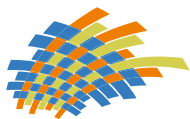


The People's Plan in action

Handicrafts and culture driving change in Torba



VANUATU
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INTRODUCTION

The Vanuatu Skills Partnership coordinates and implements a range of demand-driven skills development activities through four provincial Skills Centres, under the Ministry of Education and Training, in Malampa, Sanma, Tafea and Torba provinces. Through the support of Torba Skills Centre, the Vetimboso Handicraft Association (VHA) and Vetimboso community on Vanualava in Torba Province have been accessing skills development in handicrafts production since March 2018. Through an integrated, community-led approach, a number of positive outcomes and achievements have already been identified by producers and their community.

This case story uses outcome harvesting methodology¹ to share the experiences of the handicraft producers, community members, Torba Skills Centre staff and Industry Coaches. Highlighting practical links between national policy and community action, the strength-based approach used in Vetimboso frames the handicraft industry under the three pillars of: Society & Culture, Environment and Economy as outlined in Vanuatu's national guide to sustainable development, Vanuatu 2030: The People's Plan², and provides key learning opportunities for the Partnership and wider investment in the Handicraft sector.



¹ https://www.betterevaluation.org/en/plan/approach/outcome_harvesting

² Vanuatu 2030: The Peoples Plan- National Sustainable Development Plan 2016-2030 Department of Strategic Policy, Planning and Aid Coordination Republic of Vanuatu Port Vila, November 2016

BACKGROUND

Through the Torba Skills Centre, a Handicraft Industry Coach was engaged to work with handicraft producers, the wider Vetimboso community in a series of workshops and one-on-one coaching activities to support customer-driven designs based on local weaving designs and available materials. In the initial stages of this process, the VHA was formed by producers to help galvanise clients into a working group. This process began with an initial craft inventory which is a facilitated participatory process that works with members of the community and the producers in completing an initial joint analysis of the traditional knowledge of handicrafts framed within the pillars of Society & Culture, Environment and Economy.

The inventory is a living document that is owned by the community. It identifies their community and cultural assets in relation to handicrafts as well as any perceived threats and risks to sustainable and survival of these assets. This holistic approach was facilitated by the coach, who supported the community to identify skills and knowledge they have and to identify those that are at risk of becoming lost, thereby alerting the community to areas which they felt were worth reviving and maintaining. The information was then used by the producers and Industry Coach to guide handicraft product development opportunities.

The results of the inventory formed the baseline of each producer's situation prior to participation in skills development activities. The inventory will be reviewed annually by the community who can add or update information as change occurs. In addition to the community inventory, research was also conducted in online museums to retrieve records of handicrafts from the area that may no longer be produced.

Since this initial inventory activity, a total of four training inputs and visits by the Industry Coach and the Torba Skills Centre Provincial Training Coordinator (PTC) have taken place, as well as three follow-up visits by the PTC and a local Industry Coach to check on progress and confirm workshop

logistics arrangements. Activities have been conducted with the 28 producers: 16 women, 12 men including two people with disabilities (a woman and a man).

Concurrently, in 2018 the Torba Skills Centre has supported the development of the Torba Handicraft Cooperative (THC). The THC was initiated by producers and the Provincial Government in mid-2018 and promotes the sale of quality, sustainably produced carvings, jewellery and woven goods. It aims to function as a market hub that sells the products and strengthens the producers' access to other domestic and international markets.



Handicraft producers in Vetimboso, Torba Province

Skills development support activities during 2018 have contributed to quick and positive early social, environmental and economic changes within the VHA and the wider community in Vetimboso. The community's craft inventory provides a baseline and is the basis for monitoring progress achieved through the skills development support. A review of the inventory is planned for early 2019 at which time progress against each of the pillars will be assessed. However, specific outcomes resulting from these skills development activities implemented during 2018 have already been identified by the community, Industry Coach and PTC. These outcomes and the factors that have contributed to them are detailed below. Outcomes have been numerically referenced to the anticipated Intermediate Outcomes of the Vanuatu Skills Partnership.

Outcome 3 Increased flexible delivery of skills development activities through the provision of on-site skills development activities in both central and remote locations such as Vetimboso village and the VHA.

Outcome 5 Increased representation of women, people with disabilities and their interests in the skills system through the participation of 16 women and two people with disabilities in Vetimboso who had never previously had access to skills training.

