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GOVERNANCE IN VANUATU: IN SEARCH OF THE NAKAMAL WAY

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There has been much talk of governance in the South Pacific in the past few years. Indeed, it seems that governance has become the political and economic message of the late 1990s, much as 'sustainable development' was that of the early 1990s. The messengers are the premier international organisations such as the World Bank, the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development, the United Nations and the International Monetary Fund relayed in the South Pacific by prominent bilateral donors, such as Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain. Although the message of governance is relevant globally, it has been essentially directed at the developing world. It is, as such, currently having an impact on the Pacific islands.

Like many new and widespread concepts before it, governance will be absorbed and 'recycled'[1] by Pacific island governments and administrations. It may prove to be only an empty, 'flavour of the month' (Williams and Young 1994) expression used by Pacific officials as and when deemed necessary to satisfy aid donors. In this case governance will have an effect only in the context of Pacific island

countries' relations with larger powers and will not provoke fundamental or far-reaching changes on how Pacific societies actually govern themselves. On the other hand, should the idea come to take on meaning to the people it could be of benefit to the Pacific island countries.

For the latter to happen, governance will need to be transformed into an adapted-to-the-Pacific concept, and not remain a 'message from the cold'.[2] Indeed, for governance to become truly relevant to the Pacific, people in the region must create their own definition and understanding of the concept. The objective of this paper is therefore to try to understand what governance means or can potentially come to mean, in one South Pacific country, Vanuatu.[3]

THE GOVERNANCE 'PHENOMENON'[4]

'Why governance? Is it an issue for the Pacific? What do islanders say about governance?' (The Right Honourable Bikenibeu Paeniu, Prime Minister of Tuvalu, 15 May 1997).

WHY GOVERNANCE?

To begin this exploration of the term governance it might be useful to briefly examine why it has

come into current usage.[5] In our view two reasons stand out: the global weakening of the state, and the action taken by international development institutions to adjust the role of the state in economic development strategies.

THE WEAKENING OF THE STATE

In recent years, the state in both developed and developing countries, has experienced growing difficulties in catering to people's political and economic needs and expectations. This is mainly due to its increasing inability (or some might say, unwillingness) to manage economic and financial changes efficiently. In both the developed and developing countries this phenomenon has led to a decrease in social services, and to increasing unemployment and/or growing numbers of working poor, and to worsening inequality and poverty (Thurow 1996; Cohen 1997). At the same time that this is happening, the state and particularly its representatives (that is, politicians and civil servants) have been increasingly linked to the mismanagement and/or abuse of scarce resources.[6] Put together, these factors have tarnished the image of the state as a responsible and principal actor of political and economic well being and have provided the proponents of 'less government' with powerful ammunition. Not only is the state unable to protect the more vulnerable members of society properly but it is also seen as abusing their trust by misappropriating public goods.

The decline of the state, and therefore of government, has been accompanied by the rise of, and an increasing credit attributed to, the private sector and civil society.[7] The term governance (as opposed to plain 'government' or 'politics') is a reflection of these new conditions. However, it not only implies that other actors besides the state or government are also responsible for political, economic and social development, but it actually encourages them to take on a more dynamic role (see Williams and Young 1994). The private sector and civil society's contribution to the management of public affairs is therefore legitimised at the same time as it is promoted by the concept of

governance. For instance, New Zealand's Commonwealth Good Government Programme states

> A country's progress toward achieving sustainable development depends to a considerable degree on…the extent to which the capabilities of civil society organisations are harnessed to work towards these goals (New Zealand 1995).

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTIONS AND THE ROLE OF THE STATE IN ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

In the past decade, international institutions have been seeking to exert control over political influences which they deem nefarious to reform. This has come about according to Leila Frischtak because 'increasingly the practice of [structural] adjustment came to reflect the view that the political environment was the primary source of obstacles for sustained economic change' (Frischtak 1994:6). In its 1989 study on Sub-Saharan Africa, under the sub-title 'governance for development', the World Bank states

> Underlying the litany of Africa's development problems is a crisis of governance…Because countervailing power has been lacking, state officials in many countries have served their own interests without fear of being called to account…This environment cannot readily support a dynamic economy (World Bank 1989:60–1).

Prominent bilateral donors (Great Britain, Germany, France and the United States worldwide and Australia and New Zealand in the Pacific) have also become increasingly frustrated at the lack of transparent procedures of the governments of many aid-recipient countries. The economic aid and reforms which they assumed were going to lead to growth and development have in many cases failed and they have attributed this in large part to the mismanagement of funds and corruption of the state in recipient countries.

The term governance has thus arisen as a way of addressing political problems as they relate to development while avoiding using the word

'politics' itself. 'Governance' allows international institutions, in particular the World Bank which does not have a political mandate, to address political constraints to economic and financial reform without really appearing to do so. It enables them to discuss political matters in institutional terms and not to have to engage in a real debate on politics and democracy. In fact, it assumes as a given that what is suitable for all is 'at the institutional level the creation of a neutral state; at the social level the creation of a public sphere or civil society; and at the personal level the corresponding creation of a liberal "self" and "modern" patterns of behaviour' (Williams and Young 1994:99), that is, fundamental criteria for liberal representative democracy.

