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Addressing collective action problems in Melanesia: the Northern Islands Market Vendors’ Association in Vanuatu

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ABSTRACT
This article presents case study findings on the Vanuatu-based Northern Islands Market Vendors’ Association (NIMVA) as a vehicle for women-led collective action. While NIMVA’s existence and organisational strength challenges existing political norms, strong gender norms restricting the role of women in society and politics continue to marginalise its capacity to participate politically and pursue transformative change. Using a “permitted empowerment” frame, the article assesses NIMVA’s emergence as a vehicle for women market vendors to undertake collective action to improve livelihoods, and the implications for those seeking to support more inclusive forms of local-level development.

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Introduction
In Melanesia, structural factors conspire to make politics unstable and fragmented. High cultural diversity, unfinished processes of post-colonial and post-conflict nation and state-building, low economic development and economic informality limit prospects for organised politics and the pursuit of inclusive development reforms. In such an environment, politics has been characterised as disorderly; a process whereby individuals compete in nominally democratic elections by mobilising ethnic and clan support bases in the absence of strong parties, and use political access to the state to access limited public resources to re-distribute to supporters (May 2003; Wood 2018).

This unstable political dynamic has a number of implications for government and the ability of the state to support inclusive forms of development. While democratic competition can be intensely hard-fought this competition is largely divorced from unifying notions of the public good or national interest. Prospects for strategic policy-making to support national development are limited, as governments tend to be coalitions of convenience and too unstable to take a long view to development. Finally, the idea of citizenship is deeply compromised, with local and kinship ties, and often personal self-interest, trumping any sense of the public good (Wood 2018). Women, young people and those living in urban centres often lack representation and any notion of political rights that would emanate from more inclusive ideas of political community (Barbara and Keen 2017).

One major implication of this political dynamic is a weak prospect for collective action to drive reform. Collective action refers to the mobilisation of coalitions of individuals and organisations to achieve shared goals and institutional reforms necessary for more inclusive development. In development contexts common to Pacific Islands states, where formal democratic institutions may be weak (Lyne de Ver and Kennedy 2011), it is difficult for citizens to organise and challenge the power of entrenched economic and political interests, limiting the prospects for reform. Difficulties in organising collectively favour the political status quo and entrenched interests.

Efforts to address this collective action problem have tended to focus on strengthening the capacity of formal political organisations and processes, such as parties and parliaments, often
with limited success in terms of more inclusive political participation or responsive policy reform processes. More recent interest has focused on issues of agency and developmental leadership, linked to issues-based forms of mobilisation (DLP 2018). This move beyond parties and parliaments is better suited to the context in Melanesia, but there remains a dearth of examples of effective collective action in informal contexts, and even less in terms of how women fare in such environments.

Given the challenges faced in supporting formal forms of political participation as a basis for improved collective action, there is an important need to better understand alternate pathways to collective action and more inclusive and effective political participation. To this end, this article looks at the Northern Islands Market Vendors’ Association (NIMVA) in Vanuatu as a case study of a potential new form of large-scale collective action. First established in 2015, NIMVA is a relatively young civil society organisation. But it is also one of the largest organisations in Vanuatu in terms of membership base, with a capped dues-paying membership of 3,000 vendors. This paper looks at the potential of market vendors’ associations such as NIMVA to act politically and create political change.1

Markets are of significant importance to Pacific communities and economies. A vital source of revenue for municipal governments and affordable fresh produce and meat for urban populations, they are also crucial to rural livelihoods (Clark 2010; Underhill-Sem et al. 2014). In Vanuatu, nine in ten market vendors are women, with markets a vital space for women to earn income. But such spaces are often under-resourced and under-valued by government and municipal authorities. Keen and Ride (2018, 2) note: “Few cities in the Pacific have supportive policy frameworks for informal economic activities despite their prevalence and persistence.”

