

# A Big Leap for a Small Nation in Land Reforms

A tiny island nation in the Pacific puts in place a land management programme to improve the decision-making process of the State

Courtesy: Chris Lannay, former team leader, Vanuata Land Program



Collecting boundary measurements using handheld GPS

**V**anuatu, the South Pacific island nation of more than 80 islands, is home to some 250,000 people and receives nearly as many tourists per year. Development issues and adaptations to climate change mandated that Vanuatu took a look at its land and the related socio-economic development.

In 2006, a National Land Summit was held in the capital city Port Vila and 20 strategic resolutions were adopted. This created an important vision and stimulus for land reforms in Vanuatu — ‘A prosperous, equitable and sustainable land sector for Vanuatu’. Evolving from the resolutions of the summit, a land sector framework was adopted in 2009 serving as the 10-year road map (2009-2018) to guide the implementation of land sector reform in Vanuatu. Strategic

objectives were identified to guide the government, private sector and civil society in the use and management of Vanuatu’s land resources. The objectives were based on principles commonly reflected in good land governance practice:

- Management of land resources must comply with social and economic objectives;
- Stewardship of land resources must guarantee environmental sustainability;
- Land agencies must be relevant, cost-effective, efficient and sustainable;
- Planning, implementation, decision making and monitoring of activities must be participatory, transparent and accountable to protect the interests and rights of all stakeholders.

On the basis of this framework, the Malvatumauri Council

of Chiefs have also contributed and shown strong leadership. They have provided guidance on how to take customary lands issues forward, engaging in the consultations and appointing provincial liaison officers as local focal points.

### Prosperous and sustainable land sector

The governments in Australian and New Zealand responded to this country-level strategy by supporting the Government of Vanuatu with the funding of a programme known as the Vanuatu Land Program (previously known as Mama Graon). The five-year programme, which is being implemented by the Australian managing contractor Land Equity International, aims to support the implementation of the National Land Summit resolutions and Land Sector Framework. It also aims to improve decision making about land, make land dealings more transparent, improve land management practices and minimise the potential for land-related conflict.

Technical programmes, such as this, often ambitiously target areas that may not require or are not ready for technical solutions, often pushing political boundaries or customary ideologies and often failing to achieve effective development results. After a few years of attempting strategies to support the development of customary land governance, the Vanuatu Land Programme was reviewed and it refocused its efforts towards land administration functions. This will allow internal processes among Kastom Chiefs to evolve under the principles agreed at the Land Summit without external influences.

The programme now clearly aims to provide support in the area of institutional strengthening, and will allow significant improvements towards infrastructure development activities that the government has planned to undertake over the next five years in Port Vila. Key areas of support are in the land registry functions, surveying and developing a digital cadastral database and valuation.

### Results to date

With the help of programme support, the Land Registry Office of the Department of Lands has moved from a manual paper-based system to a computerised system for managing leases and cadastral surveys. Through the project they have eliminated a backlog of more than 6,000 unregistered applications which had developed during a period of strong activity in the land market. They have also completed updating of the lease registers. This has required the reprinting of over 10,500 lease registers and the manual checking of all existing lease registers that are on file. This is expected to improve transparency and accountability of the lease process and significantly reduce the time required to register a new lease. There have also been significant changes to the manual land registration



Courtesy: Chris Lunnay

Scanning and recording land registry records from the manual system

procedures. Instruments lodged for registration are now registered in just 10 working days as compared to months earlier.

A document tracking system (DTS) has been developed for the Land Registry Office, which helps in the process of survey, valuation and planning. The system has also helped in streamlining the registry processes and enabled staff and users of the land registry to track the progress of an application, increasing the transparency.

In January 2014, new survey equipment was procured to help the government in carrying out efficient and accurate surveys. Additionally, a week's intensive training was also provided to the survey staff in the use of this new equipment. In conjunction with this initiative, current cadastral surveying and plan presentation procedures are also being improved. These activities will facilitate in planning various infrastructure projects around Port Vila. The programme will continue till December 2015.

### Lessons learnt

In preparation of a complete digital cadastral database (DCDB), huge efforts have gone into finding survey records from across the islands. Gaps remain and records are still being located or will be reproduced from original survey records before they can be entered into the system. These records will be cross-referenced with the lease register and quality control is also taking place to ensure the integrity of the DCDB from lease register records. The records are simultaneously being updated with new state land information of unallocated parcels, road reserves etc. Technical assistance has been working closely with government counterparts to prepare standard operating procedures that will ensure improved survey demarcation of parcels prior to registration and improved definition of unallocated or state land. 🌐

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