



## COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT IN VANUATU

### RATIONALE

This briefing note provides information about how Transparency International Vanuatu (TIV) undertook a program of community engagement in various locations in Vanuatu. The program was focused on 'right to information' legislation. The briefing note looks at why this program was considered important, how it was designed and delivered, and what it achieved. It also identifies some lessons learned to inform future activities of this type in a Pacific context.

PLP's support for the program of community engagement undertaken by TIV addresses all four of the Key Result Areas for phase three:

- Building developmental leadership knowledge
- Collective action
- Policy and institutional change
- Influential communication and strategic engagement

### BACKGROUND

In 2016, the Vanuatu parliament enacted the Right to Information Act (No. 13 of 2016). PLP has provided funding to TIV to facilitate a number of public forums in relation to this legislation.

The legislation is derived from the 2014 Right to Information policy which:

*commits the Government to release all information to the public, subject to certain exceptions protective of a number of interests such as national security, personal information and privacy, and certain commercial information*

TIV has a great deal of experience in undertaking community engagement programs in Vanuatu, especially in provincial areas.

This program of community engagement that was undertaken by TIV intersected with the policy and legislative processes for introducing a Right to Information (RTI) law in Vanuatu. The combined timeline is as follows:

### Key Points

- There is a need and appetite for community engagement on government policy and legislation.
- Collective action allows for more and better community engagement and promotes knowledge sharing and capacity building
- As the policy process and legislative cycle move on, the focus of community engagement may need to change.
- Adapting to focus changes requires agility from those designing and delivering programs and those who are funding them.
- Community engagement in rural and remote areas requires significant investment in preparation.
- Further research is required to assess the longer-term impacts of this type of community engagement. "Playing by the rules", as specified in the Electoral Act was emphasised in the pre-election training. However, many women candidates suggest that complying with anti-bribery laws reduced their chances of winning their seats.
- Government, development partner and civil society programs aimed at increasing women's political participation were viewed by candidates as interesting and inspiring, but did not have a significant impact on their candidature.

Date/period	Occurrence/Activity
18-23 October 2015	Government of Vanuatu launches RTI policy
November 2015	TIV community engagement on Santo (SANMA province)
21-28 February 2016	TIV community engagement on Santo (SANMA province)
May 12 2016	TIV community engagement on Tanna (TAFEA province)
June 30 2016	TIV community/ Youth engagement on South west Malekula ( MALAMPA ) province
19 -23 August 2016	TIV community engagement on Vanua Lava (TORBA province)
28 September 2016	TIV community engagement on Pentecost (PENAMA province)
18- 28 October 2016	TIV community engagement on Efate (SHEFA province)
1-8 November 2016	TIV community engagement on Emau, Lelepa, Moso, Pele & Nguna ( Efate Offshore Islands, SHEFA province)
24 November 2016	TIV community engagement on Erromango (TFEA province)
6 February 2017	RTI legislation passed by Parliament
14 March 2017	RTI legislation gazetted and entered into force
April to June 2017	TIV community engagement on Tongoa (SHEFA province)
27 June – 4 July 2017	TIV community engagement on Malekula (MALAMPA province), Santo (SANMA province), Emae & Epi (SHEFA province)
27 June – 4 July 2017	TIV community engagement on Futuna (TAFEA province)

## AREAS OF FOCUS

TIV worked in coalition with government agencies and other civil society groups to promote RTI legislation in Vanuatu. TIV was a member of the RTI committee convened by the Prime Minister's Office to guide this area of policy development.

As the policy and legislative process progressed, the focus of the community engagement needed to be altered. Before the RTI bill came before Parliament, the emphasis was on encouraging citizens to lobby their MPs to support the legislation. Once the Right to Information Act (No. 13 of 2016) had been passed, efforts went into educating communities about the legislation, what its purpose was, and how they could make use of it.

## METHODOLOGY

The community engagement programs have several components.

To prepare there were meetings with appropriate people at provincial and area government levels to introduce the programs and identify appropriate locations for public forums. Similar discussions were held with chiefs and community leaders about holding public meetings in villages.

The public forums consisted of presentations by TIV and the RTI unit. These presentations introduced the concept of freedom of information, discussed the content of the (proposed) legislation and described how citizens can access information.

TIV and the RTI unit distributed posters and brochures that provide key information about the RTI legislation and contact details for the RTI unit.

TIV also distributed copies of the Constitution of Vanuatu to those who attended the forums.

The following data summarises the program on Tanna that was conducted in February 2016:

Venues:

2 secondary colleges, 6 villages & Lenakel municipal market

Participants:

1,070 (estimated), of which 470 were school students

Materials:

1,000 brochures and 700 posters distributed. Copies of the Constitution of Vanuatu were also distributed.

## DISCUSSION

Even though TIV has an established record of community engagement in provincial areas, the importance of collective action is evident. Working with the government's RTI unit allowed for building community awareness about government agencies, their roles and functions.

This type of collaborative activity can facilitate capacity building within the government agency, especially in relation to conducting this type of community-based program.

The need for collaboration extends to working with communities so a program can be delivered efficiently and effectively. The experience of TIV and their partners highlights the importance of pre-engagement with communities. Undertaking site visits and taking time to build relationships with communities ahead of actual activities allows for improved preparation and promotes a better reception of the program overall.

There are significant indications that people who took part in these programmes identified the importance of public consultation about proposed legislation.

“By bringing together persons of influence, the Coalition utilises the individual and united strengths of members as well as building support for collective action.”

Dorothy Pel, President of TAFEA Women's Council

Whilst people were not able to identify specific information they wanted or what they might do with it, they were very clear about the importance of RTI in Vanuatu:

**“Knowing where to go and who to contact for information to make important decisions is essential and the introduction of the Right to Information policy and bill is a major breakthrough for the citizens of Vanuatu”**

Victor Korisa, Deputy Principal of Tafea College, Tanna

It is hard to know whether the community engagement that took place before November 2016 contributed to the passage of the legislation. It would be instructive to do some research with community members and their MPs to investigate this further.

Similarly, it is too early to test the extent to which participation in these programs has led to early take up of the ability to request information under the terms of the legislation and the rollout that has followed.

## 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.

For further information email: [PLP@cardno.com](mailto:PLP@cardno.com)