Workers in the informal economy, including market vendors, “are at the heart of multiple social networks that can be mobilised for political action” (Titeca 2014). Yet market vendors as a group are shut out of formal political spaces. Markets are gendered spaces, and this entrenches their marginalisation from politics (Clark 2010; Underhill-Sem et al. 2014). Market vendors’ associations, and particularly those with large memberships such as NIMVA, can create new spaces for collective action and political participation for a commonly marginalised group of people. These associations, however, still operate in the context of existing power dynamics and institutional rules of the game that subjugate the voices of non-dominant political groups, including women and informal sector workers. In this paper we use the concept of “permitted empowerment” (Dyer 2017) to explore how such associations may create some advantage for members in terms of safer working conditions and collective bargaining power, but not necessarily create long-term transformative change.

Conceptual framework

Collective action as a means of social and economic change has enjoyed renewed focus in recent literature on international development. Scholars have argued that developmental leadership cannot be understood solely in terms of individual attributes, but as a process through which the use of networks and coalitions to work towards common goals is needed (Lyne de Ver and Kennedy 2011). Collective action requires some consideration on the nature of coalitions, the basis of their common interests in a reform objective, and the collective power held by a coalition to achieve a common goal. The idea of shared reform interests raises questions of ideology and the public good. It also requires political contestation in order to challenge the institutional status quo and prosecute a reform agenda.

How coalitions work to achieve change is also important. A distinction can be found in the advocacy for development literature between project-oriented change strategies and collective action approaches that seek to address more fundamental structural conditions impacting on peoples’ lives. A project approach to change is more localised and consequently narrow in scope and change potential. Such projects “may lead to results, but these results often do not touch upon the fundamental conditions that shape lives, such as sustainable ecosystems management, land rights, cultural understandings of sexual and reproductive health and rights, or market relations.”
By contrast, “[a]dvocacy for development often addresses such structural matters, seeking to transform the legal, political and social conditions that shape development” (Van Wessel 2018, 400). This implies a capacity for collective action organisations to work at scale and to engage with formal political institutions that control the allocation of resources, such as parliaments and bureaucracies.

Collective action has a structural dimension. It is undertaken to reform institutional frameworks which impact on the distribution of resources, power and opportunity in society. It is thus an inherently political process (Leftwich and Hogg 2007), and its effectiveness is impacted by societal power dynamics. Prospects for reform depend on the capacity of reform coalitions to amass relevant power to overcome reform opposition. Collective action also has to engage with contextual factors which might enable or hinder its effectiveness (DLP 2018, 3).

An important question is the degree to which outside actors like donors can support collective action. Recent interest in developmental leadership and the need to “think and work politically” reflects donor recognition that local actors must be supported to undertake collective action if reforms are to be successful (Booth and Unsworth 2014). Donors can help create an enabling environment for collective action but cannot dictate its direction, and too much interference can be counter-productive (Roche et al. 2018).

Collective action is, of course, a gendered phenomenon. It can be used in ways that privilege male leadership and political goals. Yet coalitions – either formalised, semi-formal or informal collaborations – can also use collective action to work to change gender norms and promote women’s leadership (Roche et al. 2018). Effective gender-focused coalitions in the Pacific are invariably locally led, locally designed, and informed by the local cultural context. Yet this does not always guarantee success, especially in transforming deep-seated gender norms and beliefs.

In her research in neighbouring Solomon Islands, Dyer (2017) uses the concept of “permitted empowerment” to explain how perceived advances in women’s empowerment in rural contexts might not necessarily indicate any transformative change. Instead, they are subtle alterations in gender relations that keep the underlying patriarchal structures intact. She notes, however, that exercise of agency can take multiple forms and is not necessarily always most effective as resistance-oriented (Dyer 2017).

“Permitted empowerment” is portrayed as an exchange of power that involves “a giving of power by men rather than a taking by women” (Dyer 2017, 204). Power is therefore conceptualised as a zero-sum game, in which any advances for women must be made at the expense of men. Women’s empowerment was seen as a potentially humiliating process for local sources of power – inevitably men – and a process that must be carefully managed by women (Dyer 2017).

**Politics and women’s leadership in Vanuatu as a collective action problem**

Politics in Vanuatu is fragmented and unstable. Between 1991 and 2015, there were 21 changes of government; in a six-month span in 2010-2011, there were five changes of prime ministership. This instability means that formal political institutions do not necessarily represent stable opportunity structures to direct political activity. Barbara and Haley (2014, 50) note a “juxtaposition of weak formal institutions and strong informal institutions” in Vanuatu. Non-state institutions – chiefly leadership structures and the church – are deeply entrenched and influential in Vanuatu, and can be conservative especially on gender issues.