WHAT IS GOVERNANCE AND ACCORDING TO WHOM?

Because the proponents of governance have their own agendas and because 'there is no precedent for any particular interpretation of the word either in academia or in popular language' (Frishtak 1994:11) governance may be interpreted in different ways. However, the institution which has been at the forefront of the concept, the World Bank,[8] gives it a distinctly institutional and economic flavour. Governance is about 'building capacity', 'institution building', 'creating a leaner, better disciplined, better trained and more motivated public service…', establishing 'an enabling policy environment that fosters private investment', encouraging 'measures to foster private sector and non governmental organisations and to enable women to play their full role in economic and social development' (World Bank 1992). The values of liberal representative democracy are not absent from this interpretation: '[reform] requires a systematic effort to build a pluralistic institutional structure, a determination to respect the rule of law, and vigorous protection of the freedom of the press and human rights' (World Bank 1992) but they are not as explicit as in the message of 'good governance', as put forth, for instance by the OECD and UNDP, or by bilateral donors such as France, Great Britain and the

United States (see Moore 1993c).

'Good governance' as seen by the OECD is linked explicitly to both democratic values and procedures and to economic development.

It has become increasingly apparent that there is a vital connection between open, democratic and accountable systems of governance and respect for human rights, and the ability to achieve sustained economic and social development (OECD 1995:5).

This linkage between economic development and democracy has however, been disputed. Leftwich, for instance, writes: '…from a developmental point of view, the general but simplistic appeal for better "governance" as a condition of development is virtuous but naïve' (Leftwich 1993:619).[9] This has not however deterred the administrator of the UNDP from emphasising the relation between democracy and social and economic development: 'Democratization…is one of the pillars of sustainable human development…' (Speth 1997:3).

The UNDP administrator also clearly associates democratisation and governance with less state, more private sector and more civil society.

Governance encompasses the state but it transcends the state by including the private sector and civil society organisations. The institutions of governance in the three domains—state, private sector and civil society—must each contribute to sustainable human development (Speth 1997:3).

This kind of statement makes implicit assumptions about what civil society is, or should be in developing countries. Indeed, as Williams and Young write in their discussion of governance and the World Bank

civil society…is not to consist of ethnic or other affective or community groups, but contractual, non-community, non-affective groups, such as professional associations, chambers of commerce and industry, trade unions and NGOs (1994:96).

Seen in this way, governance appears to be incompatible with indigenous forms of

association and socio/political management and indeed becomes an agent of transformation of society away from kin and community based to 'contractual based' decision-making.

Interpreting 'civil society' as 'economic society' as the 'liberal project' does (Habermas 1997) will not enhance governance in the South Pacific. Civil society in the Pacific[10] finds its roots in local communities that are kin-based and subsistence oriented. It is only recently that non-government organisations (NGOs), which are legal, contractual entities, have played a role in Pacific polities, and although they are a useful link between rural and urban communities and the national government, they should not replace a direct dialogue between communities and the state.

A further, world-wide dimension of governance is provided by the Commission on Global Governance in its report *Our Global Neighbourhood.* The commission's objective was to draw up a blueprint for the contemporary management of international affairs. In its own words

> The international system that the UN Charter put in place needs to be renewed…There is a need to weave a tighter fabric of international norms, expanding the rule of law world-wide and enabling citizens to exert their democratic influence on global processes (Commission on Global Governance 1995:xiv).

The agenda put forth resembles that of the other international organisations, but is concerned more specifically with establishing common, universal rules which the international community as a whole would recognise and agree to abide by.

The above views of 'governance' lead us to agree with Barrie Macdonald when he points out that 'the motives for [good governance] seem clear and laudable, yet, there seems to be something missing' (Macdonald 1995:21). It appears these views, from the World Bank to the United Nations, reflect with some minor variations, a 'new orthodoxy' (Moore 1993a) which stems from the fact that governance is being fueled essentially by a stated concern for

better economic development[11] and not by a genuine concern for better or stronger democracy or political representation and action. Governance in this sense was not thought up as a tool to question how liberal democracy and other political forms found throughout the world work and can be improved, but as a means to ameliorate the administrative mechanisms which allow minimal liberal democracy models to function as more or less successful economic development providers. It assumes that liberal democracy is the model all countries should aspire to and that it is this model which can best provide socioeconomic development. So although governance, as the word's etymology suggests, is really about politics, it has been subsumed by and disguised as economics by its most powerful advocates, the international development institutions and aid donors. This has most likely come about because it is easier and less radical to deal with 'practical 'economic matters than to review the liberal democratic system.

However, because it is a loose concept, governance may also be thought of in a radically different way. This is what Calame and Talmant have done in their book *L'Etat au Coeur* (The State at Heart, 1997), which they begin with the following discussion

> Governance? Rather than talk about administration or government, we have chosen to talk about governance. The word, undoubtedly French, has come back in the last few years by way of the English language. It is the Bretton Woods institutions…which have made it trendy. That would not be sufficient reason to adopt it but it suits our purposes…Governance is the capacity of human societies to give themselves systems of representation, of institutions, of processes, of social bodies, to manage themselves in a voluntary movement (Calame and Talmant 1997:19).

