

VANUATU CHURCHES PARTNERSHIP PROGRAM (VCP)

AusAID Management Response to the February 2012 Mid-Term Review

SUMMARY

This paper summarises the recent findings of a mid-term review of the Vanuatu Churches Partnership Program (VCP) and outlines options for future funding once VCP ends in June 2012. There are 5 main messages:

- 1) Overall, the review found that VCP had achieved good results in a relatively short implementation time (18 months) and that the program “provides strong support for Australia’s commitment to build demand for better governance and for the commitment between the Australian and Vanuatu governments to include community engagement.”¹ The program meets Vanuatu’s expressed development needs and is a useful example of how civil society can support development.” (p6)
- 2) The focus on institutional strengthening has enabled a strong foundation for VCP upon which further support for development initiatives can be built.
- 3) The relationships between the Australian church partners and the Vanuatu church partners has been effective in establishing the program on the ground. While the review recommends that a more efficient program structure could be implemented, it still acknowledges the value the ANGO partners bring to the Partnership.
- 4) For church partners, there are some challenges to program implementation including the need for more streamlined management, further clarification and support for the roles of the VCC and the Secretariat, greater dialogue with the Vanuatu Government and greater transparency and more rapid assessment of church funding proposals.” The review concludes that none of these challenges are insurmountable.
- 5) For AusAID, the main challenge faced is “heavy management burden on program staff” which has not allowed for rapid responses, strategic guidance or visibility of AusAID to church partners.

BACKGROUND

The VCP is a partnership between AusAID, the Government of Vanuatu, the Vanuatu Christian Council (VCC), six churches in Vanuatu² and their Australian-based NGO (ANGO) counterparts³. The program began in 2009 as a three year program with an allocation from the Government of Australia of just over \$A4 million and financial and in-kind contributions from the five ANGOs and Vanuatu Churches. It was adapted to the Vanuatu context from a successful church partnership program in Papua New Guinea taking into consideration the lessons learned from that program. The current program ends 30 June 2012.

The main aim of the program is to strengthen civil society and governance within Vanuatu by strengthening the church partner organisations as the key institutions that shape and support, both spiritually and physically, the daily life of most ni-Vanuatu.

¹ See Australia-Vanuatu Development Cooperation Strategy, 2005-2010, p.10

² The Anglican Church of Melanesia, the Apostolic Church of Vanuatu, Assemblies of God, Churches of Christ Conference, Presbyterian and Seventh Day Adventist

³ Anglican Board of Mission, Baptist World Aid, Adventist Development and Relief Agency, Uniting World, and Act for Peace (National Council of Churches Australia).

The program's high level goal is:

To contribute to a healthy, educated and wealthy Vanuatu recognizing traditional Melanesian values, faith in God and Christian principles.

The program objective is:

The Vanuatu Christian Council and Churches in Vanuatu, individually and collectively, play an increasingly recognised and effective role in improving governance and service delivery at national and local levels.

The program has four areas of assistance each with a medium-term expected outcome.

- Area 1: Strengthening governance, management and operations of the Vanuatu Christian council
- Area 2: Institutional strengthening of individual churches in Vanuatu
- Area 3: Resourcing and support for Churches in Vanuatu to expand and improve development initiatives
- Area 4: Common activities implemented by Churches collaboratively

Management is through the ANGOs who have legal responsibility for the program. Each ANGO oversees administration, the use, outcomes and acquittal of funds for its church partner. Church partners have put in place program coordinators who, with support from their ANGO partner, are responsible for planning, implementing, monitoring and reporting on program activities. Oversight of the program is through a Governing Council, at which AusAID has a seat. A Secretariat, with a staff of two, provides coordination and facilitation for the program, including monitoring and evaluation. It reports to a Partnership Group made up of representatives from all partners. The Partnership Group, comprising ANGO and Vanuatu church partners, is the program's key decision making body and provides the opportunity for all key stakeholders to discuss program activities and make decisions on future directions. Both the Governing Council and Partnership Group meet twice a year. In addition, there is an ANGO Reference Group that also provides some strategic input.

In late 2011, AusAID commissioned a review of VCPP, as part of a broader cluster evaluation of AusAID's support for civil society and the media in Vanuatu. An assessment was made against four OECD-DAC criteria and three AusAID criteria for evaluating development assistance (i.e. relevance, effectiveness, efficiency, sustainability, monitoring and evaluation, gender equality and cross-cutting issues, and analysis and learning) and options for the future of the program identified.

The review was undertaken in November 2011 by an independent consultant, Dr Pam Thomas of ANU Enterprise, contracted by AusAID on the basis of her significant experience in monitoring and evaluation of civil society initiatives across the region and in Vanuatu in particular. Dr Thomas spoke with stakeholders from ANGOs, the Vanuatu church partners, AusAID, government agencies and NGOs that interact with the VCPP. Field visits were made to the islands of Santo and Tanna. A final report was submitted to the Vanuatu Post in March 2012.

