

Initial Impacts of the Vanuatu Reform Programme on Women: Rhetoric and Reality

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“...there is community concern that gender issues are being marginalized in the practical implementation of the CRP”

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Demographics

Vanuatu's history since independence in 1980 has been characterised by political instability. The country holds the Pacific record of four governments in 10 months. This instability has impacted on every organisation, both government and non-government. The estimated population of 190,000 is spread over 83 islands, making communication difficult and transportation costly.

As with many other countries, women in Vanuatu are the poorest of the poor and have the worst health - maternal mortality is high. There are more illiterate women than men and women are under represented in positions of power. There are no women in Parliament.

At 46.4 on the Human Poverty Index, Vanuatu is on a par with Malawi and Pakistan. Vanuatu is a Least Developed Country (LDC) and is highly reliant on aid.

Comprehensive Reform Programme

In 1997 Vanuatu decided to undertake a Comprehensive Reform Programme, commonly referred to as CRP. CRP is a structural adjustment programme. Donors argue that Vanuatu decided to undertake the reform programme willingly, however, by so doing, the country was rewarded with an Asian Development Bank (ADB) loan of US\$10 million, a substantial incentive to an LDC on the verge of bankruptcy. Other donors supported the reform, some offering an increase in aid while ever the Country stayed committed to reform. Initially a three-year programme, CRP has been extended for another three years due to the lack of achievement of outcomes in the first three years.

The overall objective of CRP is to “enhance and sustain private sector led economic growth with its benefits distributed equitably within the country”¹. An activity matrix was drawn up that identified required outcomes; who would be responsible; and a time frame. Economic activities and social outcomes were identified. The social outcomes were meant to mitigate the negative impacts on groups who are vulnerable and at risk due to the Reform Process.

There is not time in 15 minutes to give a full picture of CRP. I acknowledge that this paper will provide a view slanted towards the women's perspective. Also, rather than focus on the well known confines of SAPs, I'd like to take a more productive approach by facing up to the reality for women in Vanuatu and arriving at some suggestions that could mitigate damage to other populations of women.

Gender Benchmarks

Nine gender benchmarks were arrived at as part of what became known as the CRP Matrix. They are aimed at addressing:

1. Visibility and meaningful participation in decision-making.
2. Valuation of the contribution of women.
3. Economic equality and independence.
4. Violence against women and discriminatory laws.
5. General physical and mental health.
6. Reproductive health.
7. Custom, religion and culture.
8. Education.
9. Environmental management and subsistence production.

As part of the design, these benchmarks are to be championed by the Department of Women's Affairs in concert with other women focused groups, particularly the Vanuatu National Council of Women (VNCW).

The need to involve women in the development process is clearly evidence in the literature now. Despite the rhetoric and a profuse number of gender policy documents by bilateral and multilateral donors, no serious effort is made, when an SAP is put into effect, to protect women's position. As a result, the women suffer, their children suffer and the country suffers.

'Right Sizing'

SAPs all seem to start off the same way – by downsizing the public service (given the friendlier term of 'right sizing' in Vanuatu). The logic of this practice in a small population, Small Island State where only a small percentage of the population are employed in the first place, is questionable in itself. How does that reduce poverty?

In March 1999, a report appeared in a Port Vila (the capital) newspaper advising that although a 10% reduction in Public Service numbers had been achieved, only a 2.6% reduction in the wage bill had resulted. The report went on to say that 58% of those who had been made redundant were in the lower pay scale, mainly employed as drivers or secretaries². What it doesn't mention is that a lot of cleaners also made it to the redundancy pile. Also not mentioned is that the secretaries and cleaners were almost all women.

Further evidence that women were discriminated against in the downsizing exercise is available from Transitions Unit data. A Transitions Unit is a group who provide training and career counselling to those made redundant – in short it's meant to turn public servants into entrepreneurs. 97% of those made redundant accessed the Unit³ and anecdotal evidence indicates that about a third of those were women. Women were not one third of the public service in 1998/9.

When women have no income the health and education level of the family suffers. Schools at all levels in Vanuatu charge fees that are quite a burden at the best of times. Women have historically taken responsibility for paying school fees. It is the girl child whose schooling is abandoned first when family income reduces. The value of educating girls is also well documented, most recently in a publication by the IMF, OECD, UN and World Bank where it was stated that "girls education produces one of the highest payoffs in development"⁴. How can sacking women reduce poverty?

Women's Focal Points

As part of the 'right-sizing' process all staff positions at the Department of Women's Affairs were disestablished. The Department went into a state of stasis for several months while the staff reapplied for their positions and waited on an overworked and under skilled Public Service Commission – awaiting its own reform – for the outcome. To date a Director has still not been appointed, though a

person has been acting in the role. Women's Affairs also suffered budgetary cuts which continue to impact on their potential to be effective.

