In Central Sulawesi, Indonesia, powerful palm oil companies stand accused of land grabs, forcing small-scale farmers from their traditional lands and livelihoods.

But thanks to the support of people like you, we partnered with local organisation Transformasi untuk Keadilan (TuK) — a staunch advocate for people's rights with regard to the environment and natural resources — to help affected communities. Together, we're arming farmers with the skills and confidence to take a stand and reclaim their lands.

Meet some of the people who are challenging big palm oil companies and taking back what's theirs.

Bangai district, Central Sulawesi, Indonesia: Littered with burnt palm oil tree stumps, these traditional farming lands have been reclaimed by Agus Tatu (pictured on page 16) and a collective of local farmers, who stood up to the big palm oil companies that had seized them. All photos: Ilvy Njokiktjien/Oxfam.





“Everything in this planet must be interconnected, while prioritising sustainability. If we don’t protect the planet, who will?”

— Vera, Indonesia

## A farmer on the frontline

Agus Tatu is the leader of his local farmers association. He was forced to migrate from North Sulawesi after his family’s land was grabbed by sugar company WMP.

Agus moved to Central Sulawesi with more than 20 families from his former village and they are still a very close-knit farming collective. They work their land together and, with support from Oxfam’s partner TuK, they also fought alongside one another to reclaim their land.

In 2014, they reclaimed 150 of the 180 hectares that had been seized for palm oil production. Before they could rehabilitate the lands for farming, they had to destroy the palm oil plantation, either shearing off the trees’ leaves to hinder palm nut growth or pouring insecticide in the top of the trees before burning them from the base.

Agus is not proud of the destruction. “The trees can’t help it,” he says.

Agus reflects on the battle for his land: “TuK strengthened our fight with knowledge about the legal framework, human rights on life, education and food, and farmers rights on land and fair value chains. This helped us to not give up and turn the government from an enemy into an ally.

“We now have good relations and work together on sustainable agribusiness. We have convinced the government that agriculture instead of palm oil is a promising and profitable business.”

In 2019, WMP accused Agus and nine of his fellow farmers of stealing crops and timber from the company’s land. With support from TuK, the farmers stood up to the company and proved their land rights.

“Whenever we have a problem, I turn to Kiki and Vera [from TuK] for support,” Agus says. “They have never failed us with their commitment and loyalty.”

## Still fighting the good fight

Vera Falinda worked with Oxfam’s partner TUK until 2018. In that time, she supported the development of village governance, gender justice and fair finance for local farmers.

“Through Oxfam’s program,” Vera says, “we built farmers’ capacity. We explained that farmers have rights, including right to land.”

“I want farmers to keep their land not only for themselves, but for future generations. Statistics show that the number of young farmers continue to decline. Therefore, I must work directly with farmers so that young people in villages will be motivated to farm and keep their land.”

She believes the fight for land rights should be positive and constructive — not fighting directly with the companies but, rather, strengthening the farmers’ coping mechanisms.

Vera’s personal motivation stems from her childhood, when her parents were forced to sell their ancestral land to pay their debts. This experience, early in life, helped to shape

Vera’s direction and sense of purpose.

When Vera’s work with TuK in the Banggai district ended, she started her own NGO, Aswangga, so she could stay on and keep supporting the community. She has dedicated her heart to the people and the region. With Aswangga, Vera aims to connect farmers with investors, so that they aren’t forced to sell off their land when they run into financial hardship.

“I’ve now linked investors and farmers, to obtain more benefits compared to saving in banks,” she says.

“We’ve done financial literacy training, but then farmers could not apply the training. So I’m now focusing on facilitating farmers to implement, every day or month, the trainings.”

“I believe whatever farming challenge there is, the most important is to develop a fair partnership with investors and farmers, especially for the environment. Everything in this planet must be interconnected, while prioritising sustainability. If we don’t protect the planet, who will?”





