

Reflections on the Vanuatu-Australia partnership: delivering for Vanuatu's people and communities

By Australian High Commissioner Heidi Bootle

This week I was honoured to be farewelled in meetings with President of the Republic of Vanuatu His Excellency Nikenike Vurobaravu, Prime Minister the Honourable Charlot Salwai Tabimasmal, Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Foreign Affairs, International Cooperation and External Trade the Honourable Matai Seremaiah Nawalu and at a reception hosted by the Prime Minister. We reflected on the strength of the partnership between our two countries and all we have achieved together over the last few years.

We also reflected on the numerous challenges we have faced side-by-side: COVID-19, then three significant tropical cycles, Judy, Kevin and Lola. Vanuatu knows it can count on Australia. Within hours of TC Lola Prime Minister Salwai and I joined our teams to assess its impact from a Royal Australian Air Force plane. Within days of Judy and Kevin, Australian support, including HMAS Canberra with engineers and helicopters, arrived to assist the most affected areas in Vanuatu.

Under the Vanuatu National Disaster Management Office's coordination and leadership, humanitarian supplies were provided immediately and distributed through partners including FRANZ (our partnership with France and New Zealand). Vanuatu's emergency radio network, delivered in partnership between the Vanuatu Police Force (VPF) and Australia, could maintain communications across Vanuatu throughout the cyclones.

Vanuatu and Australia have been close friends for a long time, since well before Independence. And the ties between First Nations Australians and Melanesian communities stretch back over our shared ocean and over time. The Melanesian Arts and Culture Festival in 2023 stands out for me as an invaluable showcase of our respective Melanesian cultures. Australia's contributions to this milestone event, hosted by Vanuatu in collaboration with the Melanesian Spearhead Group, included supporting Torres Strait Islanders and Australian South Sea Islanders to participate.

To celebrate these shared ties and acknowledge the deep – and at times painful – history between our peoples, we recently invited Hans Ahwang, a Moa Island man from the Torres Strait, to join us in Vanuatu for our national day event. He performed custom dances and sung a traditional language hymn with our Australian High Commission Choir. While he was in Vanuatu, Hans also learned he is descended from Tanna. We were honoured to play a small part in his journey of reconnecting with his Tanna family.

Last week we were pleased to have legendary sportsman Mal Meninga visit us at the Australian High Commission. Mal is an Australian icon and man Tanna through his South Sea Islander heritage – and has long been an inspiration to young Australians and ni-Vanuatu on and off the field. I thank the Vanuatu Tourism Office and FOX Sports Australia for making his second visit to Tanna to reconnect with family possible.

2023 was a big year. Australia's Governor-General His Excellency the Honourable David Hurley AC DSC, Deputy Prime Minister Richard Marles, and Minister for International Development and the Pacific Pat Conroy were some of our high-level visits to Vanuatu. These visits followed closely behind our Foreign Minister Senator Penny Wong who came with a bipartisan delegation to Vanuatu in late 2022.

The momentum has continued into 2024. We have hosted both Deputy Prime Minister Seremaiah and Minister of Internal Affairs, the Honourable Johnny Koanapo Rasou in Australia. They discussed Vanuatu's national priorities with a range of Australian ministers, including Deputy Prime Minister Marles. Our government reaffirmed the importance Australia places on its deep and enduring partnership with Vanuatu. Minister Koanapo's visit, and also the visits by his predecessor Minister Mahe last year and this year, gave labour mobility workers the opportunity to share their experience and feedback. We are working together to improve the scheme and ensure it works for both our countries.

What makes our Vanuatu-Australia partnership grow from strength to strength is a commitment to action and delivering for Vanuatu's people and communities. Our partnership is not only about what we do and deliver together, but how we do it. The infrastructure we partner to deliver – roads, water supply facilities, health centres, market houses, school buildings, courthouses and police posts – is climate-resilient and built to last. It is also built in true partnership, supporting local communities and economies, and building local capacity and skills by using local businesses wherever possible.

For example, we delivered a new 3.76km climate resilient road in Sola, connecting the airport, schools, hospitals and the Torba provincial headquarters. Footpaths and access ramps allow children to get to school and people living with disabilities to safely access services. Delivered in partnership and constructed by local contractors, it is the largest concrete road in Vanuatu. Climate-resilient infrastructure investments, like the road in Sola, and like the Isangel Road Loop and Imanaka Bridge which Prime Minister Salwai and I recently launched on Tanna, connect people to opportunities and boost service delivery throughout Vanuatu.