This fragmented political context limits prospects for large-scale collective action. Political power is wielded by influential players, mostly men, who mobilise kinship and familial ties to win office. In such an environment, the development challenge is understood as one of accessing state resources to redistribute to political supporters. This dynamic ensures politics has a strong clientelistic dimension and limits prospects for structural reform. Progressing reform relies instead on “[t]he use of informal power structures and channels to build consensus and coalitions for change” (Cox et al. 2007, 54).
The capacity of women to participate in politics and act collectively is constrained in this environment. Only five women were elected to the national parliament between independence in 1980 and 2016; following the 2016 election, Vanuatu remained one of the few countries in the world with no women in its parliament. A gender quota instituted in 2013 guaranteed women’s representation in municipal politics through reserved seats, but this only applies to the town councils of Port Vila and Luganville (PLP 2016), and attempts to promote national-level quotas have faced significant resistance.

Vanuatu has had a Department of Women’s Affairs in some form since independence, and the Vanuatu National Council of Women (VNCW) was established just prior to independence. The VNCW was a strong organisation in the 1980s which has subsequently declined in influence (Douglas 2002). Other, more “radical” groups have been created, including the Vanuatu Women’s Centre (VWC) in 1992, which has a focus on ending violence against women. Organisations such as the VWC can be forces for social change, but their reliance on funds from donor organisations leave them vulnerable to accusations of foreign influence, a common attempt to delegitimise women’s activism in the Pacific: “Women’s disquiet perhaps emanates from a political process whereby having powerful foreigners as allies risks alienating the very local men they are trying to influence and to change” (Jolly 2000, 133).

One consequence of gendered constraints on women’s political participation is a limitation on the political issues deemed to be of concern to women. Policy issues regarding national development and the formal economy are mostly seen as the prerogative of men. Family and social issues, legitimate concerns for women, are pursued in informal social contexts and do not take up too much space on the formal political agenda. In practice, this means that women’s participation is siloed, with women playing a largely consultative role within formal politics, and their political voice as community leaders is not valued equally to that of men.

Western feminism has often been rejected outright by women’s leaders; prominent ni-Vanuatu women such as Grace Mera Molisa have strongly and publicly advocated women’s rights while snubbing the label ‘feminist’ (Douglas 2002). Women’s leadership is often exercised through specific means, mainly maternal imagery and a wholehearted endorsement of Christian and customary values. Women’s leadership in the Pacific has commonly been portrayed as collective rather than individual, with communal social structures seen as in many ways well-suited to collective action (Jolly 2000). Church groups have historically been the main collective action forums for rural women (Douglas 2002).

To work effectively, drivers of change must work in politically savvy ways and exploit “cracks” in even highly conservative political and social contexts (Roche et al. 2018). In Vanuatu, effective change in the gender space has taken place out of the public eye, with key actors emphasising the importance of locally-owned and -driven agendas (Barbara and Haley 2014).

The Northern Islands Market Vendors’ Association

This section presents findings of a case study on NIMVA and its evolution as a vehicle for collective action in Vanuatu. NIMVA is interesting from a collective action perspective on a number of grounds: it is a gendered organisation, led by women with a predominantly female membership; it has a focus on market access and development, and is therefore engaging with a substantive development issue of significant importance to rural communities in Vanuatu; and its growth has benefited from external donor support, therefore allowing us to consider how external actors can support forms of collective action.

NIMVA was established with support from UN Women, who in 2014 launched a six-year Markets for Change project. The project aims to support market vendors in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu in improving working conditions, enhancing leadership capabilities and increasing income potential. One of its four key focus areas is creating “inclusive, effective and representative marketplace groups”
In the first two years of the project, 17 market vendors’ associations were established or strengthened in Vanuatu, Solomon Islands, and Fiji, with a combined 7,500 members.