FINDINGS/ MAIN IMPLICATIONS

Overall, the VCPP review found that:

Engagement with Vanuatu church partners is strategic and relevant

- For AusAID, engagement in VCPP has been both strategic, timely and relevant to the Vanuatu context, and to the role of churches within that context.
- "The Vanuatu Christian Council (VCC), as Vanuatu's umbrella church organisation, ... is beginning to provide a strong voice for Vanuatu churches and a stronger link between the churches and government." (p19)

- Church partners' activities in education and health services delivery draw from a long history of church support to communities. The Vanuatu government recognises the role of churches and three churches in particular, "Presbyterian, Anglican and SDA churches have been working with the Department of Education since independence and all are in regular contact with the Department of Education about their educational activities and have existing Memoranda of Understanding with the Department." (p28)
- AusAID, however, would benefit from more strategic thinking around the churches engagement in the health and education sector.

VCCP is now positioned to address broader development initiatives

- Outcomes have been largely achieved in area 2 (institutional strengthening of individual churches in Vanuatu), with fair progress in areas 1, 3 and 4.
- The focus of the past 18 months has been on establishing systems and strengthening the management and operations of the Vanuatu Christian Council (VCC). "With support from the VCCP, the VCC now has a full-time Secretary General, a functioning office and a Women's and Youth's Desk which arrange national events designed to strengthen the role of women and young people in leadership, decision-making and service delivery." (p20)
- "There has been excellent progress in improving church management and administrative capacity across all church operations, not just VCCP activities ... systems [and staff] are now in place to ensure financial accountability and transparency." (p21)
- "The foundation is now in place for the churches as a unified group to start working on, and informing, policy." (p25)
- VCCP is addressing cross-cutting issues, although it is still early days: "All the churches in the program and the VCC are attempting to implement inclusive and gender sensitive activities ... it is VCCP policy to include women as well as men in program decisions" (p18) however the program is still largely male-dominated with only 3 women in VCCP's organisational structure. The church partners are patriarchal in structure but some do have leadership roles for women outside of the traditional women's groups.
- Through VCCP, "three churches are already working on HIV/AIDS awareness, ending violence against women and child protection, environment and disaster and risk management." (p19)
- Both the church partners and the reviewer agree that "the program should continue to consolidate the gains made and to expand services and knowledge to the people of Vanuatu." (p27)

Program Management arrangements need to be strengthened

- The review reports that while overall management of VCCP had a rocky start prior to the establishment of the Secretariat, management is now running smoothly (p25).
- "AusAID staff input is limited and probably inadequate for what in effect is 8 individual projects." (p16)
- Furthermore, "the large number of program committees, including Governing Councils, the Executive Group, the Partnership Group, the Vanuatu reference group and the ANGO reference group, many of which comprise the same members, would be more efficient if amalgamated." (p16)
- The value of funding may need to be reconsidered given that "the absorptive capacity of the churches, with the exception of the SDAs, has been limited." (p16)

Program outcomes are likely to be sustained but recent achievements need to be built on

- The review notes that "there is very little risk of the Vanuatu church partnerships being unsustainable, given their improved management systems, greater confidence in engaging with donors and ability to find funding for and undertake new development activities." (p18) However there continue to be risks with current friction between VCC and GOV on political issues and the

potential for major disagreements between partner churches. It may still be too early for AusAID to exit the program.

- “With time and experience with the program, Vanuatu partners have become less reliant on their ANGO partners and more involved in making their own [program] decisions ... this reflects growing Vanuatu confidence and ownership of the program ... and ... the excellent support the ANGOs have provided.” (p26)
- Church partners have advised that they want to “consolidate and build on the achievements so far so we can provide better health, education and livelihoods for our congregations – and all the people.” (p27)

Recommendations for VCPP

The review recommendations addressed both the current phase and future funding options. Many of the recommendations are already being addressed. Only those requiring a more detailed management response are included below.

