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Janis Blong Toktok Lessons from Volunteer Service Abroad's partnership with Pri-Skul Asosiesen Blong Vanuatu

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Abstract:

Volunteer Service Abroad (VSA) is undertaking a series of case studies of programmes in the Pacific, Asia and Africa to monitor and evaluate our work with the objective of developing an understanding of what works well, what does not work well, to learn from our successes and failures, and to apply that learning to improving the quality of our development practice. A case study of VSA's seven-year engagement with the Pri-Skul Asosiesen Blong Vanuatu (PSABV) yielded a mass of detailed findings from which five important lessons have been drawn, i.e. indigenous participation, leadership, and ownership are key to achieving effective development outcomes; advancing education opportunities for all children requires a paradigm shift; the benefits of good early childhood education programmes flow through to parents and communities; women gain expanded choices through participation in their children's early childhood education, and external agents can be catalysts for good change.

Conference Presentation

VSA aims to deliver volunteer programmes that address key development needs in partnership with local organisations. To monitor and evaluate the quality and processes of our programmes and operations VSA has been undertaking a number of studies of our work.

In 2008 a case study of VSA's work with the *Pri-Skul Asosiesen Blong Vanuatu in Vanuatu* was completed entitled *Janis Blong Toktok (A chance to talk)*.

Janis Blong Toktok is the product of collaboration between a long-term and valued Partner Organisation, PSABV; an independent researcher, Dr John Schischka, and VSA. This study aims to contribute to VSA's intention that "New Zealand volunteers, partner organisations, and communities abroad share skills and knowledge to help improve quality of life, and build self-determining communities and stable nations" (VSA 2006a:2).

The study is the second in a series of case studies planned to provide donors, development workers and other interested parties with in-depth views of the workings and impact of volunteer programmes. Most importantly, case studies help to give our partners in confidence that good changes are possible and measurable, and can result in an improved quality of life for local people and their communities.

Janis Blong Toktok charts the history of VSA's engagement with the PSABV, covering the period 1 July 1999 to 30 June 2007.

The study, identifies the contribution of New Zealand volunteers have made to the development of early childhood education in Vanuatu, and outlines the findings of research to measure the impact of this work through a process of participatory appraisal. Lessons learnt are also identified.

The details of the research methods, which were very interesting, are available in the published report. Today I will focus on the findings and learnings.

Findings in Summary

It is often difficult to draw a 'straight line' relationship between a development intervention and a particular outcome. The causal relationship between action and impact is often difficult to trace.

When it comes to the work of VSA volunteers with the PSABV and their impact, it is difficult to separate out VSA's and individual volunteers' particular contributions.

However, when viewed collectively, it is clear that VSA's engagement with the PSABV over seven years has made a significant contribution and had an impact on the development of early childhood education in Vanuatu. The sum is greater than the parts.

The findings from the research presented in this report provide a range of quantitative and qualitative evidence that supports the view that VSA's engagement with the PSABV has led to a number of outcomes that have made a positive contribution to the development of early childhood education in Vanuatu.

We know that, since 1999, many teachers have been trained, many *kindi* have been established, and many more children have had access to a pre-school educational experience than previously.

We also know that these children are 'school ready' and making an easy transition into the formal education system.

We know that many parents and grand-parents are now engaged in their children's early childhood education and that, as a consequence, they have learnt much about child development and the process of learning. They have participated in the development and management of a community- based initiative, and have been enriched in that process.

Furthermore, we know that the PSABV has developed from a small, grassroots organisation with limited support from the state and other donors, to become an internationally recognised national organisation, providing a quality early childhood education programme throughout Vanuatu with the support of the Vanuatu Government and major donor agencies.

The PSABV, and VSA, can justifiably take pride in these considerable achievements.

The purpose of undertaking a series of case studies of VSA programmes in the Pacific, Asia and Africa is to monitor and evaluate our work with the objective of developing an understanding of what works well, what does not work well, to learn from our successes

and failures, and to apply that learning to improving the quality of our development practice.

This case study of VSA's seven-year engagement with the PSABV yielded a mass of detailed findings from which we have drawn five important lessons.

Lesson One. Indigenous participation, leadership, and ownership are key to achieving effective development outcomes.

The influence of Ni-Vanuatu educators, and the 'ownership' and active participation by parents, grandparents, local teachers and communities is slowly becoming influential in Vanuatu Education. This movement is growing from the 'bottom up'. Early childhood education programmes, and the development of the PSABV, are important exemplars and signposts in this shift in educational philosophy and practice.

