

# Thinking and working politically in the Vanuatu skills sector: supporting local leadership and building a political constituency for change

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# Overview

- This presentation follows an independent study commissioned by the DFAT and the Vanuatu Skills Partnership (VSP) in how the program provides an example of Thinking and Working Politically
- VSP is a long-term program focused on strengthening Vanuatu's skills sector and its link to Vanuatu's national development goals
- VSP is a highly successful program whose success has in part been built on its strong local leadership and ability to build strong local ownership around a common vision of a national skills system
- VSP provides an interesting case study in TWP, not least because of the role the program itself has played in changing sector politics and building a basis for genuine locally-led reform
- This is interesting in the context of development interest in TWP, particularly in the context of high aid dependence and state fragility, where prospects for strong local leadership of reform is complicated

# Thinking and working politically

- TWP encourages donors to be politically smart and support *locally-led and locally-owned* reform programs
  - requires local leaders to identify development priorities and salient policy solutions, and donors to support local reform coalitions to take reforms forward
  - requires a programmatic ability to understand the political context and respond to it in flexible ways to support local reform coalitions
- But what do you do in an emerging sector where leadership is weak and local interests are entrenched around non-productive status quo?
- VSP provides interesting example of a development program that has effectively engaged with issues of weak sector leadership by working politically

# The development problem

- In Vanuatu, economic growth held back by poor skills
- Skills gap - mismatch between skills supported by training institutions and skills needed by employers/communities
- Training focused on formal economy and in formal institutions, bypassing 70 per cent of population outside Port Vila and Santo
- Very few ni-Vanuatu in successful business/private sector operations due to lack of skills
- Weak institutional framework
  - Under-investment in institutional capacity; no skills/TVET sector policies and poor training quality, weak sector governance, supply-driven training system
- Sector support historically focused on sustaining TVET system
  - DFAT main donor, with TVET sector support since 1990s; credentialist approach

# The Vanuatu Skills Partnership: from TVET to skills for economic growth

- Recognition TVET system not meeting Vanuatu's dev needs and a new approach needed – *skills* for economic growth
- VSP aimed to build a demand-driven skills system by:
  - working at local level to support skills relevant for informal economy through establishment of decentralised provincial skills centres
  - incentivise locally-responsive training through Skills Development Fund
  - support institutional reforms to re-orient national training system from a supply to demand-driven training system focused on real economic need
- Long term support program
  - 4 phases from 2005, modest financial investment
  - program evolution encapsulated in phase 4 “Skills for Economic Growth”

## A highly successful program

“The program has made a substantial contribution to the development of the TVET system over the decade across all three dimensions. Its contributions are most visible in terms of targeted *service delivery* at the provincial level supported by BDS [business development services] activities, and this highly focused effort has produced genuine champions for TVET – an essential characteristic of an effective TVET system. The program has also made tangible contributions to the strategic framework for TVET and to TVET system oversight, and especially in the areas of building national consensus about the scope and nature of a TVET system that works for Vanuatu.”

(Independent Evaluation 2015)

# A successful program

Highly successful program – **VSP helped build a new sector:**

- over 6,000 men and women living outside capital received (for the first time) accredited skills training and business coaching services
- access to skills relevant to economic opportunity (coupled with long-term business coaching) has transformed the economic landscape of the provinces in which the Provincial Skills Centres have been operational e.g. tourism, provincial production and marketing hubs
- Significant institutional reform helped reposition the skills system
  - incorporation of skills centres under its departmental structure as the national decentralised mechanism for skills service delivery;
  - establishment of first-ever sector *Post-School Education and Training Policy*
  - national government departments (eg: Dept of Tourism) now making budgetary allocations into the Skills Development Fund, becoming the first **national funding mechanism for the sector**

# The complex politics of reform

Important reason VSP has been successful is its constructive engagement with sector politics

- donor recognition TVET system not equipping country with needed skills, but limited local interest in reform, few local champions
- rhetorical political support for vocational training
- political resistance of established actors, TVET gatekeepers
- no organised political constituency to demand systemic reform
- rural communities lacked voice to demand inclusion in skills system
- LT donor support was technical and top-down, validating old approach
- general political economy of reform in Vanuatu unfavourable

How could DFAT support a locally owned reform program if no sector leaders willing to lead? How do you build a new sector?



# Building a political constituency

One reason for VSP's success was because it was able to build a political constituency to lead a local reform program in a new sector.

- Used idea of “SKILLS FOR ECONOMIC GROWTH” to reframe the development problem and change the “conceptual infrastructure” of actors
- Demonstrated successes of pilot PSCs helped generate political interest in the idea of a demand-driven skills system – political momentum for systemic reform
  - establishment of provincial skills centres helped VSP work with a new range of actors previously excluded from the TVET system
  - resourcing for PSCs invigorated moribund provincial government structures, becoming organisational nodes
  - tender process for location of PSCs required genuine collaboration amongst stakeholders
  - provincial governments became strong advocates for national system reform and demanded increased national government investments in skills for economic growth
  - evident local development gains gave local proponents political influence/weight *and* stimulated demand from other provinces to establish PSCs; encouraged other sectors to organise
  - VSP supported local actors to organise to identify sub-sector needs and advocate in national policy fora for a changed approach

VSP became politically self-sustaining - local beneficiaries became biggest advocates for national reforms

# Program significance, lessons learned

VSP requires us to reconsider what it means to be political and TWP:

- The program used its own agency to help build a political community
- Building political consciousness a core program objective
  - VSP had an implicit political theory of change – not incidental
  - building a political constituency who recognised collective interests in a new skills sector took time but changed the political calculus and provided a basis for a locally-led and sustainable reform program over the long term
- Crucially, VSP used standard program approaches cleverly to build political consciousness
  - decentralised program structures enabled VSP to work with new stakeholders
  - high performance and culturally empathetic program approach saw VSP as a trusted partner and gave it political licence to work small “p” politically
  - long-term engagement allowed VSP to build political momentum

Does this make VSP’s lessons replicable?