"I have learned to speak out."  
— Umiyata, Indonesia



## Protecting her plot

Today, Umiyata (pictured right) is the proud owner of a flourishing farm with 20 cows — but she had to put up quite a fight for it.

When Umiyata was a small child, her family migrated from Java and secured two hectares of farming land, where they cultivated corn and soy beans. Life on the land was hard. And it got much harder in 2010, when sugar company WMP grabbed her land to produce palm oil.

Land certificates are costly in Indonesia — you pay for the measurement, administration and taxes — and Umiyata's family could not afford the expense, so they couldn't stand in the way of the land grab. For the next four years, they felt powerless.

They agreed to take part in the Plasma scheme — a government initiative mandating palm oil companies to allocate one fifth of their land for smallholder farmers — but did not see any profit from palm oil farming.

Umiyata worked with the company for a while, applying fertiliser to the very palm oil trees that had taken over her family's plot. But the job was physically demanding and the pay was low, so she soon quit.

With help from Vera (pictured left) and the team at TuK, Umiyata's family obtained their land certificate in 2014 and reclaimed their land. They destroyed the palm trees so they could again grow corn.

Umiyata received leadership training from TuK and she is now Chair of the female farmers coop in Nipa Kalemoan. With a sparkle of pride in her eyes, she says, "I have learned to speak out. I am able to face problems in my family life."

Having taken back control of her life and livelihood, the future looks good for Umiyata: "As long as I work my land."

## Scheming to leave

Mulyadi and his family have a thriving cucumber farm next to two hectares of land from the Plasma scheme. The scheme aimed to extend the benefits of palm oil expansion to rural communities, connecting farmers like Mulyadi with training, seedlings, fertiliser, an instant market for their palm oil and, eventually, title to the land.

But Mulyadi wants out from the scheme. He's still paying off his debt to the company for clearing the land, equipment, fertiliser and pesticide. "It takes long to pay the debt because the profit from the palm trees is low," he says.

Cucumber crops, on the other hand, provide a steady income source for this farming family. Our partner TuK equipped Mulyadi with a range of sustainable farming techniques and, as a result, his cucumbers are flourishing.



# Instant aid via blockchain

Does a faster, cheaper, more transparent system for getting emergency aid to people in crisis sound like a good idea? It is! And that's why we're leading a blockchain revolution.

When disasters strike, cash is often the most practical and immediate type of support we can offer affected communities. Now, using blockchain technology, we can deliver emergency cash instantly.

A year after the groundbreaking pilot of the UnBlocked Cash project, Oxfam in Vanuatu has joined forces with 17 local and international partners to scale the blockchain-based cash and voucher assistance solution across the world — starting in the Pacific nation of Vanuatu.

More than 35,000 people affected by Cyclone Harold and COVID-19 are set to receive support via UnBlocked Cash. The project provides a single payment platform that not only delivers swift cash assistance to those in need but also boosts the local economy in the wake of disaster.

Powered by Aussie fintech Sempo, UnBlocked Cash brings aid into the 21st Century. It saves the cost of distributing aid by up to 75%, cuts delivery times by more than 90%, and brings more transparency and accountability in the process.

“We are changing the existing approach of delivering aid through automating and tracking payments using a platform to convene NGOs regardless of their experience with cash transfers,” says Oxfam’s Sandra Uwantege Hart, who designed the project.

“The platform allows for seamless coordination of resources, which in many places — like Vanuatu — remain untapped.

Now, we are able to expand our cash assistance capabilities with multiple partners including, among others, World Vision, Save the Children, the Vanuatu Red Cross and the Government of Vanuatu.”

This is a huge advantage in the Pacific region, where financial infrastructure is limited and the operating environment is complex. The region experiences some of the most devastating impacts of climate change and the population is scattered across more than 25,000 islands.

UnBlocked Cash has been designed as a user-centered solution empowering the beneficiary communities and local shops in their own economic recovery and development.

Participating vendors receive android smartphones with a pre-installed Sempo payments app and are trained in basic digital skills. Enrolled households receive e-voucher cards, which can be tapped on vendor phones to pay for goods.

