



ANZSOG Case Program

A bolt from the blue: the demise of Vanuatu's Ministry of Youth Development (B)

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The administration that axed Vanuatu's Ministry of Youth Development in November 2012 did not last long.

Within months, it too had imploded and a number of former opposition parties formed a new government. Encouragingly for Paul Nalau – the ministry's long-serving Senior Policy Officer who had resigned in frustration the previous November – two parties in the new coalition were strongly committed to youth development, and had adopted some of the ministry's policies as their own. He had firm hopes that the incoming government would see a youth ministry as essential.

In February 2013, the Ministry of Youth Development was indeed reinstated. It began working towards becoming a full ministry, with its own Director-General and corporate services function. Paul Nalau, who resumed his previous position, said 'this would allow the Ministry control over areas such as its budget and research which will allow us to get policy implemented faster and more efficiently'. By mid-2013, the ministry had seven senior managers and ancillary staff, with officers based in four provincial governments. There were plans to extend its presence in the provinces.

Among the reborn Ministry's priorities were getting young people to register with their local youth councils, even in the most remote areas of the country. This was proving an expensive and time-consuming exercise, requiring volunteers and staff to travel extensively throughout the country. But it was important for two reasons, said Paul Nalau:

Firstly, registration enables us to link young people to government services and projects. Secondly, the best way to empower young people is to organise them. They haven't yet fully realised the power they will have when they get mobilised. Politicians will start taking more notice. Donors will start taking more notice.

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Another way the Ministry was seeking to strengthen the youth council structure was through legislation. A National Youth Council Bill and a Youth Management Bill were being drafted with the aim of protecting the youth council (and the Ministry) from future political interference. This statutory underpinning would be unique among Pacific youth councils, which mostly operated as non-governmental organisations.

The Ministry was also working to strengthen its relationships with other government ministries so it could promote and coordinate youth policies across government. By mid-2013, the Ministry had already been able to get the government's new climate change policy revised to explicitly recognise the significance of the issue to youth. Next, it would contribute to the juvenile justice policy being prepared by the Ministry of Justice. 'It is not enough for the Ministry of Youth Development to be represented on working groups,' explained Paul Nalau. 'We want youth development to be integrated into the mainstream of government policy-making, projects and programmes.'

A new national youth development policy was finalised and approved by the council of ministers in May 2013. Paul Nalau said there were some significant changes from previous policy documents. 'We have tried to keep the issues it focuses on very significant and relevant to Vanuatu. Sure, unemployment here is a big problem, as it is across the Pacific. But we see it as an offshoot of what is really the major issue – rural/urban migration.' To tackle this issue, the Ministry wanted to change attitudes about what 'the good life' could mean for young people in the country once dubbed the world's happiest place.

Like most Melanesian countries, we have a big land mass and most of the people are customary land owners. In America or Australia, people work all their lives in the hope they can buy some land and build a house. That's the dream. But here in Vanuatu, people already have the land – they're halfway there. We want to create ways for young people to be able to use their land for their long-term wellbeing. We want to change the mentality that says you have to get money to buy things. Money's not the only way of measuring you have a good life.

We have to be realistic, and work within the limitations of the resources we have as a government. If we try and emulate Australia, New Zealand and big countries with substantial financial resources, young people are going to be disappointed. Our policies are about creating a different way of thinking.