These authors' preoccupation (both were high level public works engineers and administrators) rests not in seeing how the market and other institutions can best deliver economic development, but in how societies can best

organise 'partnerships' between their different members and institutions so that they take into account the diversity and the interdependencies which all societies carry within them and use them to their benefit. They also emphasise the importance of articulating space and time in such a way that the small scale is integrated with the large scale and the short term with the long term. Unlike the 'development/economist' proponents of governance, they are not concerned so much with structures and procedures which tend to lead to 'an obligation of the means',[12] as with the results which are attained. As such, they pose the question

> Could we not agree on the results to be achieved rather than the rules to be respected, thereby allowing for the possibility of inventing, in each context, the best way to obtain these results? (Calame and Talmant 1997:183).[13]

Governance then, as seen by Calame and Talmant, takes on a political and social nature which emphasises processes rather than procedures, and is emancipating in the sense that it allows for cultural diversity and different approaches to the management of public affairs. Unlike governance as an 'economic' concept, it does not promote the 'dismantling of social and cultural specificities and the multiplication of common norms',[14] but rather provides for societies to choose for themselves, through improved dialogue and consultation, the most suitable ways to govern themselves.

Governance, seen in this manner is no longer a uni-dimensional 'blueprint', but rather suggests a new way of thinking about how societies can run themselves.

GOVERNANCE IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

Not surprisingly, the issue of governance in the South Pacific has arisen, as in other developing regions, from the concern of influential aid donors with promoting growth and a more efficient use of their decreasing development assistance.[15] It has indeed become apparent that past financial assistance has not been leading to

self-sustaining growth and that South Pacific governments and bureaucracies have been showing increasing signs of instability, mismanagement, and even abuse of funds and of public trust.[16] In addition, aid donors are uncomfortable with the increasing rise in the ideology of traditionalism[17] and the demands put forth by certain groups and countries on the basis of special rights for indigenous peoples.[18] As a result the donors promoting governance, particularly the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, the United Nations Development Programme, Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain, are seeking to advance the adoption of the principles that underlie liberal democracy, especially respect for the rule of law and for individual human rights.

One of the strategies of donors is to provide opportunities, through funding and technical support, to a variety of non-governmental actors to carry out activities such as, for instance, furthering non-formal education about democratic values through training sessions and workshops carried out in both urban and rural areas, or improving the capacity of the media and highlighting its role in democratic politics. The strengthening of these NGOs is also aimed at enabling the latter to wield greater influence at the national and regional levels and to influence decision-making. It is in fact helping them become a collaborator of the state in providing services to people which the government has difficulty reaching as well as a check on state power, when the latter takes actions which are considered inauspicious or detrimental to basic liberal democratic rights. However, the promotion of international or non-local non-governmental organisations may weaken their local counterparts by creating rivalries and divisions within the NGO community and by increasing competition for scarce funding.

At the state level, donors have been contributing technically and financially to the reform of the public service, with the aim of promoting greater 'transparency' and efficiency. Workshops and meetings have also been organised at the regional level, bringing together

senior government officials from across the Pacific to discuss 'accountability' and 'good governance'.[19]

GOVERNANCE AND VANUATU

In Vanuatu, governance has gained prominence recently through the Comprehensive Reform Programme (CRP). As its title indicates, this reform process, officially initiated at the beginning of 1997, is wide ranging and aims to deal with the main aspects of governance— 'renew[ing] the institutions of governance', 'reviewing the role and enhancing the efficiency of the public sector', promoting private sector-led growth and 'improving equity between sections of the population' (Comprehensive Reform Programme 1997).

Although Vanuatu's economic and financial situation did not warrant immediate reform when the reform program was conceived (Ambrose and Siwatibau 1997) (unlike Cook Islands which is also undergoing an Asian Development Bank sponsored reform) the country's political situation had become preoccupying. The instability of successive coalition governments and the reported inappropriate behaviour of many politicians[20] had led to what the authors of the CRP have labeled a 'crisis in government'.

Vanuatu, an ex-Franco-British condominium, became independent in 1980. Until 1991, the country made up of 80 islands with a population of approximately 160,000 and vernacular languages numbering about 150, was ruled by the anglophone Vanua'aku Pati, which had led the country in its fight for independence. The 1991 split within the Vanua'aku Pati led to a fragmentation of the previous two-party system. Since then the young state has experienced a series of coalition governments, which until the 1998 elections, were headed by the main Francophone party, the Union of Moderate Parties (van Trease 1996 and Ambrose 1998). Divisions within the latter since 1995 have led to even greater instability resulting in one cabinet reshuffle, two changes of government and the

kidnapping of the president by members of the Vanuatu Mobile Force in 1996[21] and to a dissolution of parliament by the president at the end of 1997.