Recommendation	Actions
<i>Strengthen and streamline program structure and management</i>	
<i>The Governing Council and Partnership Group finalise a simplified VCPP management and reporting arrangement at the next Governing Council in May.</i>	AusAID and church partners to agree to a simplified arrangement in terms of overlap between the GC and the PG at the May 2012 Governing Council meeting. Preparation for discussions is already underway. Follow up on the status of the VCPP Charter by May 2012.
<i>AusAID provide further support to staff at the post and expedite processing of funds.</i>	Resourcing at the AusAID office is currently limited. Program Manager to encourage transition to a single-ANGO management structure by July 2012. AusAID will develop a short discussion paper on streamlining the management structure for circulation/discussion with church partners and consideration at the May 2012 Governing Council meeting.
<i>Expand and follow-up training and skills enhancement</i>	
<i>The VCPP in collaboration with the ANGOs develop a training program in key development concepts and processes for church coordinators and other key personnel with a special focus on concepts such as gender equity, child protection and governance and that this be extended to urban and rural.</i>	AusAID PM to ensure VCPP consultations with the Vanuatu National Training Council, as well as share the draft program with AusAID education staff at Post by end April 2012.
<i>The VCPP provide a clear focus on gender issues and violence against women and children and build on current achievements to include women in all activities.</i>	AusAID PM to regularly encourage VCPP Women’s Desk Officer to liaise closely with NGOs like the Vanuatu Women’s Centre and GOV on gender issues and EVAW.
<i>Coordination support for service delivery</i>	
<i>Churches share their strategic plans with other church partners and relevant government departments to avoid duplication and confusion, and in terms of health and education, work within the GOV sectoral guidelines.</i>	AusAID to propose these are shared annually as part of the annual plan approval process with the Governing Council (May 2012).
<i>Within AusAID, the program officer for the VCPP keep the AusAID program officers for health and education advised of the VCPP activities in these two sectors.</i>	Current information-sharing underway with AusAID’s education and health managers. Agreement to share all relevant draft documentation, specifically annual plans, for internal consultation and sectoral guidance.

The review also identified future options for AusAID support to church partners in Vanuatu:

1. Consideration is given to funding a second phase of the program taking into account the good progress made, the limited absorptive capacity and short-time involvement of the smaller churches in the program. Greater funding is provided for components 3 and 4, in particular for church education services, depending on the outcome of meetings between Ministry of Education, AusAID and the Churches.
 - A second phase include a focus on child protection and good governance and establish mechanisms for greater collaboration with the GOV. It should allow for increasing Vanuatu responsibility for managing planning and reporting.
2. Every effort should be made to implement some of the management and training recommendations during the remaining time of the first phase, providing additional funding if this is deemed necessary. A second phase of the program should incorporate those recommendations that have not been implemented before the end of Phase 1.
3. A new design document is undertaken during 2012 and to ensure an on-going flow of funding and adequate time to develop a new PDD, it is suggested that either six months bridging funding be provided to the end of 2012 or the current program be continued until June 2013.

CONSIDERATIONS FOR AUSAID'S MANAGEMENT RESPONSE

The following considerations are likely to be relevant in terms of possible future Australian assistance for Vanuatu church partnership:

- The review is comprehensive and its assessment against the required criteria was thorough, providing much needed evidence of what VCPP does. Prior to this, AusAID management has struggled to understand the relevance of the Partnership.
- The review, however, provides more recommendations than are manageable, despite guidance to focus areas for future work. Some recommendations are already being addressed by the church partners (see Annex), but those flagged on page 4 will require lengthier discussions with all partners over the remainder of the calendar year.
- The draft review report was workshopped intensively with all Church partners (both ANGOs and Vanuatu partners) in February 2012 who have provided feedback on the recommendations, are applying many and are already aware of their implications.
- Internally at Post, AusAID has workshopped the review report in March 2012 with the health and education team who are very keen to strengthen the links between programs and provide feedback on draft annual plans. VCPP Program Manager will encourage the health and education program managers to liaise directly with church partners.
- The 2011 AusAID Quality At Implementation report for VCPP provides the following ratings, which suggest a reasonable program status:

QAI Criteria	Rating (1-6)
<i>Relevance</i>	4
<i>Effectiveness</i>	4
<i>Efficiency</i>	3
<i>Monitoring and Evaluation</i>	4
<i>Sustainability</i>	4
<i>Gender Equality</i>	4
<i>Risk Assessment</i>	Amber

- All of the eight VCPP funding agreements expire in June 2012. The Program Manager has asked partners to report on anticipated underspend by early April 2012.
- AusAID's management of VCPP is currently in transition, with a new manager taking on board responsibility in mid-April 2012. Allowance will need to be made for a settling-in/handover period.

FUTURE FUNDING OPTIONS

The respective merit of different options to extend VCPP funding in Vanuatu is outlined below.

1. A 12-month Extension of VCPP until June 2013 (preferred option, addresses all three options proposed by the review)
 - AusAID has requested a financial update and a 12-month projection from all partners by early April 2012 to inform future programming.
 - The current program design can be extended for another year to allow for more activities in areas 1, 3 and 4 in particular. Draft annual plans will be discussed at the 7-9 May 2012 Governing Council meeting.
 - During the 12-month period, VCPP will have sufficient time to implement the review's short-term recommendations (see Table on p3) and trial new, streamlined management arrangements to inform future programming.
 - During the 12-month period, a new design may be explored and a decision made with regards to the future focus/scope for VCPP. AusAID's internal processes for the development and approval of a new program design typically take 6-9 months.
 - Church partners propose that a second 3-5 year phase of VCPP will be an appropriate timeframe to consolidate and build on the partnerships already made, the skills already learned and the improvements made to service delivery in the past two years. They consider an expanded program will fully utilise the increase capacity of the VCPP churches.
2. No Extension of VCPP
 - Benefits of program outweigh costs of ceasing funding.

