

Passports, prosperity and problems: Vanuatu's CBI scheme in the media



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by Grant Walton and Henrietta McNeill-Stowers

19 March 2025

In an era of increased geopolitical competition, there are growing calls for policy makers and citizens in [Australia](#) and [New Zealand](#) to improve their understanding of the Pacific Islands region.

Traditional media in both countries play an important role in this task. However, some are concerned that while media reporting on the region and its people has improved over the past few years (see [here](#) and [here](#)), it too often misrepresents the challenges, cultures, economies and politics of the Pacific Islands. This misunderstanding, some say, can lead to [poor diplomatic relationships](#) and [foreign policy](#).

To better understand how western media frames the challenges faced by Pacific Island countries, in a recently published [Geopolitics article](#), we examine the ways in which Australian and New Zealand media portray Vanuatu's Citizenship by Investment (CBI) program – a scheme that legally allows people to purchase citizenship.

We focused on the portrayal of the CBI program because it encapsulates a paradox of development facing many Pacific island states. That is, on the one hand CBI is associated with crime, corruption and insecurity, which, given the rise of China in the region, are key concerns for Western donors. And it is true, these schemes can and do carry security and governance risks which may undermine state sovereignty and service delivery.

On the other hand, the scheme provides much-needed revenue for a country like Vanuatu, which is faced with [frequent devastating natural disasters](#) and limited ways to raise funds by other means. In 2022, the scheme contributed up to 50% of the

Vanuatu government's revenue, providing an economic buffer post-COVID and through a series of cyclones and earthquakes. This paradox means that while Western donors would likely much rather that Vanuatu scrapped its CBI program, successive governments have been unable or unwilling to do so due to the significant revenue it produces for the country. This continues to be the case, despite [a recent downturn](#) in revenue from the scheme.

Given this paradox, you might expect that media reporting on the CBI program evenly reflected both its benefits and drawbacks.

That's not what we found.

In our analysis, we compiled a corpus of 71 media articles that were published between 2013 and mid-2023 from three key international media outlets: New Zealand's public broadcaster RNZ, Australia's public broadcaster ABC News and the Australian edition of independent British newspaper *The Guardian*. This timeframe captures initial discussions about the resurrection of the CBI programme in Vanuatu and more recent developments.

Through a discourse analysis, we found that most references in our corpus (almost two thirds of the 71 articles) to Vanuatu's CBI scheme reflected Western concerns that we labelled the "security-governance nexus" (this included alarm about corruption, crime, security and other concerns about the scheme). Most prominent were articles about the Chinese clientele of the scheme, drawing on geopolitical fears in the West. Conversely, slightly more than one-fifth of references highlighted the counter-geopolitical narrative that mentioned the economic and development benefits of the scheme.

We also show how media reports that emphasise the security-governance nexus [reflect historical](#) and [current day](#) discourse about the Pacific Islands as a region of "fragile" states.

It is, of course, important that the media in Australia, New Zealand and elsewhere reports on corruption, insecurity, money laundering and other problems in Vanuatu and across the region. CBI schemes can be subject to the types of abuses that are highlighted by the media. In an ideal world they wouldn't exist.

But they do.

Indeed, around 60 countries in the world have golden passport or visa schemes that help governments raise money; the new US administration is currently considering introducing [a new gold card visa](#) which is slated to cost each applicant US\$5 million and [New Zealand](#) has just expanded its golden visa scheme. In the Pacific, Nauru

has just [introduced its own CBI scheme](#) and [Solomon Islands](#) is also considering one.

While there are genuine issues to address, particularly around due diligence, the media's failure to explain the economic benefits of CBI creates a risk that the public and policymakers misunderstand why the scheme persists in Vanuatu.

Getting the balance right matters as media reporting can have very real consequences. Media reports in our corpus likely shaped the [EU's recent decision](#) to revoke visa-free access for Vanuatu citizens to Europe and the [UK's similar decision](#) in 2023. This month it has been reported that US president Donald Trump is looking to ban citizens from certain countries entering the US and those countries are currently listed under three categories. Vanuatu [is said to appear](#) on the yellow list, which means countries have 60 days to address deficiency concerns or risk being moved to a category with restrictions.

Given that, through Freedom of Information requests, we found that Australian and New Zealand officials are also influenced by such media, they too might become less willing to engage with, and strengthen oversight for, the scheme. They might also be dissuaded to work with the Vanuatu government to develop alternative income streams that are less likely to be subject to corruption, insecurity and illegality. We have [previously argued](#) that pushing to scrap this scheme without providing alternative income streams would be a mistake.

Of course, there are many sources of [biased and partial](#) reporting on the issues facing the Pacific island countries, particularly through social media and [artificial intelligence](#). However, if traditional media is to better inform the Australian and New Zealand public and policy makers about the region, it would do well to provide a more informative and nuanced account of the challenges facing these countries and the creative, though flawed, ways they have sought to gain economic independence through schemes such as Vanuatu's CBI.

Read the full open source article ["Passports, Prosperity and Problems: \(Counter\)geopolitical Narratives of Vanuatu's Citizenship by Investment Scheme"](#) published by the journal Geopolitics.

Disclosures:

This research was supported by the [Pacific Research Program](#) funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views are those of the authors only.

Author/s:

Grant Walton

Grant Walton is an associate professor at the Development Policy Centre and the author of *Anti-Corruption and its Discontents: Local, National and International Perspectives on Corruption in Papua New Guinea*.

Henrietta McNeill-Stowers

Henrietta McNeill-Stowers is a research fellow (Pacific security, geopolitics, regionalism) with the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/media-depictions-of-vanuatus-cib-scheme-20250319/>