Vanuatu's political situation has deteriorated progressively with Ministers and Members of Parliament from all parties being implicated in inappropriate and even criminal conduct. Although their misdeeds have been widely reported, many have been consistently re-elected and none have voluntarily resigned. In addition, women have been consistently and disturbingly under-represented in political institutions, with none being elected to Parliament in the 1998 election. This points to a disfunctioning of political institutions which the instigators of the CRP have decided to address.

It is in this context that we decided to consider the relevance of the 'governance agenda' in Vanuatu and to seek ni-Vanuatu people's attitudes towards it.

SEARCHING FOR THE NAKAMAL WAY

Those surveyed[22] gave answers covering a broad range of areas. Rather than attempt to summarise them, we have chosen to point out the issues we feel they were most concerned about and which the 'governance agenda' offers an opportunity to deal with by developing what one of our respondents called the 'Nakamal way'.

Custom and politics. Many of the respondents equated good governance with good government which they view as a government which is fair (i.e. treats everyone the same way), consultative (i.e. listens to the people), and efficient in the distribution of services (i.e. makes the right decisions about development and carries them out). Obviously, this is an ideal situation and does not reflect the case of Vanuatu.

In fact, when subsequently asked to explain the causes of breakdowns in governance, half of the respondents indicated that there is a feeling of alienation from political governance which is due to people and leaders not really understanding a system they have been 'burdened' with, and have little hope of coming to grips with without substantial education. In

addition, this system is perceived as not blending in well with a much older, familiar system. Hence, perhaps the issue of governance in Vanuatu should be geared towards providing people with a better understanding of both political systems and reviewing their articulation so that they are not presented and thought of as being in opposition to each other, or as one being 'better' than the other. This process of review should allow people to take the time (which they did not have at independence and have not had since)[23] to decide for themselves the appropriate combination and not have it foisted upon them from the outside.

Some of the difficulties associated with the articulation (or lack thereof) between systems are revealed in commonly used language. For example, in Vanuatu[24] 'politics' is frequently distinguished from 'custom' when discussing the management of public affairs. People will talk about politics when they refer to what is happening at the national or political party level, and to custom when they talk about the management of local, rural issues. For instance, in his essay *Chiefly Power in Southern Vanuatu*, Chief Philip Tepahae writes

…chiefs must remember and take heed that custom is the province of chiefs and not of politics. Politics is the province of the Vanuatu government but not of custom (Tepahae 1997:4).

This artificial differentiation both reveals and reinforces the gap which exists between 'imposed' institutions and 'local' institutions. It generally also has a tendency to demean custom, i.e. the system under which a majority of the population is ruled, when compared to politics.

Why is this distinction made and what does it tell us? Politics is obviously a foreign word which has come into ni-Vanuatu vocabulary by way of the colonial powers, and which the latter used to describe their management of public affairs as opposed to the management of affairs by chiefs or local leaders to which they referred as 'custom'. The word 'custom' has evolved from describing products and actions used in exchange[25] to signifying 'culture' or the rules and

ways by which a society operates (Larcom 1990). The distinction between 'politics' and 'custom' was reinforced at the time of the independence of Vanuatu when the national leaders fighting for independence thought of themselves as engaging in politics and acting as politicians thereby distinguishing themselves from customary leaders and proponents of 'custom'.[26] Custom has thus come to exist in opposition to politics as though two completely distinct spheres existed with politics being thought of as more important and prestigious than custom

…today in Vanuatu a situation exists which is unsatisfactory because it is only politics which controls everything with a consequence that chiefs are no longer able to control their island and their people (Tepahae 1997:4).

While an artificial barrier separates custom from politics, paradoxically, the term 'big-man' is used both in the parliamentary and customary contexts to refer to a leader and is a source of confusion and a hindrance to governance. Although there is a perception in Vanuatu that chiefs have been neglected in the overall framework of governance, politicians frequently attribute to themselves a chiefly or 'big-man' aura (often they have been inducted as chiefs by their community to recognise their contribution or reflect their status (Lindstrom 1997)) which they use to profit from their functions as parliamentarians.

This is due to a manipulation or a 'manufacturing' of custom. Some high level politicians for instance claim that it is uncustomary to criticise chiefs and that therefore they should not have to put up with public criticism through the media or through the ombudsman's reports. In fact, there is nothing in custom which prevents criticism or sanctioning of inappropriate behaviour by leaders[27] (Siwatibau, pers. comm.). Rather, the attitude of those politicians, who are in this case deliberately mixing custom with politics, reflects their use of the ideology of traditionalism (Lawson 1996, 1997; Otto and Thomas 1996) or of what Futa Helu calls a 'second class of customs…[whose]

function is to maintain or consolidate the power of the ruling élite' (Helu 1997:1).

So how can 'custom' and 'politics' or traditional community and state governance be better combined? Should 'custom' be better defined and held distinct from parliamentary institutions, or should the two be blended? Chief Philip Tepahae makes it clear that he does not think 'politics' and 'custom' should mix: '…the government should work as the government and…custom should work as custom'. Perhaps this is because he feels that 'politics' infringes on the way public affairs are managed or should be managed by the chiefs through custom. The space which should have been reserved to custom has, according to him, been occupied by politics. He does, however, feel that both the 'government' and chiefs have a role to play and that the former should provide the latter with more authority through a constitutional amendment and through an effort from 'parents, families, communities, teachers, chiefs and the government'.

