

Giving voice to First Nations foreign policy in Vanuatu

by Shirley Viraqwareqware, Rachel Reilly and Alice McGrath · 12 July 2024



Australians this week celebrate NAIDOC week **to recognise, celebrate, and learn more** about the history, culture and achievements of Australia's First Nations peoples. This week presents an opportunity for reflection – including for the international development community on how it implements the First Nations foreign policy objectives which are firmly embedded within Australia's refreshed **International Development Policy**, released last August.

The Vanuatu–Australia Policing and Justice Program (VAPJP) works hand in hand with Vanuatu’s own constitutionally recognised customary body, the *Malvatumauri* Council of Chiefs. Working with customary justice providers is increasingly recognised as critical to **achieving SDG 16.3** on access to justice for all, to which both Australia and Vanuatu are committed.

Day to day, this means working in a spirit of genuine and respectful partnership, jointly implementing **people-centred justice reforms** across a complex legal landscape of state and non-state actors.

In this context, Australia’s increased focus on First Nations foreign policy commitments has inspired the VAPJP team to seek opportunities to go further in embedding Melanesian Indigenous perspectives, experiences, and interests. This includes a deeper commitment to genuine locally-led solutions, which seek to bring about sustained improvements for ni-Vanuatu communities and professionals through a process of listening, learning and exchanging perspectives to find what will work best in the local context.

As an example, and building on calls from senior representatives from Vanuatu’s justice sector, the program is supporting a more holistic approach to professional development in the justice sector that recognises the central importance of custom and culture. In 2022 and 2023, the team **carried out research** to guide actions to promote wellbeing across the profession. Wellbeing in justice sectors globally is increasingly acknowledged as an important but historically overlooked issue. In addition to the known stressors faced by legal professionals everywhere, in Vanuatu the sector works in a uniquely diverse and challenging environment – linguistically, geographically, culturally, and legally – reflecting a rich indigenous landscape, as well as the country’s English and French colonial history. The workforce is small, making for heavy workloads and a high burden of stress on most individuals.

There are very few documented examples of efforts to promote the wellbeing of the legal profession in the Pacific. Those that have been documented have largely focused on one-off psychosocial education and stress management workshops, informed mostly by Western individualistic concepts of mental health and wellbeing practices, which may not align with a Melanesian collectivist cultural context.

There is strong resonance here with the lessons that have been learnt in Australia's Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander context, where Western biomedical models of mental health have often been applied uncritically, and risk minimising the importance of culture in healing and wellbeing. With regard to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, we are beginning to understand a broader concept of social and **emotional wellbeing**, which recognises health as something that is holistic, incorporating connection to land, place and spirit; cultural grounding and strength; as well as the impact of trauma and loss through colonisation. With this in mind, the VAPJP team has recognised the importance of ensuring that its programming is guided by local models and understandings of health and wellbeing.

During the research process, Jean-Maurice Aite and I (Shirley Viraqwareqware) from the VAPJP research team worked with the Warlpiraringga Aboriginal Health Equity team at the South Australian Health and Medical Research Institute, a leading research unit focused on understanding, monitoring, responding to and reducing inequity among Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities.

To drive VAPJP's work, the team has applied Indigenous research methodologies common to Australia and Vanuatu and, drawing on the nascent body of local research in this space, utilised a model that incorporates spiritual and social components, alongside physical and mental wellbeing (**the Frangipani Model**). The participatory developmental evaluation approach, which seeks to elevate the voices of participants and stakeholders, will refine the model, processes and **actions over time**.

As we celebrate the culture, custom and achievements of Australia's First Nations peoples during NAIDOC week, we are reminded of the need for policymakers, researchers and development practitioners to continue the conversation on how we can realise Australia's First Nations foreign policy objectives. When applied in genuine partnership with Pacific counterparts, First Nations perspectives and experiences can give depth and quality to our collaborative efforts.

Disclosure

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