



2014 ELPD Report – Vanuatu Study Tour

NASUMAN – a belief that the community has the ability to control their destiny through faith

‘Nasuman’ is a concept derived from Tanna island in the southern province of Vanuatu and is translated broadly as ‘garden’. Nasuman conceptualizes nature and nurture of the environment and man’s relationship to it and to others-in regards to survival.

The concept is illustrated by a gardener tending his garden to make sure his crops grow well so he could have a good harvest. In leadership, Nasuman is used as to relate to leadership that is people oriented. A leader is a gardener who farms the community and people to ensure positive outcomes are gained.

As emerging Leaders, Nasuman concept applies to us actively reviving the values of a man and his garden such as respect and service and integrating these into our economic, social and cultural interactions. It calls us to identify and protect features that can provide a framework of sustainable development in a changing environment.

***Since time began, our Pacific forefathers have been using storytelling as a means of explaining why the world is the way it is. In Australia, we have the Dreamtime.
In New Zealand it is Ranginui and Papatuanuku.***

***For our Fijian neighbours, they have Talanoa, and on the Cook Islands it is Akapapaanga.
On the Solomon Islands it is Kastom stories, while in Papua New Guinea there are many including Lagatoi and Ravakai. In New Caledonia they have Kanak legends.***

In Vanuatu they have done the same. Over the last week we have had the privilege of hearing the many stories of ni-Vanuatu, and how these are still influencing modern Vanuatu today.

We would like to share some of these with you, as well as some of the recommendations we have for ni-Vanuatu when it comes to “navigating our future together”.

Vanuatu - formerly known as New Hebrides prior to independence in 1980 - like many of our Pacific countries has its challenges and opportunities, with a population of just over 260,000 residents across 83 islands (34 of which are inhabited) and six provinces. More than 68% of the population is under 25 years of age, and the country has had five Prime Ministers in the last five years.

As part of the Vanuatu Study Tour, we spent time in two of the six provinces, including the islands of Efate, Tanna and Pele. At each of these we have met with community leaders who have shared with us their stories – of communities managing the collision between their traditional culture and the influences of the 21st century in a way that is meaningful and relevant to these inspiring communities.

At the village of Mele we heard from the first head of State of an independent Vanuatu, Elder Ati George Sokomanu who shared with us the dreams and aspirations of this vibrant and growing community struggling to maintain their cultural heritage in a faith that is being dramatically influenced by a western way of life that is perceived, but is not necessarily, better.

In the Province of Tafea, where we spent two days on the idyllic paradise of Tanna, we transcended into another world where the preservation of custom is a true vocation for the local community, and at the same time they are attempting to adapt to the influences of a 21st century and realise that for the future of their communities they must embrace change.

As we emerged ourselves in to a custom village that worships Prince Phillip, and another John Frum, it was obvious to see the importance of tradition to these communities. At the same time we saw a modern and progressive model of provincial governance that represented the interests of youth, women, people with disabilities, religion, business and the traditional leaders.

On the island of Pele we saw the community working together on projects to adapt to the challenges of climate change.

In Port Vila itself, we saw a modern vibrant community that is very western in its approach to life, but at the same time tradition and culture were still evident. This was shown in their daily market which supports their Karan market garden farming model, and the clothing worn by local residents.

Our Vanuatu Study Team was made up of nine members – our Team Leader Philippe Prevot (New Caledonia), our Liaison Officer Paul Nalau (Vanuatu), Lyndon Gorie (Papua New Guinea), Neal Kerr (New Zealand), Fred Lahi (Solomon Islands), Simona Nicholas (Cook Islands), Julie Slater (Australia), Fane Vave (Fiji), and Liliana Warid (Fiji).

At the outset of our Study Tour we selected a series of themes that we would each consider during our week in Vanuatu – Sustainable Economic Growth; Regional cooperation and infrastructure; Good governance and gender equality; Community Resilience; Environment, Education, Science and Health.

Here is what we observed.