Various customary organisations in Vanuatu are also seeking to enhance peoples knowledge about customary values and practices so that these are not be subverted by politicians. The Comprehensive Reform Programme (CRP) also addresses the issue of custom and its application in the reform, but in a minimalist and extremely utilitarian way. Custom is mentioned only in the 'Social equity and sustainability' section of the program and is thoroughly ignored in the 'Governance and public sector management' section. In fact, custom is seen only as a tool to 'assist in mitigating adverse social effects of reform' (Comprehensive Reform Programme 1997b:16). Indeed, under its 'risks and assumptions' column the CRP states that it hopes that 'communities are able to draw on traditional values and resources to assist those adversely affected' and 'that custom has not been unduly undermined by changes brought about by development and CRP' (*ibid.*).

We feel that key aspects of both systems, such as openness (Siwatibau, pers. comm.) and accountability could be stressed and built upon.

In fact it may be more useful to identify common practices which emphasise 'good governance' characteristics such as participation and equity for all and stress these rather than oppose values and procedures of both systems and dwell on their contradictions. Bikenibeu Paeniu (1995) provides an example in Tuvalu of how traditional and local governance can be amalgamated at the village level by creating village governments which incorporate elements from both types of governance, to replace the unpopular and central government imposed island councils. Although we are not suggesting the same solution should apply to Vanuatu, it is the exploration of such avenues which should be pursued.

Education. Many respondents saw education, in multiple forms, as a key to remedying governance problems. Education, they thought, should teach people of all backgrounds and ages what it means to be a ni-Vanuatu citizen at the end of the twentieth century. This means understanding rural conditions and skills, as well as how the public service should operate, reducing the gap between Francophones and Anglophones and allowing people in the villages to access learning according to their own needs and specifications. Access to relevant information thus seems to be a key to improving governance.

The emphasis on education is not surprising and seems to stem from various sources.

- People correctly perceive that they are not equipped to deal with their contemporary environment unless they have access to appropriate knowledge and information.
- People in Vanuatu were for a long time deprived of formal education (Schoeffel 1997) leaving them in a vulnerable position with regards to the colonial administration and hampering their understanding of how imported institutions work today.
- Customary systems in many places are breaking down because knowledge and information is not being adequately transmitted.
- People are aware that there is something wrong about how the national government operates but don't feel they have the means

to understand the causes and act upon them fully.

• People see education as key to improving their social and economic conditions.

We feel that education about the principles and values of democracy is essential but should not overshadow or replace education about customary practices.

Consultation. As much as education, improved consultation was seen as an essential factor in overcoming governance breakdowns. Respondents felt that there needed to be new avenues through which the different groups in Vanuatu could participate in the decision-making process at the different levels: village, provincial and national. They were aware that although a process of consultation may be time consuming, it was worth investing the time and enabling everyone to participate. There was also the understanding that it should not be a 'flash in the pan' exercise but an ongoing process which would take into account continuous social, political and economic transformations.

One time national moments such as the Constitutional Planning Committee or the CRP processes are insufficient as they may not be truly inclusive[28] (chiefs for instance have not actively participated in the CRP National Summit although they were invited to do so); their outcomes may be rigid and static (since it will be assumed that because there was a consultation, all have agreed upon the results and these should not be changed), and their results will most likely reflect the interests of the dominant parties of the time.

A wide process of ongoing consultation, we feel, would be more efficient than any combination of institutional reforms, at providing genuine decentralisation. And although we recognise that governments must make decisions about issues, widespread discussion with communities, churches and specialist agencies about these issues would enhance the implementation and effectiveness of decisions and would increase people's stake in them. There is no doubt this strategy is time consuming but it has the advantage of respecting

the rhythms of communities and implicating them in the future, both the short term and the long term. It also should result in better thought-out planning.

The government of Vanuatu is virtually omnipotent in its ownership of services but weak in its distribution of the latter. This is not a fruitful combination and is responsible for people's dependence on and disgruntlement with the government and national politics.

The civil service and national government. Improving the efficiency of the civil service was also seen as a significant way of overcoming breakdowns in governance. Respondents both within and outside of the civil service expressed their frustration at the lack of direction and efficiency within the public service. The 'orthodox' governance agenda, of which the CRP is an illustration in Vanuatu, probably gives adequate attention to this issue. The problems in the public service in Vanuatu are not so complex that they cannot be addressed through better utilisation of well trained staff (there are many qualified agents in the country), additional training and enhanced coordination. However, this hinges on a more rational and responsible attitude of parliamentarians and government ministers.

