

Case Study: Creating shared-value economic opportunity in remote Vanuatu

DFAT Skills Program generates business opportunity, while preserving traditional craft and addressing gender and disability inclusion.

In Vetimboso Village, a two hour truck drive from Sola on the island of Vanua Lava, in Torba, the northernmost province of Vanuatu, Victoria is meticulously preparing her signature handmade ‘half-moon’ cane basket. In March, Victoria joined an initiative that is reviving and preserving authentic traditional craft.



Image: Half-moon cane basket



Victoria in Vetimboso Village, Torba Province

Victoria has been profoundly deaf since birth. She has never been to school or participated in formal training, Victoria’s mother, however, has passed on to her a precious gift: her cultural skills and heritage. While Victoria is already an exceptional weaver, access to markets and understanding of consumer demand from a remote village have always been barriers to opportunity for Victoria.

In Vetimboso Village, with a burgeoning young population and a need to pay for school fees, sustainable incomes are integral to resisting urban drift and building resilient communities. The new handicraft initiative is offering an approach that allows for economic opportunity while accommodating village life, and creating value with these timeless skills.

Through the Australian Government funded Vanuatu Skills Partnership, and as part of the ‘Skills for Handicraft’ work-stream, a suite of integrated activities are delivered collaboratively with the Vanuatu Department of Industry. All skills activities are coordinated through the locally embedded Torba Skills Centre, under the Ministry of Education and Training. The work stream combines coaching, workshops and mentoring on product design and business skills based in the community, as well as strengthening mechanisms required for a path to market.

Before training commenced a community inventory documented the existing tribal designs, skills, materials and practitioners to protect these endangered cultural assets and capture baseline data. Product design and development workshops have then aimed to introduce simple tools to improve quality, consistency and efficiency for cane basket and carving production, while exposure to product photos has inspired new ideas in design and functionality. The use of sustainable natural dye is being revitalised with the goal of promoting an all-natural colour product range.



Images: Experimenting with new sustainable natural dye techniques.

As well as product design, the trainings are skilling artisans in business. These clients, along with Victoria, have begun learning basic income and expenditure processes as well as establishing pricing structures in the value chain, essential for agency in business to business dealings. Business skills coaching is challenging with low levels of language, literacy and numeracy - another area that the work stream has begun to address.

To support market access, the Torba Skills Centre with the Department of Industry and Cooperatives and the Provincial Tourism Office have spearheaded the establishment of the Torba Handicraft Centre nearby to Sola Airport. As a co-operative business, the Torba Handicraft Centre is owned by the producers and will operate to support product distribution and sales.



Handmade products from the province of Torba are famous for their unique use of wild cane which offers a point of difference. Initial market feedback on product design has been positive with potential customers waiting for an official release of Vetimboso's first craft catalogue. Product launch timing is crucial though as the work stream develops market-ready product while simultaneously building market access pathways along the supply chain - producer, wholesaler, retailer. Now numbering 26 participants, with 16 females and 10 males, the Vetimboso craft people have established a Village Handicraft Club that works together every Friday. They each plan to open individual bank accounts and commence formal business operations, supported by the skills initiative. With a small population in a remote location, artisans cannot compete on price with imported mass production. Instead product value is being generated by promoting the unique handmade traditional craft. Generating shared value lies within the intersection of maximising the competitiveness of the unique skills in product design, while simultaneously advancing the economic and social conditions in the community - ultimately giving Victoria's and Vetimboso's unique creations a path to market.