Sustainable Economic Growth

“Development that works for us, which means that it benefits people and government, not just foreigners”
Secretary General, Tanna – Raynold Surmat

Through the broad stakeholder consultations there were resounding issues which were continuously highlighted at different levels of the community, whether at grassroots, business or national levels. They included:

- (1) the need for local communities to sustain their daily lives;
- (2) the ability to grow and expand business to cater for increased demand and
- (3) the aspiration to increase economic development with less reliance on donor funds.

In Port Vila we heard from the Governor of the Reserve Bank about forecasted economic growth based on expected renewal of donor funded projects, the increasing growth and contribution of tourism and the volatility of the Vanuatu economy over the years due to ongoing political instability and changes and increased liquidity in the economy.

The Tourism representatives who we dialogued with emphasised the reliance of the Vanuatu economy on their sector but the dwindling allocation of funds for international marketing and product development relative to other economic sectors.

On Tanna Island we met with the Tafea Provincial Council and Local business owner of Evergreen Resort and Tours who outlined their challenges were

- (1) sound data to make strategic decisions;
- (2) vision of the province to be self-sustainable and decrease reliance on supplies from Port Vila; and
- (3) as well as the challenges in growing business opportunities due to the land boundary challenges.

The growing skill gaps with rural urban migration were also an ongoing challenge as the resort tried to deliver quality services to their paying guests.

Vanwood was an example of a cooperative initiative which encouraged Small Medium Enterprise development and empowerment of women. Established in 1991 with 5 members, today (2014) the organisation has grown to over 7,000 members and has generated almost \$2 billion Vatu of economic activity into the economy since its establishment.

Emphasis was placed on community awareness, the empowerment of women, gender equality, and the role women played in being change agents in the community at large.

“It is important to empower people to create GDP capacity” Simeon Athy, Reserve Bank Governor

Recommendations for navigating our future together:

- That the Government of Vanuatu seriously consider introduction of an income tax system soon in order for the country to be able to control and sustain its own national budget and therefore give them a greater sense of control and autonomy. With the notion that every citizen and business in the country should contribute to the development of the nation and its infrastructure;
- That the collection of accurate and timely data become a priority for the country to ensure development priorities are based on sound data, contribution of economic sectors can be measured and quantified;
- That import substitution be encouraged through the development of small to medium size enterprises, which will decrease imports, increase local investment and create multiplier effects in the local community at all levels;

Regional Cooperation & Infrastructure

Regional Cooperation is about Pacific countries working closely together on areas requiring collective action to do more than they could separately. It is an important platform on which countries work together towards unlocking their vast economic potential, achieve sustained, rapid growth, and reduce poverty. The wide-spread nature of the challenges facing the Pacific region reinforces the importance of integration and cooperation (Pacific Plan 2012).

Vanuatu can benefit immensely by leveraging off the expertise and best practice methods from other Pacific sites. Areas where this is essential are:

LAND. Issues concerning customary land and ownership in Vanuatu are complex and in many ways hinder the progression of economic development. From ownership rights of individuals and families to land boundaries, the resolution of this matter is of national importance, as resolving this will build investor confidence leading to increased developments, creating opportunities and drive a more sustainable economy.

TOURISM & INFORMATION COMMUNICATIONS TECHNOLOGY. Vanuatu is a beautiful country boasting not only the sand, sea and surf like the rest of her Pacific counterparts but is also home to some unique sights like the Yasur volcano and Custom village in Tanna.

In Port Vila our discussions with the Tourism Authorities highlighted the growing role of social media in destination marketing, the untapped potential of the tourism offerings, the significant contribution of tourism to the economy relevant to the budget allocated to them annually, and the importance of the governance structure with the provincial tourism associations to ensure greater cohesion and focus for the industry.

The success of tourism will provide more employment opportunities for Vanuatu, boost GDP, and possibly force the hand of Government to direct more funds to developing the required infrastructure. This continued development will attract brands like Starwood, Accor and Wyndham, and their clientele.

There are also areas where Vanuatu appears to be ahead of their peers and are in a position to share their methods and experiences across the region. These include:

(1) Traditional culture preservation - Yakel village in Tanna Island, although located in a remote area of Vanuatu has a small museum that contains artefacts, stories and pictures that illustrate their culture.

Funded by the Government of Vanuatu, the museum is staffed by volunteers from the village who have an acute appreciation for the importance of preserving their local culture. This conscious approach to traditional culture preservation if adopted by the Pacific sites is an excellent way to ensure traditions and cultures are protected.