Hundreds of children who have completed a sound early childhood education programme are now entering the Vanuatu education system. These children are not the 'passive' learners that were the product of the Mission-led education system, rather, they are 'active' enquirers whose thirst for learning has been fostered by their experience in early childhood education programmes.

Indigenous participation, leadership, and ownership of development programmes can now be considered central to achieving effective development outcomes.

Lesson Two. Advancing education opportunities for all children requires a paradigm shift.

Four out of every ten Ni-Vanuatu children are currently excluded from the education system before secondary school. Girls are actively discriminated against. Exam-centred schooling has led to elitism and nepotism, with many inequities. The basic human right of access to education has been denied many Ni-Vanuatu children. However change, led by early childhood educators, is underway.

The beginnings of a paradigm shift can now be detected as learner-centred early childhood education programmes have spread throughout Vanuatu. And the recognition that play has intrinsic value and leads to discovery, confidence and learning is growing amongst Ni-Vanuatu parents (and teachers).

This PSABV approach to early childhood education was quite different from the previous situation where the Government or a Mission provided a school building, imported the curriculum and language of instruction, and paid the teachers. In contrast, an indigenous NGO has empowered civil society (village communities) to initiate and complete the establishment of pre-school buildings and set up participatory programmes that engage and conscientise the whole community. The PSABV approach, that honors indigenous language, knowledge and leadership, and encourages local participation, is indeed a reflection of a paradigm shift.

It may be too early to gauge the impact on the wider education system in Vanuatu of the recent cohort of Ni-Vanuatu children who have come through PSABV early childhood education programmes. However, if the experience of other countries is considered, the foundation of learning and enquiry established during pre-school should flow through

and have a lasting impact on each child's later development and learning, and should over time reshape the Vanuatu education system.

Education is a powerful factor in social change. But, the importance of a 'living tradition' should not be disregarded.

In Vanuatu we can see that the strength of the living heart of culture can be a powerful force for development. *Vilij kindi*, where *kastom* and culture are valued alongside a sound early childhood education, are becoming recognised as important agencies for good change. This study has demonstrated that there is a 'bottom up' paradigm shift underway that is giving Ni-Vanuatu children better opportunities for education and greater choices.

Lesson Three. The benefits of good early childhood education programmes flow through to parents and communities.

Good practice, based on sound evidence and an understanding of child development, has replaced a traditional teacher-centred, rote-learning approach to early childhood education in Vanuatu. VSA volunteers have had an important role in the training of local teachers who have learnt to value new approaches, established teaching practices sensitive to the varied cultures and *kastom* of Ni-Vanuatu, and appropriate to their particular context in rural villages and towns in Vanuatu.

The findings of the focus group studies, undertaken in a number of village communities, demonstrate the wide engagement of these communities in the learning and education of their children.

The transcripts from the focus group studies revealed some significant outcomes from the result of the programmes of PSABV. Specifically, the conscientisation of parents, the realisation amongst many parents that pre-school is the foundation of children's learning, and what children do while attending *kindi* helps them prepare for Class One at primary school and their future education.

The integration of older people, including grandparents, into the pre-schools was seen as very important.

This study has provided evidence to support the view that the benefits of effective early childhood education programmes flows through to parents, grandparents and the wider community.

Lesson Four. Women gain expanded choices through participation in their children's early childhood education.

The Vanuatu education system has been biased towards boys. Raising money for school fees is a major task for many families with limited cash income, and often parents have hard decisions to make between which of their children continue their education. In this patriarchal society with clear gender roles, boys are often placed ahead of their sisters when it comes to decisions about the limited educational opportunities available. With two thirds of children not proceeding to secondary education the number of girls attending school drops off dramatically after primary school. Furthermore, motherhood in Vanuatu frequently starts in a young woman's teenage years. These factors

disadvantage young women, reduce their choices, and limit their access to educational opportunities.

The active involvement of many mothers with children participating in PSABV programmes, has given these women a second chance for their own education and advancement, and an opportunity to contribute to the well-being of the collective community. PSABV training programmes are always over-subscribed and many young women have found employment (occasionally paid) as *kindi* teachers, organisers and helpers in their *vilij kindi*. A few women have now had the opportunity to gain qualifications in early childhood education through the University of the South Pacific and a large number of women now see that they have opportunities for a second chance at education.