Gender. Although gender was not thought of by many of our respondents to be a cause of breakdown in governance, it did appear significantly as a remedy to those breakdowns. There was a general feeling that Vanuatu politics and society should be more inclusive of women, at the customary and bureaucratic/parliamentary level, as this would improve the management of public affairs.[29]

Gender equity is addressed by Vanuatu's CRP in its section on social equity in which it makes a commitment to 'incorporate gender awareness and gender analysis into policy-making at all levels', to establish a working group for gender equity and to adopt 'nine benchmarks of the situation of women in Vanuatu' (CRP 1997a:45) from which to monitor the progress towards gender equity.

In their analysis about the position of women

in Vanuatu, the authors of the CRP state that '…the absence of one gender from positions of power is often said to be culturally determined', while the 'Benchmark of the situation of women in Vanuatu 1997' attached as an appendix, asserts that 'custom, religion and culture [are] often used as an excuse for the subjugation of women' and that 'ni-Vanuatu women are generally not considered to be equal to men in customary or contemporary society and are not generally expected or encouraged to participate in decision-making in the family, the community or government' (1997a: Attachment D).

It is true that in certain customary areas the status and role of women is not at all adapted to contemporary circumstances. At the same time, women have not been truly enfranchised through the democratic institutions.[30] Women have little control over the political process and over economic resources. Their status has been lowered through the casting aside of certain practices[31] and by the lack of knowledge about the respect traditionally accorded to them in certain areas.[32] Many politicians have taken on the patriarchal characteristics of the 'west' and 'talk the language of man as though only man existed'. They have become alienated from their own culture and have lost their sense of tradition in which everyone was recognised, where all were remunerated in one way or another, regardless of who they were and where the system provided in a fair manner. As such, matrilineal systems of governance are being deliberately ignored and women's traditional rights have not been translated into the modern political and economic context.

The exclusion or non-consideration of women means that decision makers have become accountable to only half the population and that policies are not based on a realistic assessment of the social and economic production of all ni-Vanuatu. We feel that the governance agenda provides an opportunity to review women's role and status in both 'customary and contemporary society' and to re-assess the political system as a whole in relation to the gender issue.

DEVELOPING THE NAKAMAL WAY

The Nakamal in Vanuatu serves to bring people together. In the village setting, all paths converge on the Nakamal. Traditionally, it also symbolises three distinct and separate places: the meetinghouse for the whole community; the sacred men's house (this is the sacred Nakamal), and the women's sacred dwelling place (which in many places no longer exists). Today there are also urban Nakamal, where people from various horizons meet quietly, drink kava, exchange information and discuss public issues. The idea of the 'Nakamal' then is that it offers the opportunity for different knowledge bases to come together and share information in a common space in which all can participate.

The 'Nakamal way' therefore symbolises a process of dialogue in which knowledge from the different components of society is distributed and commented on to be used in decision-making for the benefit of the community. It is a way of sharing customary and contemporary experiences in an inclusive and educational manner.

Today the Nakamal is both a customary and a re-designed space which accommodates people from different horizons. Nakamal are not the same in structure throughout Vanuatu, but the concept of the Nakamal is widespread. Building on the Nakamal does not mean that Vanuatu must seek absolute consensus, but that its different actors: government, people, private sector, women, men, elders, youth, churches, urban and rural citizens and chiefs, must be given the opportunity to come together and communicate their needs and aspirations.

The Nakamal way can lead the way to appropriate governance in Vanuatu by providing a forum for the examination of best practices, both customary and parliamentary.

CONCLUSION

Governance can be a potentially emancipating idea if its main objective is to promote greater participation of people and increase consultation

in the democratic process. The reduction of the role of government as the dominant instrument of political decision-making and social regulation can allow other actors, and particularly community-based organisations to play a greater role. However, if the main purpose of governance turns out to be to further reduce the functions of government in order to increase the role of the market it will not lead to enhanced decision-making or to stronger democracy.[33] As Futa Helu writes, if the 'new economic orthodoxy' which 'requires everyone to cooperate in the strengthening of the private sector…succeeds, civil society in the Pacific islands countries will experience a further weakening. It could kill it altogether' (Helu 1997:4).

There is also a danger that if the governance agenda focuses on elaborating an 'artificial' civil society which consists primarily of internationally funded NGOs which are more or less localised, and on promoting an élite which is removed from the majority of the people, the governance agenda will further disenfranchise communities which should have direct and organised access to the state.

One of the governance agenda's greatest potentials rests in providing the opportunity to review and transform, where necessary, rules, laws and institutions, both customary and introduced so that they become more relevant to today's context. It is essential to understand the origin and logic of customs, laws and institutions and to judge their appropriateness. Do they contribute to people's wellbeing or are they maintained for other reasons? As Calame and Talmant found in their study of aspects of governance in France, the older laws or regulations were and the less bureaucrats knew about their historical origin, the more the laws were considered sacred or untouchable and the less bureaucrats were willing to modify them. This, they concluded, prevented effective and appropriate decision-making (Calame and Talmant 1997). This situation is by no means unique to France and in Vanuatu's case, is compounded by the legacy of the British and

French administrations, the influence of various Christian churches and the frittering away or deliberate manipulation of customary practices.