(2) Information Communications Technology (ICT) - The availability of data for well-informed decision making is essential for any country to progress well. The office of the Chief Information Officer (CIO), Vanuatu has implemented cloud-based systems in Government making the country the first of the Pacific islands to have an e-Government network based on the cloud.

SEASONAL EMPLOYMENT. Although there is a growing emphasis on the importance of education, the vast majority of the Vanuatu population is currently only educated up to Primary school level. Together with the rapid population increase, there are limited formal employment options as a result of this.

The Department of Labour has created a successful relationship with NZ and Australia to provide seasonal workers that work on rural farms for up to 6 months at a time. Not only does this provide a lucrative option for the unemployed Ni-Vanuatu, but the arrangement also supports the developmental goals in NZ and Australia.

INFRASTRUCTURE. For any country to thrive, there needs to be effective infrastructure setup. Not only should infrastructure be effective but also affordable and accessible. From better road network, schools, hospitals, communications, electricity, water & sanitation, are mandatory for basic need and survival requirements.

From our study tour, the level of infrastructure set-up and development in Port Vila is good, while in outer municipal areas this is less developed and should be of concern. We had the opportunity to visit Tanna Island where this was certainly the case, and we believe the same can be said for other outer municipal islands.

For the economy to flourish, electricity and water supply should be looked into, and government needs to invest more in these areas so that cheaper and sustainable methods of generating electricity and supply water can be harnessed for the benefit of the people and SMEs.

Recommendations for navigating our future together:

- With regards to electricity generation, Vanuatu is poised to generate more and more of its energy from coconut oil, wind generators and hydro power. As the renewable energies come on stream, there will be less and less dependence on imported diesel and petrol. But there is no foreseeable possibility of oil independence for Vanuatu.
- That the advent of integrated IT networks for e-governance, in particular, IT health data collection may allow close to real time capture of patient level data, which can support region level needs assessment and inform geographical and institutional planning and resourcing decisions. Unlike in other countries where various incompatible IT systems exist, the relatively clean IT slate in Vanuatu ought to allow for a single uniform collection system and avoid the incompatibility issues present in the Australasian health informatics collection processes.
- The logical first step would be to establish the Ni-Vanuatu that have a right to customary land then accurately assign land to the family units. Whilst the authorities appear to understand what needs to be done, Vanuatu must commit to actually doing these things so an amicable result is in place before the situation worsens.
- There are opportunities to harness geothermal activities around the country to generate electricity which will drive the cost down significantly for the consumers. The only challenge would be the start-up cost for setting up the geothermal power station. However, due to the climate change issue being a global concern, major industrial countries around the world have put money together to support sustainable energy initiative, hence, start-up costs for a geothermal power station can be greatly subsidised by these grants.

Governance Structure in Vanuatu

“Without strong leadership not only are new opportunities lost, but what we already have is in danger of also being lost,” Douglas Patterson, Director, Island Property Consultants Ltd

Vanuatu has a complex government structure – both at a formal and custom level. It is a multi-party system, with a unicameral Parliament of 52 seats. Over the last five years, Vanuatu has had five different Prime Ministers, the current of which is Joe Natuman who took office earlier this year. The current President, Farther Baldwin Lonsdale has also only been in office for a short time.

This lack of political stability, has had a huge impact on the ability of this beautiful country to attract international investment, vital to the country’s future.

At a custom level, in the North men advance through ‘grade societies’, acquiring a new title at each stage in part by paying off titleholders above them in sacrificed pigs, mats and food.

In the centre of Vanuatu, patrialineages passed chiefly titles that are inheritable. This system, called the Naflak, features totems of the Octopus, Coconut, Stone, shellfish, Wild Ginger and Yam which is passed through the woman. Land and chiefly titles still pass through the men.

On Tanna in the south, every male personal name is a landed title. In addition, local communities control one or up to three generic titles endowed with various ritual perquisites – Ieremera- ruler, Iani Niko-spokesperson of the canoe and Tipunis-manager or a skilled directorate.