The Vanuatu National Council of Women (VNCW) did what it could to make progress while Women's Affairs was in turmoil. Then, in what can only be described as unfortunate timing, in April 1999 – just as Women's Affairs was bouncing back - VNCW was reviewed by its core funder. As a result the organisation spent the next 12 months internally focused while it restructured. VNCW then suffered a severe funding cut which necessitated a reduction in staff from 11 to three. Thus, even with a more effective structure, they are limited in their ability to lead women through the CRP process.

So how are the gender benchmarks progressing? A national workshop was held in August 2000 where women from around the country commenced work on establishing baseline data in the nine benchmark areas.

Double Standard

Women's right to employment, to health and to education are all protected by CEDAW⁵, a UN Convention signed by the Government of Vanuatu in 1995. For those who would argue that international conventions are of no relevance to developing countries, women's fundamental rights and freedoms are also protected by the Vanuatu Constitution⁶. Neither of these documents were honoured when CRP came into effect. Further, there is provision in both documents to employ affirmative action practices so as to accelerate the position of women, but these provisions were ignored.

A Commonwealth South Pacific Symposium on Gender, Politics and Conflict/Peace was held in Wellington in June this year. Women and men from all around the Pacific were in attendance. In the final communiqué it was stated that:

There is a lack of cross sectoral application by donors of their own Gender and Development policies in projects and programmes. There is no evidence of applied compliance by donors with a recipient's ratification of CEDAW⁷.

Donor governments and multilateral organisations invest in the ratification of international covenants, like CEDAW, in developing countries. They promote implementation and provide technical assistance to support fulfilling reporting requirements and to assist with the redrafting of the laws of those countries. Yet, at the same time those governments and organisations encourage the implementation of SAPs that result in breaching those international covenants and, in the case of Vanuatu, the Constitution of the country. CEDAW and the Constitution are reduced to becoming part of the rhetoric.

It could be argued that donor governments are doubly duplicitous as they are, mostly, signatories to CEDAW themselves. So they have an obligation to honour its principles in their own actions not just in the actions that they encourage of the developing country.

The CEDAW Optional Protocol will come into effect on 22 December 2000. The Optional Protocol provides for any woman or group of women to take a complaint against their government to the UN. Should the women of Vanuatu, or of any country where discrimination has resulted from an SAP, chose to exercise their new right then all those involved in the funding and implementation of the SAP will need to search their consciences and face up to their double standards.

Situation Update

Well the reform programme in Vanuatu may have gotten off to a bad start but things are looking up. An ADB technical adviser has been working with the Vanuatu National Council of Women for the last five months, providing training and support to women on the gender and social monitoring objectives of CRP. This work includes the development of strategies to monitor the ongoing implementation of CRP for gender equity and improvement of frontline services from government agencies, in particular the Department of Women's Affairs. A Gender Policy Officer has been appointed to Women's Affairs.

A UNDP funded Good Governance project went into effect in 1999 and one outcome has been the increased political awareness of women around the country. At the workshop mentioned earlier women identified participation in decision making as their top priority from the nine Gender Benchmarks.

Three years into the reform, it is now acknowledged that there is a need for the machinery of government to develop effective mechanisms for mainstreaming gender. What a pity that this rhetoric was not put into practice in 1997, at the start of the reform.

Transforming Rhetoric into Good Practice

What can be done to ensure that rhetoric leads to positive reality? Following are just a very few suggestions:

- ◆ Assess a country's readiness to reform, rather than just its need to reform. Work at putting mechanisms in place that lead to readiness to deal properly with the forthcoming changes.
- ◆ Pay particular attention to building capacity within the women's focal points before reform commences.
- ◆ Honour the country's commitments to international human rights Conventions, in particular, CEDAW - not to mention the country's Constitution.
- ◆ Assist the country to honour its commitment to women during the reform and make the government aware that you will be monitoring for equity – then monitor right from the start!
- ◆ Reform the Public Service Commission before the down sizing commences, not a year into the SAP.
- ◆ Better still, redeploy or up-skill those who are not performing. Don't downsize a public service that is only a small percentage of the paid employed.

If these measures had been in place at the start of Vanuatu's Comprehensive Reform Programme then the reform may not have needed to be drawn out from three years to six years – with consequent borrowing implications – and the situation for women may not have gone backwards before it could go forwards.

Glossary

ADB	Asian Development Bank
CEDAW	Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women
CRP	Comprehensive Reform Programme
LDC	Least Developed Country
SAP	Structure Adjustment Programme
VNCW	Vanuatu National Council of Women

Notes

- 1 Aide Memoire of Loan Review Mission, September 2000. ADB-SPRM, Vanuatu.
- 2 Trading Post newspaper, 3 March 1999. *After all the redundancies, the government saves only 2.6 percent on its wage roll.*
- 3 Aide Memoire of Loan Review Mission, September 2000. ADB-SPRM Vanuatu.
- 4 Communications Development (2000). *2000 A Better World for All*. Washington: Communications Development.
- 5 Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women.
- 6 Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu: Part I - 5.
- 7 Unpublished paper. Commonwealth South Pacific Symposium on Gender, Politics and Conflict/Peace. Issues of Concern.