ANNEX

Points for discussion at the 7-9 May 2012 Governing Council meeting

Follow-up actions resulting from the MTR recommendations:

Strengthen and streamline program structure and management	
<i>The Governing Council and Partnership Group finalise a simplified VCPP management and reporting arrangement at the next Governing Council in May.</i>	AusAID and church partners to agree to a simplified arrangement in May 2012. Preparation for discussions is already underway. AusAID PM to follow up on the status of the VCPP Charter by May 2012.
<i>AusAID provide support for an additional Secretariat staff member to enable effective coordination and secretarial work given the expansion of program activities.</i>	AusAID to discuss with church partners at next Governing Council meeting in May 2012 and clarify that AusAID's initial secretariat services were only for the start-up period.
<i>AusAID and the Partnership Group give consideration to increasing the budget allocation to those churches which have been progressive and able to utilise their full allocation, perhaps on condition that this is used for collaborative activities with the smaller churches.</i>	AusAID to discuss with church partners at the May 2012 Governing Council meeting.
<i>AusAID provide further support to staff at the post and expedite processing of funds.</i>	AusAID will develop a short discussion paper on streamlining the management structure for circulation/discussion with church partners and consideration at the May 2012 Governing Council meeting.
<i>The ANGOs provide more detailed reporting to the church partners and provide an opportunity for local partners to raise issues for discussion in ANGO meetings.</i>	AusAID to discuss with church partners at the May 2012 Governing Council meeting, with a view to addressing this throughout 2012, as part of the in principle 12-month extension be granted. Church partners to clarify their expectations from ANGO reporting.
Clarify and make widely known program roles and responsibilities	
<i>The program coordinator take every opportunity to ensure the roles and responsibilities of the Secretariat and the VCC are further clarified and made known to all church partners, church leaders, and the GOV.</i>	VCPP Secretariat to report in May 2012 at the Governing Council meeting.
<i>The Governing Council and Partnership Group expedite the formal registration of the VCC and appoint a high profile independent VCPP Chairperson prior to the next Partnership Group meeting.</i>	VCPP Secretariat to report in May 2012 at the Governing Council meeting.
<i>The VCC immediately make further efforts to engage with the GOV possibly as on-going follow-up from the November National Policy Summit.</i>	VCPP Secretariat to report in May 2012 at the Governing Council meeting.
<i>At the next Partnership Group meeting, the ANGOs explain to church coordinators the process and criteria for accepting or refusing church proposals.</i>	ANGO partners have agreed to discuss this at the April Partnership Group meeting. AusAID to follow up on how this process is documented.
Expand and follow-up training and skills enhancement	
<i>The VCPP develop a training strategy which includes follow-up training and further skills development in program planning,</i>	VCPP Secretariat is addressing this and will provide an update at the May 2012 Governing Council meeting.

<i>management, reporting and accounting and that future church plans include follow-up training for teachers, health workers, women's and youth groups and community members.</i>	
<i>The VCPP in collaboration with the ANGOs develop a training program in key development concepts and processes for church coordinators and other key personnel with a special focus on concepts such as gender equity, child protection and governance and that this be extended to urban and rural.</i>	VCPP and ANGOs are already addressing this. AusAID PM to ensure VCPP consultations with the Vanuatu National Training Council, as well as share the draft program with AusAID education staff at Post by end April 2012. An update to be provided at the Governing Council meeting in May 2012.
Coordination support for service delivery	
<i>AusAID arrange a meeting with Ministry of Education, Church Program Coordinators, Church Education Directors and AusAID Education Program Managers to discuss ways the Churches can best be supported to effectively handle the recent return of the churches of a very large number of government –run schools, and to identify the VCPP role in this.</i>	This was addressed by the AusAID PM in March 2012 as part of the AusAID TVET design. It was agreed that VCPP would have a role to play in teacher training. AusAID PM to report to the Governing Council in May 2012.
<i>Churches share their strategic plans with other church partners and relevant government departments to avoid duplication and confusion, and in terms of health and education, work within the GOV sectoral guidelines.</i>	AusAID to propose these are shared annually as part of the annual plan approval process with the Governing Council (May 2012). This links to the recommendation below regarding the relationship between VCPP/VCC and GOV.
<i>Churches and the VCC, with support from AusAID give greater attention to expanding relationships with GOV and with relevant NGOs and civil society organisations e.g. Wan Smolb Theatre, Save the Children, Vanuatu Women's Centre</i>	AusAID has invited NGOs and GOV to the May 2012 Governing Council meeting.