It is therefore important to re-examine both customary and parliamentary governance to see how changes can be made to them so that they become more inclusive and relevant to people's needs and aspirations. However changes or adaptations of this nature are contingent on people being able to make sense of their past and of the present. The governance agenda should therefore first and foremost serve as an opportunity for people to acquire the feeling that they have a grasp on their contemporary environment. If people are not able to feel enfranchised through contemporary institutions and practices whether customary or imported, if they 'lack a sense of ownership' of them (Paeniu 1995), they should be modified accordingly.

Unfortunately, at present the governance agenda only involves people who can read and write, who can 'operate with paper' and 'operate from offices'. Even though rural communities, who constitute the majority of people in Vanuatu (80 per cent of the population), will be affected by well-meaning programs carried out with donor assistance, they may not get the opportunity to express their own ideas about the management of public affairs. If the governance agenda fails to provide them with this opportunity, it risks remaining just a 'message from the cold'.

Vanuatu has many of the ingredients necessary to govern itself well, beginning with its knowledge of the best practices of traditional governance, drawn from a diversity of cultural backgrounds from which threads of commonality can be linked and woven into a new fabric of Vanuatu society. These existing best practices are found in the different cultures of Vanuatu, particularly in the egalitarian, achievement-oriented, matrilineal societies, but also in the patrilineal societies that claim hereditary chieftainship (even in such societies there are women of rank and status). We should therefore be looking not only at the politics of hierarchy and status but also at the frameworks of social

organisation which hold the Vanuatu people together.

Vanuatu also upholds Christian values (*in God yumi stanup*), and has an understanding of the basic principles of democracy. It has formally educated decision makers, lawyers, economists and accountants, but so far it has not put serious thought and effort into applying the right skills to the existing skill demands.

All these elements which belong to Vanuatu need to be studied further so that the best practices of the diverse societies can be incorporated into a body of a Vanuatu 'brand' of democracy and Vanuatu 'made' good governance.

NOTES

[1] This is already happening as demonstrated by the frequent references to 'governance' and 'good governance' made by prime ministers and members of their cabinet in countries throughout the Pacific.

[2] Although Peter Larmour states that 'governance is no longer just a word used by the North against the South' (1998:7), we believe the concept has a long way to go before it belongs to the Pacific.

[3] In doing this we hope to address one of the problems of governance which Barrie Macdonald has highlighted: 'One of the most striking features of the literature on governance is the tendency to go beyond country specifics in an attempt to define a set of model characteristics for good governance' (Macdonald 1995:23).

[4] This section will only briefly review governance and does not claim to provide a detailed analysis of the different uses and interpretations of the word.

[5] Leftwich (1993) posed a similar question: 'Why did Western governments begin to take a serious interest in promoting good governance and democratic politics from the late 1980s? I think there have been four main influences: the experience of structural adjustment lending, the resurgence of neo-liberalism in the West, the collapse of official communist regimes and the rise of the pro-democracy movements in the developing world and elsewhere' (p606). These

reasons and others are also developed and discussed by Moore (1993a, 1993b).

[6] Although this is happening in both the developed and developing worlds, its consequences are felt more harshly in the latter due to limited natural and financial resources.

[7] 'The globalisation of the same trends which originally spawned the nation state today call its sovereignty into question. Civil society and the economy are networked via worldwide communications systems, markets and organisations. They have expanded so far beyond national borders that the states, at any rate, are no longer able to control the national society or the national economy as stocks of their own' Habermas (1994).

[8] On the World Bank's (1992) policy statement on 'good government', Mike Moore states that 'one may read it as a set of signals intended to influence the thinking of the rest of the world…about what constitutes good government, and therefore what they [the Bank's client countries] should themselves be doing independently of the Bank' (Moore 1993b:39).

[10] Frischtak (1994:12) also writes: 'In their analysis of fiscal and monetary policy in twenty-five developing countries, Haggard and Kaufman (1989) found no substantial differences between the ability of democratic and authoritarian regimes to implement stable macroeconomic policies. Countries on a transition path from authoritarian to a democratic regime, on the other hand, were found to have considerable difficulty implementing stabilisation policies'.

[11] Helu (1997:5) writes about Tonga that it is 'a country which, in modern times, has never had a civil society worth speaking of'.

[12] One may even be skeptical of this motive. Macdonald (1995:21) for instance, comments: 'A skeptic might ponder whether or not the emerging concern with governance owes as much to the spirit of glasnost, as the World Bank implies, as it does with the collapse of the former Soviet Union and the need for western aid donors to find some moral defence for what

probably remains more of a self-interested, than altruistic, process'.

[13] Authors' translation.

[14] Prior to posing this question, the authors have made clear that it is up to the members of the community engaging in an activity to decide on the results it would like to achieve.

[15] 'Economics require the dismantling of social and cultural specificities and the multiplication of common norms in the name of imposing the equality of conditions for fair competition' (Calame and Talmant 1997:172).

[16] The Prime Minister of Tuvalu explains the interest in governance in the South Pacific thus: '…firstly our donor partners have somewhat got frustrated and certainly fed up with the poor economic performance given by our respective countries despite the millions of dollars poured into our economies every year…and of course with the shift of our development partners' emphasis and interest to other larger regions of the world, following the end of the Cold War, we are increasingly under pressure to perform exceptionally well, making the best use of limited resources that are now being made available to us…' (Paeniu 1997:1).