Of these market vendors’ associations, NIMVA is by far the largest in terms of membership. Based on the island of Espiritu Santo in Vanuatu, its membership is made up of vendors who sell produce and goods at the Luganville Town Market. It is one of two market vendors’ associations established in Vanuatu, the other being the Silae Vanua Market Vendors’ Association in Port Vila. The current membership base of NIMVA is capped at 3,000.

NIMVA’s membership is overwhelmingly female, with only around 2% of members being men. The executive members were all women as of November 2018; while some men had been elected to the executive, they had subsequently resigned. Since the first formal elections in 2016, there had not been a leadership transition. Elections scheduled to be held at the 2018 AGM were cancelled prior to the meeting. While this appeared to be an executive decision, with executive office holders saying they wished to extend their terms in order to see through the redevelopment of the market house before new elections, members spoken to for this research did not express any concern over the delayed elections.

Markets as a site of collective action

NIMVA’s organisational focus on market access issues means it is engaged with an issue of genuine development importance in Vanuatu. Markets are the long-established cornerstones of the informal economy (Keen and Ride 2018). They are also important community spaces and sites of social interaction between urban and rural populations (Anderson 2008). Around 75% of ni-Vanuatu citizens rely on subsistence farming and fishing for their livelihoods and markets are a key way in which subsistence communities connect with the cash economy. However, the location of markets within the informal economy means that policymakers have tended to overlook them as an important economic sector. Growing recognition of the importance of the informal economy is resulting in policy shifts, such as reforms to the Vanuatu tertiary training system to better engage with the skills needs of the informal economy (Gibert 2013). Yet changing conceptualisations of the role of the informal economy in national development from marginal to central is still a work in progress.

Markets are important sources of income for rural women; a 2008 study of market vendors in Madang, Papua New Guinea found that on average they earned more than three times the national minimum wage (Anderson 2008). Yet Yvonne Underhill-Sem et al. (2014, 307) note markets can be sites of potential harm for women: “While marketplaces are also busy, vibrant and vital places, and are central to food supply networks and livelihoods, women vendors also experience various forms of insecurity and exploitation.” Women market vendors, especially those who have to stay overnight in the market, are vulnerable to gender-based violence. The risks are exacerbated by a lack of security and the location of the markets, often in town within walking distance of bars where men go to drink. Underinvestment in facilities including toilets and showers, or exploitative charges for use, also disproportionately affect women (Underhill-Sem et al. 2014).

Municipal government plays an important role in regulating market spaces and activity. Markets as spaces, and market vendors’ associations, are vulnerable to political manoeuvring by local government authorities and other political actors. Engagement in politics is fraught for informal sector organisations, especially those led by women and other marginalised groups (Stillerman 2006; Titeca 2014). Underhill-Sem et al. (2014) note that “improvements” to market infrastructure often occur without the active input of women market vendors, and may in fact be setting up systems through which their market activities might be more effectively controlled and profited from by market management and other authorities. They argue that establishing market vendors’ associations in the Pacific that are democratic, inclusive and effective is vital for women to exercise agency and leadership in decision-making within market governance structures and more broadly. Research from
elsewhere in the world also advocates inclusive governance, albeit in “culturally and historically appropriate forms” (Clark 2010, 61).

Market vendors’ associations can exercise political agency and influence through, for example, fielding candidates in municipal elections; building relationships with key government agencies and officials, with other smallholders’ associations and interest groups, and with local and international NGOs; organising protests; and lobbying for legal changes (Stillerman 2006). Yet if associations are circumvented by municipal authorities and market management, vendors can come to see them as powerless.

**NIMVA as a vehicle for collective action**

Given the economic and political significance of local markets, how has NIMVA evolved as a vehicle of collective action to represent the interests of women and support women’s interests in market governance?

NIMVA can certainly claim to be highly representative of market vendors in Luganville. NIMVA’s large membership base and associated membership fees give it genuine organisational independence. From the treasurer’s report at the 2018 AGM, it was clear that the organisation is in strong financial health, with a solid revenue base from members and a healthy bank balance. NIMVA’s financial independence is unusual in a Vanuatu context where many civil society organisations are dependent on donor support. That members are willing to renew their membership also suggests NIMVA is in some way providing valued services to members.

