Vanuatu held a week-long public forum in June 2014 as a step towards creating its National Sustainable Development Plan 2016–2030 (NSPD). The development of the NSPD reflects a shift in development thinking away from the heavy emphasis on economic growth that dominates the current development framework — the Priorities and Action Agenda 2006–2015 (PAA). The PAA in turn follows the spirit of the economic restructuring initiated by the Asian Development Bank–sponsored Comprehensive Reform Program (CRP) of the late 1990s (Gay 2004). This In Brief discusses the ongoing development of the NSPD and positions it within a number of similar regional and global developments. It suggests that a number of Pacific islands seem poised to engage in some bold new experiments in building home-grown development frameworks rooted in their own unique cultural values and geographical context. This in turn should signal to development partners a real need to engage in conversations about alternative development pathways in the Pacific islands and take seriously the emerging critiques of the problems occasioned by a previous narrow neoliberal economic focus.

**National Sustainable Development Plan**

In his opening speech to the NSPD Forum, the Prime Minister of Vanuatu, the Hon. Joe Natuman, explained the background to the development of the NSPD. He observed that the current PAA contains four objectives: to increase real per capita incomes, to be a world leader in achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), to reform the public sector by making it more productive and accountable, and to create an enabling environment to sustain private sector-led growth. However, he noted that although Vanuatu has performed well in that economic growth and per capita incomes have increased, this has not translated into high achievement of the MDGs. Further, there has not been equitable distribution of the benefits of the growth, and private sector growth has benefitted only a few, and mostly expatriates. This point was later developed in a presentation by the Director of the Department of Strategic Policy, Planning and Aid Coordination, Mr Shing, who observed that the CRP had led to reduced service delivery in rural areas, and that most government services and salaries now only benefit towns. As a result, the prime minister’s address recognised that focusing on the formal economy as a top priority will not foster sustainable development outcomes in Vanuatu. Instead, the government is looking to develop a new development framework in which social, cultural, and environmental objectives are prioritised. These new priorities reflect awareness of the fundamental importance of the environment to well-being and the integrative effect of culture on development initiatives.

The NSPD Forum was attended by a wide range of participants, including church leaders, chiefs, women’s groups, NGOs, representatives of the private sector and youth groups. Several common themes emerged from the discussions, including the need to give greater prominence to the traditional economy, which forms the basis of the majority of the population’s livelihood, the importance of strengthening customary governance institutions, the centrality of cultural values, and the need to empower and protect women, young people, and the disabled.2

The NSPD Forum is just one component of the overall development of the NSPD. It arose from a commitment by the prime minister and his Cabinet in 2013 to create a new development framework based on the principles of sustainable development to replace the PAA. Its development is being managed by a core group comprising representatives from government, civil society, the private sector, academia, and development partners. This core group will organise a number of consultation activities (it has already received over 100 submissions), and will prepare a draft NSPD for consideration by parliament by the end of the year.

The development of the NSPD was foreshadowed by a series of initiatives over the past decade in which the Vanuatu government has sought to re-emphasise the importance of the traditional economy and local governance mechanisms. This has involved exploring ways in which Vanuatu’s strengths — such as strong social relationships, connections with land, rich cultural heritage, customary principles and institutions,
vibrant exchange networks and small-scale agriculture — can be harnessed to promote sustainable development, particularly in the face of a range of new challenges occasioned by climate change and globalisation. These initiatives have included the Year of the Kastom Economy in 2007 (repeated in 2008), the Pig Bank project, the Alternative Indicators of Well-Being (VNSO 2012), and most recently a radical land reform package. A number of scholars have commented that although these initiatives potentially set up a binary of indigenous versus modernity, they should rather be conceived as reframing modernity and progress within a local value system and cosmology (Geismar 2012, Rousseau and Taylor 2012). As such, it is part of a re-framing of development that focuses on the resources that Vanuatu currently possesses as offering creative ways to increase the overall well-being in society.

An Emerging Regional Trend?

The development of the NSPD resonates with the inaugural Pacific Islands Development Forum that was held in Fiji in 2013, which also involved the initiation of a conversation about the need for a new development framework that is meaningful for, and works with the existing strengths of, Pacific island countries. A commentator observed there was an emphasis on infusing the forum with a ‘distinctive Pacific voice’, repeated calls for a ‘new development paradigm’ based around a ‘distinctive Pacific model of green growth in blue economies’ and the need to be ‘agents of our own change’ (Tarte 2013). Other regional developments that have also sought to re-prioritise social, cultural and environmental objectives include the MSG’s green growth framework (2012), Papua New Guinea’s Sustainable Development Strategy (2014), the cultural industries initiative by the Secretariat of the Pacific Commission, the extension of the Alternative Indicators of Well-Being project to Melanesia as a whole, and the development discussions prompted by the upcoming Small Island Developing States Forum in Samoa later this year.

An Emerging Global Trend?

These developments can also be seen as part of a recent growing global trend to revalue and prioritise social and cultural values (which in turn follows decreasing importance on small-scale agriculture, in order to avoid the consequences of climate change. As such, it may be that there is a worldwide audience for the lessons that will emerge from Vanuatu’s innovative experiments in development.

Author Notes

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References


Endnotes

1 The speech was actually delivered by the Hon. Ralph Regenvanu, Minister of Lands and Natural Resources, Chairman of the National Sustainable Development Plan Core Group.

2 These are based on reports available at <http://vanuatu.daily-news-digest-20-june-2014/>.

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