[17] Macdonald (1998:35) attributes donor interest in governance in the South Pacific to the weakness of 'the capacity of governments to design, formulate and implement policies and discharge functions'.

[18] 'Traditionalism as an ideology emerges at the point where the preservation of a particular social or political practice becomes a matter of political concern, often for an instrumental reason…This is the point at which it becomes possible to reify, objectify, reinvent or appeal to tradition as a political legitimator. More specifically, where this works to provide normative support for established political authoriy, tradition emerges as a vital adjunct to political conservatism. This is because it is implicit in the ideological rendering of tradition that established social and political institutions are seen, not as a set of human constructions that are potentially alterable, but as a set of natural forms which command the automatic allegiance of those who "belong" to them, that is, those who are supposed to follow the leaders' (Lawson 1997:16). See also Otto and Thomas 1997. An example of 'traditionalism' in Vanuatu was when former Minister Barak Sope justified the repeal of the Ombudsman's Act by stating that in Ifira custom it is not acceptable for women to criticise big-men (the Ombudsman is a woman).

[19] For instance claims that journalists should exercise self-censorship in the name of 'cultural sensitivity'. This is a recurring theme brought up by Pacific island ministers at occasions such as Media Freedom Day.

[20] See for example the two-day meeting co-sponsored by the UNDP and Forum Secretariat held at the end of April 1998 (*Fiji Times*, 30 April 1998).

[21] See the multitude of reports published by the Office of the Ombudsman of Vanuatu.

[22] For details of the series of political crises in Vanuatu in 1996, see Ambrose 1996, Ambrose and Siwatibau 1997, and the Editorial of *The Vanuatu Weekly*, 10 March 1998:3.

[23] In our survey we met with 28 representatives of various categories of ni-Vanuatu society: national politicians, national and local chiefs, public servants (national and provincial), non-governmental organisations, the private sector, women's organisations, youth groups (both rural and urban), the media and church leaders. We asked them what they understood by the term governance, what they considered to be 'good' and 'bad' governance, whether they felt there were governance problems in Vanuatu and if so, what were their causes and possible remedies. Interviews were conducted in Bislama, English and French over a 3 week period in November 1997.

[24] At independence, there was an assumption that democracy was an extension or another word for the fairly egalitarian political systems which were in place in Vanuatu before colonialism disrupted them. It was therefore thought that both would blend naturally.

[25] This is also the case in New Caledonia where French authorities have frequently reminded the chiefs that custom is not politics and should not

deal with political matters.

[26] Discussing the Mewun people of Vanuatu, Joan Larcom writes: 'Mewun kastom, which once referred to a repertoire of transferable performances, techniques, and artifacts, is now used to denote a unique culture identified with the Mewun as a group' (Larcom, 1990:177).

[27] This idea is illustrated by Chief Phillip Tepahae's portrayal of the post-independence period as the 'period of politics' and leads him to write that 'politics is the fourth (after the church, education and the colonial administration) confusing element within custom, where customary life is already in danger' (1997:4).

[28] In Vanuatu traditionally, the 'big-man' was nothing without the support of his community. This is illustrated by Chief Willie Bongmatur's expression: 'Class 1 he givem Class 6, Class 6 he no givem Class 1' (those at the top depend on the support of those at the bottom, but those on the bottom don't need those on the top, pers. comm.). Furthermore, traditionally, although the 'big-man' appeared to have power, he was heavily dependent on his supporters and when he accessed material goods it was not for his own household but rather for redistribution to the community. Women, as producers of goods, were important links in this process and their participation in ceremonies was crucial. One of the authors witnessed an induction ceremony for a very high chief which had to be stopped when the chief's wife refused to play her part.

[29] As noted by Grace Molisa, 'The timing for the CRP preparation was very short. Those of us chosen to make input on the Topic (gender) on short notice are already busy people. We were not able to attend every meeting' (1997:11).

[30] The 'Benchmark of the situation of women in Vanuatu, 1997' states that 'The current political party system does not serve the needs of women, discourages their participation in party politics, and needs to undergo a complete review' (CRP 1997a: Attachment D).

[32] For instance, in certain areas of Ambae, during menstruation, women had four or five days of complete leisure and stayed in a house away from their family. They were free of all domestic responsibilities, did not work in the gardens and were fed and looked after. This provided them with an opportunity to have their own space and time. Although in modern times this may seem like an archaic and superstitious custom, it allowed women a freedom which they do not experience today and provided them with respect.

[33] In Ambae and other islands in the north of Vanuatu, the 'Lord' in the 'Lord's Prayer' is referred to as the 'Mother' and the highest chiefs are referred to as 'motherly' people. In the past, in the island of Aneytum, which is in southern Vanuatu, women were chiefs and landowners. This is no longer the case.

[34] For a definition of 'strong democracy', see Barber, 1984.

AUTHOR NOTES

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