Last year, we opened the new police station and courthouse on Epi, which has more than doubled the number of Vanuatu Police Force officers stationed there. Vanuatu and Australia have partnered in the policing and justice sectors for over two decades. We both value accountable, trusted police forces that keep our people and communities safe, as well as independent and transparent justice systems that uphold the rule of law. Our shared values, including equality of opportunity, democracy, and a resilient, open economy, are what make our partnership work.

Earlier this year, Prime Minister Salwai and I laid the foundation stone for the Port Vila Central Police Station. On Santo, we handed over the Tiroas Barracks redevelopment to the Vanuatu Police Force (VPF), complete with new facilities designed and delivered in partnership to boost the Vanuatu Mobile Force (VMF) capabilities. While on Santo, we announced a further A\$4 million (approximately VT320 million) partnership for response and early recovery from Tropical Cyclone Lola. This will support Vanuatu's pressing roads and infrastructure, health, education, food security and telecommunications priorities.

We will soon handover the Cook Barracks in Port Vila - an impressive piece of infrastructure for the VMF which comes with full maintenance package. The VMF's capability demonstration for the Prime Minister earlier this week showcased the VMF's security, medical, engineering and band skills, and the state-of-the-art facility and strong Vanuatu-Australia partnership that is supporting this capability, including to ensure disaster readiness. This week we also commemorated ANZAC Day and those who sacrificed their lives for the freedom we enjoy today. Our interoperability is vital as we stand together now and into the future to protect the peace and prosperity of our shared Blue Pacific.

I want to acknowledge the important role of chiefs, and of kastom. We have been contributing to the Malvatumauri Council of Chiefs' rebuild of their iconic nakamal. Through our investment in the Vanuatu Skills Partnership, this rebuilding effort will also upskill youth from across all six provinces of Vanuatu. Trainees will complete on-the-job training and earn a formal qualification in building and construction.

We have heard Vanuatu's priorities also of health, education and skills. We will make sure we deliver through our Vanuatu-Australia partnership and make changes rapidly where we need to evolve. We are supporting Vanuatu to fast-track the Hospital Master Plan to ensure infrastructure and facilities for Vanuatu's six hospitals are fit to deliver essential primary healthcare services. Our education partnership is providing critical classroom resources and supporting the Curriculum Improvement plan, to provide teachers and principals the necessary skills to improve literacy and numeracy.

I take this opportunity to thank Vanuatu for its leadership on climate change. Australia recognises that climate change is the number one threat to the livelihood, wellbeing and security of the people of Vanuatu and our shared Pacific region. Australia is making big changes to decarbonise our economy and we are working with partners to scale up global action. As members of the Pacific Islands Forum, we have seen the power of our collective voice – and we look forward to partnering to co-host COP31 if our bid is successful.

Our security partnership is longstanding, dating back to 1980 and before, and equips Vanuatu to secure its own future, including when natural disasters strike. Later this year, we look forward to the return of RVS *Takuare* and delivery of Vanuatu's new landing craft. Our strong partnership allows us to respond quickly to Vanuatu's needs and priorities. Last year this enabled us to deliver over VT9 billion in development assistance.

Our new economic recovery investment, including direct budget support, supports the Vanuatu Government to boost services to the people and respond to priorities in trade, aviation, the productive sector, cybersecurity and so on. Our work together through PACER Plus is yielding results. We expect to see more products and new markets to open for Vanuatu, especially with the noticeable success of 60,000 kilograms of kava exported to Australia already.

Another area of immense growth is our immigration and border partnership. Our Immigration Office in Port Vila opened last year, and we have significantly reduced visa processing times. The closer partnership between Vanuatu officials and our Australian Border

Force officers is building understanding and trust: when our systems are more familiar with each other, we all benefit.

Vanuatu's participation in Australia's Pacific Engagement Visa Program will further deepen links between our nations, our people and our economies through a permanent residence pathway for Vanuatu citizens. Our labour mobility partnership shows how our economies, workforces and communities' benefit from these deeper exchanges.

Vanuatu's most valuable resource is its people. More than 500 ni-Vanuatu have studied through Australia Awards and gone on to drive economic and social development in various sectors and fields in Vanuatu. Visionary men and women working together are needed for Vanuatu to achieve its goals, with a strong focus on good governance, transparency and strong leadership. I look forward to more strong women taking up leadership roles across government, business and civil society. Tugeta yumi stanap.