Recommendations for navigating our future together:

- Integrating and including both national government and traditional governance structures together to ensure a holistic and inclusive dialogue is carried out continuously, will ensure that policies developed and implemented are successful and benefit all stakeholders of Vanuatu.

Community Resilience – Security, Stability and Strengthening

“We need to create a society that is able to accommodate the people and their aspirations” John Salong, former advisor to the Minister for Lands

In Vanuatu, the population is steadily increasing each year, with more than 68% of the population under 25 years of age. This new generation of ni-Vanuatu have different aspirations to those of their parents and there is some struggle between the importance of maintaining culture and tradition, and at the same time adapting to 21st century influences.

In Tafea Province, the Secretary General shared with us their progress on developing a 15 year Strategic Plan for the Tafea Province which was utilising modern community engagement principles including an Environmental Scan, a People Forum’s to capture community input, and high level consultations. The draft Plan will then be open to public before it is put to the Tribal Chiefs for formal approval and implementation.

Speaking to the Chief Information Officer, who shared with us their whole of government approach to ICT, we saw the opportunity to utilise technology to preserve their cultural and traditions by recording these for historical purposes. This was also evident on the island of Tanna during our visit to the Cultural Heritage Centre at Lanekal.

In Port Vila we meet with members and organisers of the Vanuatu Beach Volleyball team. The team leader, Debbie Masauvakalo shared with us their journey that today has seen the team become a Vanuatu success story on both the local and international stage. Some of these girls cannot read and write, but they know how to play volleyball.

***“If you don’t make your goal, don’t give up – set a new one. We are creating hope...”
Debbie Masauvakalo***

Recommendations for navigating our future together:

- That other Provincial Governments adopt the model of community engagement and empowerment implemented by the Tafea Provincial Government that incorporates a top down-bottom up approach
- To formally preserve the stories, traditions and culture of ni-Vanuatu for the education of future generations utilising ICT
- That the rural communities of Vanuatu identify the most important elements of their tradition and culture to be retained, and at the same time they need to embrace the positive elements of 21st century living.

Environment, Education, Science and Health

The foundation for Vanuatu’s future survival and it’s ability to flourish needs to be secured today through investment in the identification and addressing of challenges to good health, robust education and the protection and adaptation to the environment.

HEALTH

“The population is growing so fast”, “Teenage pregnancy is a real problem and we don’t know what to do” Tanna Village & Mele Village

“The government must do more to stop the importing of so much unhealthy food from overseas” Mele Village and Lapita Owners

While no formal health sector representatives were consulted during the course of the Vanuatu study tour, a number of recurring themes emerged where concern continues to grow around several key health related areas which includes a rising incidence of non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, obesity and cardiovascular disease.

There has been a shift in diet and lifestyle balance from hard work to obtain a healthy nutritional diet, to a sedentary lifestyle obtaining energy rich, low nutritional value foods leading to obesity.

Teenage pregnancy is a widespread concern across Vanuatu, with access to family planning information and contraception is limited in Vanuatu with approximately 40% contraceptive coverage in the country. Sexual education within school and the community is variable. (I am Not a Lost Cause – Teenage pregnancy in the Pacific)

The Vanuatu Women’s centre supported findings from the national violence survey showing as many as two in three women reporting physical or sexual violence at some stage in their life.

EDUCATION

“Learning gained from western education must be anchored in the roots of their local traditions,” Tanna Chief Freeman

In Tanna and Mele Villages community leaders expressed concern that local dialects were not being taught within the curriculum and the community members suggested that “The scholarships overseas for western education should be supplemented by a bonding on return for traditional education”.

Two of the businesses we visited in Port Vila, namely - *Wan Smolbag* and the women’s centre, are key advocate in the promotion of women’s issues in Vanuatu, through direct family planning services, women’s and child safety services but also via public health promotion of these issues and ongoing education across all sectors of the community.

ENVIRONMENT

“Vanuatu’s environmental quality is rapidly deteriorating. Natural disasters related to volcanic activities, frequent cyclones, drought, flooding and even coral bleaching are increasing in frequency and severity. Deforestation, air, land and marine pollution are growing problems,” Vanuatu National Assessment Report, 5 year review

The community in Tanna raised grave concern on the threat of deep sea mining and its associated negative implications on them. On Pele Island the community was already experiencing the impact of climate change on crop type, harvest, rising sea levels and extreme weather conditions. A pilot animal husbandry project to adapt live stock to drier environments and develop new ways of feeding them has begun, as some staple foods become more difficult to supply.

