

Trust is at the heart of Vanuatu's economic recovery

by Elizabeth Pechan

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'Yumi evriwan tugeta': trust is at the heart of Vanuatu's economic recovery

Photo Credit: Vanuatu Tourism Office

Vanuatu, aside from one case identified in quarantine last November, remains thankfully COVID-free. But as a tourism-dependent economy, the coronavirus pandemic has been highly disruptive for Vanuatu. My personal story is a microcosm of the national story: in my 'normal' life, I am a hotelier and support several charitable initiatives, but since the pandemic, I have become a lobbyist for Vanuatu's economic stability and recovery, deepening my relationship with the public sector. Where previously my relationship with government as a member of the private sector was more transactional, it has transformed into a collaborative relationship to a degree I could not have anticipated a year ago.

2020 became a year of expanding my knowledge, networks, and public service. I have taken on various roles on private sector, charitable and state-owned boards. I have become acquainted with incredibly skilled, smart, and energetic people from all sectors – public, private, and informal – plus bilateral partners, all of which are driven to “do something” about the pandemic's impacts on Vanuatu's economy and on the livelihoods of Vanuatu's people.

Everywhere, I have been impressed with the [Vanuatu Government's response to and preparedness for the pandemic](#), which has been enacted while simultaneously tackling two natural disasters, a severe tropical cyclone and a volcanic ashfall. I discovered technical groups doing incredible work on formulating a national response to the pandemic, on top of their normal work and with the added burden of limited available capacity.

I observed trust being built between sectors through the lowering of barriers. The unifying nature of this common challenge has had a neutralising effect on those holding more extreme viewpoints on the pandemic response. For example, the [2020 Government and Private Sector Business Forum](#) produced a dialogue from which a collaborative way forward was mapped out, and monthly High-Level Leaders Dialogues have focused energy on common purpose, rather than dissension.

Vanuatu has achieved a lot in such a short space of time, there is much to be proud of: for example, we're the first Pacific island nation to launch [COVID Safe Business Operations Guidelines for Workplaces](#). So where will Vanuatu's response need to take us in 2021?

When Vanuatu recorded our first COVID-19 case at the border in November 2020, this marked not just the inevitable arrival of the global pandemic on our shores, but an important milestone: the first time the Vanuatu Government has used [pandemic prevention protocols](#) to detect and contain a case at its border. The prompt isolation of the first border case and public communication was consistent with international standards and practice. [Vanuatu has returned to COVID-free status](#), and has managed almost 5,000 repatriations without incident since May 2020. While Vanuatu can be confident in its pandemic protocols, the extended State of Emergency until 31 July 2021 suggests that further trust needs to be built at home. This trust-building is already underway, for example with the rollout of COVID-Safe Business Operations workplace training. This needs to expand to include businesses beyond tourism to consolidate public trust in public health protocols, not only at the borders but at the community level.

Having trust at home will build our trust abroad. Bilateral diplomacy around [Pacific 'travel bubble'](#) concepts has been a clumsy dance with lots of sidestepping and stepping on toes, and not enough 'step up'. Vanuatu is highly appreciative of the [pandemic response support that partners](#) have offered so far, but what we need right now is support for our economic recovery.

More than anything else, what Vanuatu needs now is for its neighbours to begin a dialogue about reopening our respective borders safely. Last month, while celebrating Australia Day, Australia's High Commissioner to Vanuatu reiterated that Australia stands shoulder to shoulder with Vanuatu in addressing the pandemic. But from this side of the Coral Sea, this collaboration can seem a bit one-sided. This is especially so when we see that Australia has opened its border to COVID-free NZ, with one-way quarantine free, while seasonal workers from COVID-free Vanuatu are required to quarantine on entry into Australia.

In July 2020, Vanuatu's Prime Minister Bob Loughman launched the [Tamtam Travel Bubble](#) initiative on the anniversary of Vanuatu's 40th year of Independence. The Tamtam Bubble will allow for quarantine-free travel with countries that meet the nation's health and border criteria.

The dark days of the blackbirding era added a moral dimension to Australia's relationship with islands whose indentured labour helped to build its economy. My own great-grandmother was raised and worked on a Queensland plantation before

being 'sent back' (incidentally to the wrong island) in 1906. Our ties with Australia are long and deep.

During COVID, much trust has had to be built amongst Vanuatu's labour mobility recruits, their families, and communities, in order to support the labour supply demands made by employers in Australia and New Zealand. Vanuatu's labour supply has been critical to ensuring that horticultural harvests in Australia have been unaffected by domestic labour shortages, and have helped support Australia's food security during the pandemic. So, when will Australia – and indeed, New Zealand – be ready to reciprocate by allowing their citizens to come to Vanuatu to help our economy? This is the genuine and mutual trust and respect we seek from our neighbours in support of our economic stability.

With all of Vanuatu's preparedness to date, and the proven rigour of our health protocols, and the fact that zero positive cases have been found in Vanuatu travellers into Australia and New Zealand during the pandemic, why is it so hard to talk about travel bubbles and corridors?

As a milestone year, 2020 brought COVID-19, Vanuatu's 40th independence anniversary and graduation from Least Developed Country status. In 2021, I hope it brings deeper trust within communities, within government and bilaterally so that we can all get on with the business of socio-economic recovery and sustainable livelihoods.

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