

Case 3. Mainstreaming Environmental Considerations and Traditional Knowledge and Practices into Policies and Programs for the Mele Catchment Area in Vanuatu

A. Objective

This case study in Vanuatu has targeted the review of legislative, administrative, and traditional/community information processes for mainstreaming the environment into development processes. Lessons learned, constraints, and positive contributions for integration of economic, social, and environmental parameters for sustainable development are highlighted. The Vanuatu Case Study Team worked in association, with the approval of the government and stakeholders, with the Tagabe River Catchment Management Initiative, a stakeholder group formed to address catchment issues within the greater Mele Catchment. The objectives of the case study are to (i) identify the shortcomings and positive aspects identified in the review of legislative, administrative, and traditional/community information processes that act as barriers or potential strengths to mainstreaming; and to (ii) identify actions that can be taken to stimulate the evolution of current planning practices to more effectively manage the environmental, sociocultural, and economic needs of the community.

B. Findings

Legislative Frameworks. The development of effective environmental management processes has been constrained by a lack of coordinated legislation to guide natural resource utilization. Where legislation is in place effective implementation procedures are constrained by lack of financial and human resources, a lack of technical know-how, and in some cases a lack of will to address conflict between formal legislation and customary principles. While Vanuatu has ratified a range of environment-focused international conventions, there has not been any concerted activity at the national level to update or integrate existing legislation in accordance with best practice environmental governance and convention requirements. Issues relating to governance have lacked clearly defined directions and blurred the distinctions between the roles of political and public sector based processes. The role of traditional practices under existing legislation is limited or in many functional areas nonexistent.

Institutional Arrangements. Communication and liaison between departments and agencies at the National Government level and between national and provincial departments occur, as does efforts for coordination; however, the administrative linkages are not there for this to transpire as a matter of common practice on matters that affect each level of governance. With regard to physical planning, the national based Physical Planning Unit can only provide advice to municipal and provincial planning and assessment agencies and does not have legislative power under the Physical Planning Act to ensure that municipal and provincial bodies develop and follow regulated planning procedures. Decisions on physical planning and development issues are made by committees with limited technical input and often reflect political rather than long-term sustainable planning outcomes. Pressures to generate funds from development application permits, building permits, and business licenses at the municipal and provincial level is driving the development approval process and encouraging short-term thinking.

Information Management. Natural resource data and information collection, storage, and use are fragmented and operating in a sectoral-based framework with limited linkages between departments or the community. A lack of information sharing between government departments and agencies due to incompatible software and hardware, lack of administrative procedures that stimulate information flows, poor general communication, and lack of understanding of the importance of information sharing is resulting in resource management decisions being made with limited, inaccurate, or outdated information.

Policy Frameworks. There is a limited policy framework to guide the implementation of activities in a number of sector-based areas of operation at the national and provincial levels. Decisions on sectoral activity and direction are made without a clear understanding of long-term goals or objectives. In some cases the direction of sectoral activity had been determined by external assistance providers without a national multi-function focus. The incorporation of multi-sectoral inputs and community input to policy development was limited to involvement through NGOs. The Environment Unit has not developed any national policies and currently operates under the guidance of its Corporate Plan.

Environmental Planning Systems. Through the development of the case study in the Tagabe River area it was clear that there was an inability on the part of the national and provincial agencies to resolve land and resource use issues. Squatter camps have now been in existence in the area for over 20 years and are still growing, increasing pressure on water resources and lowering outcomes with regard to community health and ecosystem resilience. The multi-island cultural makeup of the squatter camps and urban fringe dwellers has a distinct effect by limiting their use of traditional practices in their management of resources. This is further compounded by the fact that the land they are occupying is under the control of a different cultural group further constraining the use of their traditional practices. Without the usual village social structures to support and guide the community there is a lack of control or ownership in the way activities are carried out within the community. This has led to tension between some of the island based community groups over access to resources such as water and land for subsistence gardens.

Conclusions. A suite of issues constrains economic development in Vanuatu and includes a lack of coordination in environment and development processes, lack of integrative legislation, policies and administrative mechanisms, as well as poor aggregation and use of community, traditional, and natural resource data.

Measures to coordinate government and community actions are being put in place through the development and implementation of the Comprehensive Reform Programme. Stakeholders in Vanuatu understand that they are in the embryonic stages of instituting coordination mechanisms to better address environmental protection and sustainable development. Community empowerment, strategic thinking, and mainstreaming traditional practices are recognized as having value and importance in Vanuatu and their inclusion in policy is in the early planning and implementation stages. In order for the reforms to show positive outcomes a period of political stability is considered of critical importance to allow the reforms to be implemented in the manner in which they were designed.

Essential steps in the reform process have been made such as the development of environment legislation that will foster the development of national plans and policies, the establishment of community based conservation areas, and the instigation of formal environmental impact assessment (EIA) processes. Now that Vanuatu has taken the initial steps to reform and invigorate their procedures and processes, it is important that assistance is provided to support these initiatives in a collaborative manner and that Vanuatu is given the opportunity to implement new procedures and processes in line with the concepts of sustainable development.

C. Recommendations

A series of recommended options are presented to improve mainstreaming processes:

Capacity Building: Port Vila Municipal Council, Shefa Province, and DESD would benefit from capacity building in the assessment of environmental and social impacts of development proposals; and the Environment Department to implement the Environmental Management and Conservation Act specifically in the areas of EIA and policy development.

Legislation and Regulation: Strengthen the regulatory relationship between the National and Provincial/Municipal Planning Offices; ensure involvement of technical staff in provincial and municipal Physical Planning Committees through regulatory requirements; and support the implementation of the Water Resources Management Act and the Environmental Management and Conservation Act.

Planning Improvements: Implement the Urban Growth Management Strategy; and implement the Sanitation Master Plan.

Community Involvement: Provide for community involvement in the development assessment process; and create linkages that encourage the interaction of community with environmental management agencies.

Administration: Assist in the establishment of a National Resource Information Center based on a users pays system; and support the operation of the Tagabe River Catchment Management Initiative, the preparation of the Tagabe River Catchment Management Plan, and the implementation of activities.

Awareness Raising: Provide awareness-raising opportunities to encourage public access to natural resource information and data; and provide awareness-raising opportunities to encourage information exchange and the benefits of information exchange.