Recommendations for navigating our future together:

- Continued public health promotion of a return to the traditional food production and diet, increasing physical activity and nutritional value of consumed food, as well as strengthening traditional customs and values;
- In relation to violence against women and early pregnancy, there is significant need for Vanuatu as a whole to carefully review its traditional stance on the position, protection and encouragement of women within Vanuatu societal structures.

CONCLUSION

At the start of the week we were set a challenge by the first President of an Independent Vanuatu, Elder Ati George Sokomanu who urged us to use our time in Vanuatu to create a recipe for “navigating our future together”

“Let us look at the contents of the pot – it includes leadership, culture, democratic values, skills, communication, problem solving, decision making, awareness challenges, relationships, communities, developments, cooperation, understanding and stability,” he said.

We have accepted his challenge, and hope that our findings will help the inspiring people of ni-Vanuatu, and indeed the wider pacific region, better navigate our future together.

The rapid population increase that Vanuatu is experiencing means less land per person and more intensive use of customary land.

Emotionally, many people would like to retain at least some part of their traditional life, however from a practical & commercial point of view, most people especially those who live in or near the urban centers, are realizing that this is rarely possible. Money is needed for just about everything in daily life.

Vanuatu has to navigate its future between traditional & western influences.

As in many developing countries, Vanuatu’s economic growth has not kept pace with the population growth. Here in Vanuatu, things have made much worse by foreign investment over the past decade. Foreign direct investment was about 30 billion VT in 2005. It was only 5 billion VT last year.

This massive decline in foreign investment has been caused as much by domestic factors as the Global Financial Crisis - high operating costs, expensive bank borrowing, land disputes, eroding infrastructure, political instability, corruption, decline in local spending, and lack of enforcement of existing laws/regulations.

If Vanuatu wants investors to plan long term, then it must in turn offer long term security to investors. That means strong reliable leadership is imperatives. Laws exist, but what seems to be missing is enforcement of those laws and to go from concept, static phases to practical, dynamic actions.

To close, we would like to take this opportunity to thank all of the people who made time to share their stories with us, the sponsors that made our Study Tour possible, and the members of the Vanuatu EPLD Organising Committee for ensuring that we were able to see and experience all that is ni-Vanuatu.

As team Nasuman, we have made a commitment to continue to work together to navigate our future. This includes a reunion in five years’ time (2019), to stay connected and supportive of one another via social media, and also to make contact with one another whenever we visit the country in which they reside.

Our Study Tour Itinerary

Sunday 19 October 2014

- Meeting with Vanuatu Organising Committee
- Church and Community Meeting at Mele Village
- Visit to Evergreen Cascades
- Presentation and dialogue with the Reserve Bank Governor

Monday 20 October 2014

- Discussion on Labour Issues – Panel Session
- Visit to Port Vila Beach Volleyball Centre
- Wan Smolbag
- Tanna Coffee Factory
- Conversation with Office of the Government Chief Information Officer
- Presentation and dialogue with the Tourism Sector

Tuesday 21 October 2014

- Dialogue with Nikoletan Council of Chiefs
- Tanna Cultural Centre
- Tafea Provincial Government Headquarters
- Yakel (Prince Phillip) Custom Village
- Yasur Volcano
- Evergreen Resort and Tours – discussion about tourism and industry

Wednesday 22 October 2014

- Tanna Farms (Coconut Oil Factory)
- Meet with community leaders at Lenakel village
- Imaleto Area Governance Strengthening Program
- Nasituan Community Initiative

Thursday 23 October 2014

- Panel discussion and dialogue on land issues
- Chief Roimata's Domain – World Heritage Site
- Pele Island Climate Change Project

Friday 24 October 2014

- Vanuatu Abbatoirs
- Vanwods Microfinance Centre
- Lapita Café
- Vanuatu Women's Centre
- Meeting with President of the Republic of Vanuatu