NIMVA also enjoys power because of its ability to regulate access to markets among traders. NIMVA restricts access to market stalls through a strict roster system, reducing competition among traders, and resulting in improved market incomes. From discussions with NIMVA members, the roster system had provided them with more stable incomes and schedules, and was seen as a positive initiative.

While the organisation has the potential to exercise significant political power, it faces challenges in translating this into effective political action. Part of the challenge is certainly institutional dexterity. Members of the NIMVA executive noted in interviews that the size of the organisation as a whole is unwieldy under existing institutional arrangements. A key example of this is a recurring issue with AGMs, which under the current constitution require a quorum of 40% of the total membership, or 1,200 members. This number has never been reached at any AGM to date; at the scheduled 2018 AGM, 432 members attended. The quorum issue is a widely recognised issue within the organisation, with acknowledgement of the logistical difficulty for members – some of whom need to travel for up to five hours to attend meetings – as well as the impossibility of finding an indoor venue in Luganville capable of hosting 1,200 people. To amend the constitution, however, an AGM with quorum would need to be held.

Another related issue is the opportunities and challenges related to being a donor-funded group. While NIMVA exercises significant freedom in its day-to-day operations, the constitutional issues raised above highlight the dilemma of being an organisation that has not necessarily grown organically into being, but rather been modelled from a donor-designed template it has since outgrown. There are other potential issues related to NIMVA’s close connection with a donor organisation, including the possibility it may be seen by others as a vehicle for foreign interests, and the likely unwillingness of donors to be too closely associated with an explicitly political organisation if NIMVA did decide to go that route in future.

Despite having significant potential power as a representative body, NIMVA has been reluctant to articulate an overt political strategy. Ordinary members, executive members, and those outside the organisation tended to conceptualise NIMVA in interviews as primarily a registration body and a conduit for complaints by the market vendors to the council. Executive attention has to date been focused on basic welfare issues for women market traders. A key area of interest to members is working conditions at the market, especially the condition of the market building. Working conditions
were cramped, and an old and leaky roof caused problems both for vending and when vendors were sleeping overnight in the market house. Executive members saw a project to redevelop the market house as the main objective for their (extended) term. This project was being funded by UN Women through the Markets for Change programme, in consultation with NIMVA and other stakeholders including the Luganville Municipal Council.

Executive office holders have also been active in advocating for improved security. The Luganville market house has no fencing or dedicated security guard. Market vendors highlighted their security concerns in interviews, especially those caused by drunk men when the vendors were sleeping overnight in the market house. Petty theft was also a recurring issue. Security issues were mostly dealt with by the executive as individual cases – for instance, going to the council to seek compensation for a vendor who had her profits (and bus fare home) stolen – and not as a broader structural issue.

At the AGM, the issue raised most frequently by representatives from the area committees was transport. The cost of transport to town was seen as too high, especially for vendors from more remote areas, a problem that seriously affected the profits to be made from vending. The condition of roads and bridges on Espiritu Santo was also criticised. This criticism was largely directed at the provincial council, whose headquarters are located a short distance from where the AGM was held, although no provincial council representatives attended the AGM.

**Achieving political influence: market vendors’ associations as political forces**

NIMVA’s organisational coverage, ability to coordinate market vendors, and financial base means it has potential political influence. But has NIMVA been able to translate this into concrete reforms and development change? Are there limits on NIMVA’s capacity to enact change, and does this constitute a situation of “permitted empowerment” (Dyer 2017)?

An important part of the collective action challenge facing reform coalitions is political motivation and the need for purposeful agency (DLP 2018). Political motivation and will to drive a reform agenda require reform coalitions to have a clear and shared sense of self-interest, coupled with a good understanding of their organisational power and a strategic sense of how to wield it to achieve development goals. For those outside the organisation, the political potential of NIMVA was clear. NIMVA was recognised as a potentially highly effective political force:

They have the numbers. Politics is about numbers. (Interview, November 2018)

They have the potential. But it’s up to their mentality and mindset … They could become political leaders. They have the strength; they don’t realise that but they have the strength. (Interview, November 2018)

Outside observers pointed to NIMVA’s negotiations with council representatives as political action: “They don’t think they’re playing politics, but actually they’re playing politics.” But political activity through NIMVA, a predominantly female organisation, was seen as limited by cultural norms:

