



ANALYSIS OF WOMEN COUNCILLORS' EXPERIENCES IN WISDM COALITION ACTIVITIES IN VANUATU

BACKGROUND

The Pacific Leadership Program is an initiative of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade that recognises the pivotal role of leadership in development. The program supports regional and national partners and coalitions of leaders that can achieve policy and institutional reforms in key focus areas, including women's leadership.

Under its Vanuatu Country Program, PLP3 supports the Women in Shared Decision Making (WISDM) Coalition, led by the Department of Women's Affairs (DWA). The support provided includes funding for activities, adaptive leadership training and mentorship, and a program of ongoing action research. Drawing on this support, the DWA/WISDM has provided and facilitated training to women councillors in Port Vila and to women candidates who took part in the Luganville municipal elections in 2015. This briefing note presents the key findings of analysis of the experiences of women councillors in Vanuatu the related WISDM activities.

RATIONALE

This analysis has provided the basis for key knowledge products to share with governments, development partners and other stakeholders. These products add to a growing knowledge base of how women currently engage in Pacific political processes as well as providing a context for the development of interventions to increase this participation.

The specific purposes of this investigation were:

- to document the experiences and lessons of the women councillors in Port Vila and Luganville before and after their participation in municipal elections in which TSM were used;¹
- to assess the impact of training activities conducted or facilitated by the DWA;
- to identify opportunities for future DWA/WISDM Coalition support and training of female candidates and councillors, and how this could be strengthened in the future;
- to develop profiles of the women councillors for PLP3's communications and reporting processes.

Key Points

- The impacts of introducing Temporary Special Measures for municipal councils in Vanuatu differ between locations.
- Political parties are important players and need to be included in reform-focused activities.
- 'Training' needs to focus on 'doing' politics as well as on how to be a successful candidate.
- The dynamic between electors and elected is slow to change from one based on clientelism to one focused on policy-led development.
- Peer learning and support may overcome 'critical mass' deficiencies in any one location.

Women councillors require pre-election training that equips them to think and act politically from the moment they are elected.

METHODOLOGY

In November 2015, members of the PLP team conducted interviews with the successful women candidates who were elected during the Luganville municipal council elections. Interviews with the successful women candidates in Port Vila were undertaken in March 2016. The transcripts of these interviews were analysed along with other material resulting from interviews with (male) political party representatives.

LESSONS LEARNED

The interviews highlighted several important lessons about the way in which support for TSM and women candidates has been provided by DWA/WISDM, and how this support could be strengthened in the future. The lessons that were identified are also relevant for development partners, practitioners and other actors concerned with women's political participation in the Pacific region and globally.

The lessons learned from this analysis are:

- The political context can vary significantly within a country as well as between countries.
- Political parties can use critical junctures such as the introduction of TSMs as opportunities to progress their own agendas.
- The clientelist nature of politics in Vanuatu persists at the level of local government and is an inhibitor of policy-led activities.
- Political party affiliations may be stronger than the desire to work as part of a women's caucus.
- Provision of training to 'women only' can create impediments to their ability to exercise influence within a wider grouping
- Women councillors require pre-election training that equips them to think and act politically from the moment they are elected.

IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY AND PRACTICE

The introduction of TSM in Vanuatu is one of only three forays into this means of increasing women's political participation in the Pacific island region (the other two being in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville and, most recently, in Samoa). The lessons learned from this analysis add to a growing body of literature derived from the region and inform the global debate about how best to develop more and better political leadership by and for women.

The lessons learned from this analysis are:

- Interventions designed to improve the level of women's representation in decision-making need to be located in the political context they are intended to influence. This requires nuanced and ongoing assessment of the context, established and emerging drivers of change and arising opportunities and risks.

- Interventions designed to provide support to women seeking (greater) political involvement need to be evaluated at the 'impact' level with a view to determining how ongoing activity can be made more effective.
- Political parties may see interventions such as introduction of TSMs as an opportunity to progress their own agenda. This creates an opportunity to engage with political parties to promote reform. This may be a 'high risk, high return' strategy.
- The provision of women-only training and development sequesters participants and may prove counter-productive in low-capacity environments. Opportunities should be identified to provide support and skills development to the whole of political groupings such as councils to allow for the development of mutually beneficial pro-reform relationships between councillors, regardless of their gender.
- A changing political context requires flexibility from policy makers, activists and development partners to make the most of critical junctures and key opportunities as they arise.
- Ongoing support, including exchange visits to promote peer to peer learning may assist in overcoming the lack of 'critical mass' of women in decision-making in separate locations.



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PLP Briefing Notes

PLP Briefing Notes summarise key findings and lessons learned from research, coalitions and other activities implemented or supported by PLP and its partners. The aim is to inform policymakers and practitioners on emerging themes and issues in PLP's current work and consider the implications of these for wider development policy and practice.

¹In Port Vila these elections were held in January 2014 and in Luganville they were held in August 2015.