The focus group research gave an opportunity for women, and other community members, to exercise their voice. 'Exercising voice' is an opportunity for empowerment and *janis blong toktok* has given an opportunity for some Ni-Vanuatu women to speak out and to be heard.

Central to Sen's Capabilities Approach to development (1999) is the concept of 'expanding capabilities'. This concept is a useful framework for analysis of the situation of the many women associated with the PSABV that have participated in the development and management of *vilij kindi*, taken the opportunity to attend training programmes and gained employment.

It is interesting to note the parallel between this phenomenon in Vanuatu and New Zealand where many women participating in the early childhood education of their children in Play Centres, Kohanga Reo, Aoga Amata Samoa and the like, found opportunities to start or re-start their education and develop a new career. It will be of interest to track the future advancement of Ni-Vanuatu women who gained a second chance at education through their participation in PSABV programmes.

The finding that Ni-Vanuatu women have gained a second chance at education, expanded their options, and exercised their voice through their participation in PSABV programmes, was an 'unintended', but welcome and important, outcome of this study.

Lesson Five: External agents can be catalysts for good change.

External agents who, in the words of Robert Chambers, 'hand over the stick' to local actors can be important facilitators of participatory development. The findings of this study demonstrate that external agents (VSA volunteers) have played an important, often catalytic, role in the development of early childhood education in Vanuatu.

Indigenous leadership has been actively supported by external agents in the form of VSA volunteers. Fresh ideas and practices have been introduced to Vanuatu by volunteers with experience of working within indigenous early childhood education programmes in New Zealand. These ideas have not been implemented uncritically, rather they have undergone a critical analysis and been indigenised to fit the Ni-Vanuatu context. Consequently, PSABV policies, programmes and practices have been enriched by the contribution of outside agents.

This is an important affirmation of the work of New Zealand volunteers from VSA who have worked to exchange skills and knowledge with local Ni-Vanuatu counterparts and build the capacity of the PSABV. But this process is not 'one-way'. Returning volunteers have consistently commented on how their professional practice and personal lives have been enriched by their time working in Vanuatu.

The findings of this study have provided evidence to support the argument that external agents have an important role to play in development and can be a catalyst for good change.

Final Comment

Volunteer Service Abroad's long-term relationship with the Pri-Skul Asosiesen Blong Vanuatu exemplifies the value of developing a sequential cluster of volunteer assignments that systematically build, one-upon-another, to strengthen organisational capacity, develop local skills and knowledge, improve the quality of life, and promote self-determining communities.

VSA's relationship and work with the PSABV has developed and evolved over seven years as the latter organisation has grown and matured. With the large number of children entering *kindi* throughout Vanuatu there is still much work to be done to train teachers and build the organisational and management capacity of the PSABV.

The findings of this study led to the recommendation that VSA continues the partnership with PSABV and seeks fresh ways for New Zealand volunteers to add value to the work of the PSABV, keeping in mind the lesson of indigenous leadership. A similar conclusion, with the same caution, was reached in a case study of VSA's Bougainville Programme: "*VSA takes its cue from local partner organisations and only recruits volunteers for assignments that have been requested, sanctioned and supported by our... partners. When they tell us we are no longer required, we should leave.*" (Swain 2006:53)

The engagement of an independent researcher to work with the PSABV to develop strategies to monitor the impact of its programmes was a unique feature of this project. The focus group methodology has found favour with local staff, been incorporated into the PSABV processes, and has to some extent become indigenised.

Ni-Vanuatu early childhood educators have adopted sound teaching methods, developed a good knowledge of child development, and gained an appreciation of how evidence-based research methods can raise the standard of early childhood education practice in ways that are sympathetic to the cultures and *kastom* of village communities of Vanuatu. This is a significant achievement that deserves support to continue to develop.

VSA is continuing to work together with the PSABV, and the independent researcher, to seek support to develop and strengthen the capacity of the PSABV to monitor and evaluate the outcomes and impacts of early childhood education programmes in Vanuatu. Furthermore, we will be working to make sure that the lessons that we have learnt with the PSABV are applied to our other programmes in other countries.

Finally, let me acknowledge thank all who contributed to this study. Jenny James and John Schischka *tangkyu tumas*. And a special *tangkyu tumas* to all the volunteers and their partners who served with the PSABV.

Note: *Janis Blong Toktok - Pri-Skul Asosiesen Blong Vanuatu and the role of New Zealand Volunteers* was published by Volunteer Service Abroad as part of its case study series in 2008. It is also available on line at: <http://www.vsa.org.nz/development/>.