Maybe in Vanuatu’s context there will be some other factors affecting [NIMVA going into politics] … in the villages, maybe chiefs make all the decisions. (Interview, November 2018)

It’s a cultural role, that a leader should be a man. (Interview, November 2018)

While these cultural norms were seen as shifting in urban areas, the vast majority of NIMVA’s members live in rural areas where patriarchal cultural norms are viewed as more entrenched. In this context, creating space for progressive female leadership is difficult. Under the permitted empowerment framing, where women exercise leadership, it is because men have allowed them to do so (Dyer 2017). Thus, permitted empowerment rests on an explicit understanding of the primacy of male authority.

NIMVA has been changing leadership norms for market women through providing experience of serving on committees and the executive, and access to leadership training through UN Women. Yet insofar as NIMVA was an informal sector group with a predominantly female membership base and
an apolitical agenda, it fits relatively comfortably into conceptualisations of rural women’s leadership. Informal sector leadership does not necessarily challenge perceptions of gender norms in the same way that political leadership does. Women exercising leadership in this area, therefore, was not seen as transgressive; rather, the idea of women’s space had merely been slightly expanded (see Dyer 2017).

People outside the organisation saw NIMVA’s basis of power partly in its numerical strength, but also its centrality to the economy. The market was a major revenue earner for the council, and council representatives acknowledged this gave NIMVA a lot of (as yet unrealised) power in negotiations. The economic strength of NIMVA could prove a challenge to the permitted empowerment framing of the organisation among local politicians and bureaucrats, yet the marginalisation of the informal sector still worked to undermine NIMVA as a politically powerful organisation.

NIMVA members interviewed were reluctant to recognise NIMVA’s potential as a political force. For many, politics was seen as divisive and something that would foster disunity within NIMVA. Some, however, saw the potential for NIMVA to become more political in the future, noting that it was still a young organisation but could grow into a political force.

In the absence of an explicitly political agenda, NIMVA has largely pursued a permissive reform approach that has sought to work with local leaders to agree on market reforms. For example, the NIMVA executive works very closely with established market authorities such as the market manager as well as the Luganville-based representative from the national Department of Women’s Affairs. NIMVA has also developed relationships with the acting town clerk and the mayor of Luganville. NIMVA’s relationship with the Luganville Municipal Council was formalised on International Women’s Day 2018 with a Memorandum of Understanding. Under this new arrangement, the council provides support for NIMVA, including use of its council chambers for executive meetings.

NIMVA has shown little interest in expanding its reform coalition beyond that of its immediate membership base. Since 2013, Vanuatu has had reserved seats for women at the municipal level in the town councils of urban centres of Port Vila and Luganville (PLP 2016). In the latter, one seat in each of the four wards is reserved for a woman, and the highest-polling unsuccessful woman candidate who contested the ward is appointed to this role. In the 2016 election, one woman was elected outright, meaning that there were five women (38%) councillors, including the Deputy Mayor, at the time this research was carried out. The female councillors interviewed for this research were not in regular contact with the NIMVA executive. This was despite the fact that two of the female councillors were members of NIMVA. This potentially important representation on the council was not an opportunity that the NIMVA executive had taken advantage of.

Overwhelmingly, NIMVA was acting as a responsive rather than a proactive group in terms of market issues. The executive was seen by those outside the organisation as not assertive enough in its dealing with outside stakeholders, especially the Luganville Municipal Council. NIMVA members who were interviewed, however, invariably approved of the performance of the executive.

NIMVA’s experience raises important questions about what it means for women to be political in an environment such as Vanuatu. Is permitted empowerment a paradox? Can empowerment indeed be gifted, or must it always be claimed (Mosedale 2005)? It is tempting to dismiss NIMVA’s political activism focused on achieving modest, local-level changes as somehow second best or less political. However, all NIMVA members spoken to for this research expressed overall satisfaction with the organisation, and were committed to maintaining their memberships. As a female-dominated organisation, NIMVA must contend with entrenched gender norms that can limit women’s political agency. In this context, an assertive political strategy might be resisted by male political elites. NIMVA's reluctance to develop an overt political agenda targeted at influencing policymakers in formal political institutions in many respects represents a rational strategy in the political milieu which it inhabits.