The unique feature of the Vanuatu program design is a vendor-to-vendor cash-out, where vendors can exchange their digital tokens into a local flat currency between themselves, or purchase goods from each other without any intermediaries. NGOs like Oxfam can monitor transactions remotely and in real-time via an online platform.

Priscilla Tabe (pictured) is a participating vendor from Sarakata, Santo. She says, “I’m glad to join the program. I think it will benefit local businesses as well as people in the communities because they can choose what they want. It’s very interesting seeing how technology can be used to provide assistance to people at the grassroots level.”

The innovative use of digital currency — in this case, a digitised version of the local currency in the form of a collateralised blockchain token — ushers in a new era of digital financial inclusion and access in Vanuatu, where most people don’t have access to brick-and-mortar banking services.



“I think it will benefit local businesses as well as people in the communities because they can choose what they want.”

— Priscilla Tabe, Vanuatu

Santo province, Vanuatu: UnBlocked Cash vendor Priscilla Tabe holds a tap-and-go UnBlocked card up to her smart phone to complete payment. Photo: Arlene Bax/Oxfam in Vanuatu.



Sanma province, Vanuatu: People line up to register for the UnBlocked Cash program. Of the 2,525 beneficiaries registered so far, many are elderly (38%), widowed (11%) or have a disability (36%). Photo: Arlene Bax/Oxfam in Vanuatu.





"... one day I will be the Minister of Education!"

— Deng, Uganda

## Learning in lockdown

For young people who've survived immense hardship and displacement, education is a critical pathway to a brighter future. That's why we're working to keep kids at Palabek Refugee Settlement "in school" — even if it means bringing school to them.

For the world's most vulnerable children, the closure of schools due to the pandemic is more than a temporary disruption — it could put an end to their education. In northern Uganda's Palabek Refugee Settlement and surrounding communities, lockdowns and school closures have forced some students to forego their education in order to work and support their families. Teen pregnancies are on the rise and, sadly, some students have returned to South Sudan to take up arms.

But teachers and educators in the region refuse to give up on their students. They are fighting tirelessly to support at-risk students during the lockdown, with a helping hand from an Oxfam-supported initiative called Education for Life.

Local Primary School teacher Irene Amyera says, "The lockdown has affected all of us around here, especially the children. Some of them are demoralised. Education gave them hope and helped them handle their trauma — now they just have to stay at home, missing school and their teachers.

"Together with the other teachers, I have been visiting the children's homes. We have distributed self-study materials, guiding and supporting them in every way possible.

"We have taught them about the corona guidelines: to wash their hands with clean water and soap, and use a face mask if they can get one. I also made sure they know that they can come to us if they need help with the self-study materials."

Irene's colleague Jennifer Cynthia Akonga (pictured) says, "As a teacher, I try my best to reach all of my learners at

their homes once a week during the lockdown. In the beginning, we distributed home-study materials to all the students. Then we started gathering them outside in small groups of four or five students to support them in their self-study. We have made a schedule to make sure that we reach all students once a week, although they are often working in the garden or the house when we come by."

Deng (pictured) is one of Jennifer's students. He says, "Because of the coronavirus, I stay at home all day right now — digging the garden, cultivating maize and playing football with my friends. But I also make sure that I read the materials I got from my teachers when they came to visit me at home. I'm sure that I will go back to school as soon as they re-open."

Deng missed one year of schooling due to the war in South Sudan but he's determined to catch up and thrive: "When I came to Uganda, I joined the Education for Life program because I wanted to study fast. And one day I will be the Minister of Education!"

Keen ambitions like these make it all worthwhile for teachers like Jennifer. "I became a teacher because of my love for children — my love of education. And I saw that it was a way for me to help our country in raising citizens who would be of benefit to our country."



Photos: Emmanuel Museruka/Oxfam

Will you join forces with Oxfam to beat this global health crisis? Visit [oxfam.org.au](https://oxfam.org.au) to find out more and get involved.



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