

# Strengthening the legal system of Vanuatu

The Australian Government is supporting the redrafting of legislation in Vanuatu as part of the country's Comprehensive Reform Program.

'Drafting legislation is really like writing a story. But the story has to be absolutely exact. We have to cover every possible scenario,' says Michael Wright, an Australian Government adviser to Vanuatu's Legal Sector Strengthening Project.

'There's really no limit to how many changes we can make. What's important is that we produce laws that accurately take account of what is happening in this country and that we train others in the process.'

Angelyne Saul and Eric Csiba are learning the ropes from Michael. Both graduated from law school on Australian Government scholarships – Eric from the University of Papua New Guinea and Angelyne from the University of the South Pacific.

'Drafting law is very difficult,' says Eric. 'It requires intense concentration. But I know that what I am doing is really important.'

Angelyne agrees. 'What we are writing here will be around for a very long time and hopefully it will have a positive impact on the way people live.'

The redrafting is a slow and complex process. The Acts are written in English, but under the Vanuatu constitution they must all be translated into French. In the Parliament they are debated in Bislama, the local language.

'Last year we drafted 54 different Acts,' says Michael. 'Currently we're working on the National Disaster Act. This might take several days. Then we might be looking at the Public Service Act. There is so much to do.'



Heather Lini, Chief Public Prosecutor in Vanuatu, studied law with support of an Australian Government scholarship. Photo: Peter Davis

Working with Michael, Eric and Angelyne is Anna Green. She's a commercial lawyer from Sydney who is in Vanuatu as an Australian Youth Ambassador for Development.

'I'm doing things here that I wouldn't have done until I had much more experience in Sydney. Drafting is something I have always wanted to get into. You have to be incredibly precise. And doing it here in Vanuatu means I'm helping to build a system from the bottom up. That's a good feeling,' she says.

Training is an important part of the legal strengthening program in Vanuatu. And a significant success story is Heather Lini, the recently appointed Chief Public Prosecutor who studied at the University of

Papua New Guinea and then through the Victorian Barristers Association in Melbourne with the support of an Australian Government scholarship.

'In my position I have a good overview of the strengths and weaknesses of our legal system,' says Heather.

'I can see things improving, albeit slowly. We have worked hard to clear a backlog in the courts and we've developed a series of videotapes to help train other lawyers as well as the police.

'Sometimes I feel the Comprehensive Reform Program is too slow, but I know you cannot rush these things. Certainly when the redrafting of our laws is complete, our system will be much stronger.' – PD n