Yet while such a strategy is rational, it also faces real limitations in terms of the potential to overcome structural barriers limiting women’s economic empowerment. If NIMVA is to begin to engage with more substantial issues impacting upon the livelihoods of its membership, it will need to engage with policy issues considered in the context of formal political institutions. For example, Keen et al.
(2017), looking at the role of markets in the broader process of urbanisation in Solomon Islands, underline the importance of policies supporting urban connectivity so rural communities can better capitalise on economic opportunities. Improved connectivity would be of direct benefit to NIMVA members travelling long distances to the market, but would require, for example, the articulation of a more political agenda focused on increasing public investments in transport and infrastructure.

**Conclusion**

Part of the challenge of establishing effective market vendors’ associations in the Pacific is creating a new construction of the market vendor – individually and collectively – as a political actor. Underhill-Sem et al. (2014, 312) note that “women and girl vendors are predominantly perceived as “domestic” producers, vendors and buyers, and not as political subjects and dynamic and opportunistic entrepreneurs”. NIMVA’s self-conceptualisation as an apolitical organisation has arguably undermined prospects for a more radical reform agenda coupled with disruptive political tactics.

NIMVA has been recognised as a potential political force and vehicle for substantive collective action by others. Limits to their ability to effect social and political change are a cautious leadership culture, anti-political involvement attitudes among its membership; and wider social norms that constrain women’s – and especially rural women’s – political participation. All of these speak to pervasive gendered norms of political participation and leadership in Vanuatu. As it has grown as an organisation, dominated by rural women who contribute significantly to the economy and are formally organising collectively for the first time, NIMVA has already by its existence challenged existing political norms. To realise its political potential, the organisation and its executive must further confront and subvert these norms; to do this, however, it would need to challenge the status quo in a way that moves beyond the permitted empowerment paradigm it is currently operating under.

Beyond NIMVA’s significance as an organisation representing marginalised women in Vanuatu, this case study is interesting from the perspective of the broader literature on developmental leadership, collective action and reform. First, the case study suggests the need to consider more carefully the sources of organisational power and the challenge of building politically influential organisations with some potential to achieve consequential reform. Second, tactics matter: NIMVA’s strategic focus on issues of direct importance to its membership base – security, transport and market access – means it has been able to build a large membership, giving it organisational legitimacy (and resources).

But organisational strength has not of itself provided a basis for more radical forms of political advocacy and demands for transformational reform. This points to the need to consider how normative issues such as social norms, values and self-confidence impact on development reforms and the nature of collective action. In the case of NIMVA, strong social norms regarding the role of women has tempered the level of developmental ambition exercised by it, limiting its political agenda. NIMVA can be viewed largely as an exercise of permitted empowerment, as a female-led organisation exercising power to the extent that it does not threaten entrenched male political interests. Engaging with these normative challenges will be important if organisations like NIMVA are to capitalise on their potential power to achieve significant reforms.

Working beyond the permitted political space in pursuit of a more ambitious advocacy for development agenda will be challenging for NIMVA. One possibility would be for NIMVA to more actively engage with the issue of the informal economy, working with others in Vanuatu to demand greater recognition of the importance of the informal economy to broader economic success of the country. This issue is gaining traction in the country and may be one where NIMVA could legitimately exercise greater voice. Related to this is the need for NIMVA to think carefully about how to expand its political influence through strategic partnerships with other organisations around shared issues. Again, the issue of the informal economy is one of direct relevance to NIMVA’s members and one where other stakeholders also have interests, such as provincial governments, local businesses and...
donors. There could be scope to expand NIMVA’s collective action influence by forming a broader coalition active in this area.

**Note**

1. The research for this paper was carried out in November 2018 in a fieldwork trip of 12 days to Vanuatu. Interviews were conducted with 18 interlocutors, including members of the NIMVA executive (who at the time were all female); ordinary members of NIMVA (both female and male); local representatives from government departments; representatives from the Luganville Municipal Council; and local politicians (both female and male). Participant observation was also conducted, at the market, in an organisational meeting for the annual general meeting (AGM), and at the AGM on 7 November 2018.

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