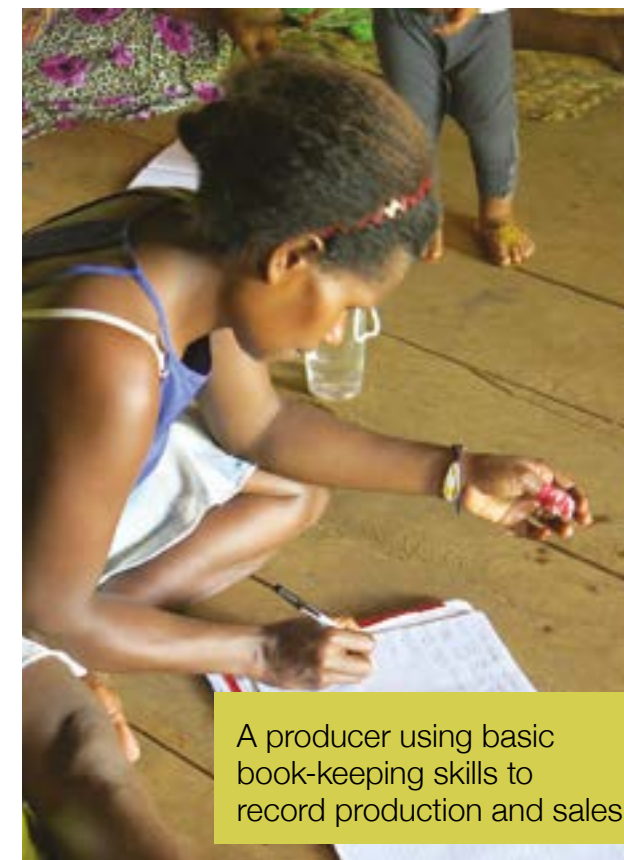
Outcomes 7,8,9 Improvements in the business, employment opportunities of the clients through skills development and business development inputs leading to increased income and improvements in livelihood options.

Outcome 10 Improved market access for producers in target value chains through working with THC to access new market opportunities.

The use of the participatory approach to create the craft inventory baseline has ensured that the goals of the corresponding skills development activities include a focus on sustaining traditions and culture rather than being entirely driven by economic and business factors. This holistic approach is culturally located. It is based upon, and relies on, community knowledge and assets. The craft inventory process aligns and supports the foundational commitments of the Vanuatu Skills Partnership: Local values-based leadership, Melanesian values and social inclusion.

Increased production and sales

As part of the skills development activities implemented during 2018 the production and sales of the groups were monitored. Six months after baseline data was collected and initial workshops were held, the production and sales of the producers had increased. Since the collection of baseline data, production in weaving, carving and jewellery increased by 94%, 56% and 67% respectively, and volume of items sold improved by 96%, 54% and 68%. The large increase in production, particularly in weaving, is attributed to increases in orders and improved market access gained through the producer hub, the THC. During this time the producers have begun to improve their skills and confidence in book-keeping and opened new bank accounts, indicating greater commitment and improved understanding of their businesses.



A producer using basic book-keeping skills to record production and sales

Diversified employment and livelihoods opportunities

Due to their increased production, the VHA producers in October 2018 earned approximately 280,000VT from handicraft sales. This represents an increase of 20% from sales in August 2018. As production increases, community members have identified growth in income generating opportunities in complementary areas. For example, weavers are now purchasing turmeric produced in the village for dye. Due to the increase in demand, one community member increased his turmeric production and income by selling units at 100VT each to association producers. He is likely to continue to sell as demand continues to increase.

The producers shared examples of positive outcomes flowing from the increase in income including greater “peace of mind”, with some member paying debts and school fees or solar panels to ensure clean, low-cost energy for their families. Others have invested more in their business through the procurement of new hand tools. These tools assist carvers to increase productivity and the quality of the items. Many are now also spending less time to produce higher standards of products. Other members have invested in additional business opportunities such as purchasing cement for renovations to guesthouses or tools for livestock farming. One female member of the association who has a disability, was regarded as a model in diversifying her activities, from weaving to livestock farming, by using part of her earnings to purchase a pig wire.

Financial literacy

The skills development activities have also focused on the financial literacy of the members of both VHA and THC. Members have developed simple book-keeping records, through basic financial literacy training, which has helped them track increasing income, profit and customer information. By recording and reviewing this data, members are now better able to understand profit and pricing, and identify customer trends that helps to inform decisions on production and marketing strategies.

Members opening bank accounts

In the past, community members had little need for, and did not see the relevance or value of, accessing and using the services provided by banks. Since the growth in their business, VHA members have been seen going more often to the bank in the provincial capital, Sola, four hours walk away. Coaching reports have highlighted a significant increase in the number of members with new bank accounts. Initial assessments in March 2018 found that only three of the 28 members had bank accounts while recent data collection (November) has shown that 21 new bank accounts have now been opened by members. An estimated 79,000VT was deposited by clients in Vetimboso into their new bank accounts in the first month.

Due to the increased demand for banking services in Vetimboso, the National Bank of Vanuatu is now planning to schedule monthly visits for rural banking in 2019 to the village providing financial management opportunities for more members of the community.

Increased market access

The THC has provided an avenue for the marketing of Vetimboso products as well as the opportunity for VHA to create a brand and a marketing story. Building on knowledge from workshops and data from sales, VHA chose to direct focus to high-value products for “niche” markets rather than the lower-end and cheaper “souvenirs” market. By aiming produce at a higher price point and more exclusive clientele that to date includes Port Vila resorts and a high-end retail store, the Australian High Commission, and the Vanuatu High Commission in New Zealand, the VHA is beginning to establish a reputation for high quality products within a unique market.

Being a Torba-based organisation, the THC is able to create a greater level of trust among its members. The increase in sales, quality and orders has also reinforced greater mutual trust between producers and the THC. Accurate book-keeping by the THC assists in proving sales/income for individual co-op members. A large portion of THC income comes from Vetimboso sales through the addition of a 25% commission. From June to October 2018 THC earned 157,000VT through VHA sales, representing 471,000VT in sales for VHA.



His Excellency, the Vanuatu High Commissioner to New Zealand, proudly displaying products from Vetimboso in Wellington

SOCIETY (SOCIAL & CULTURAL) CHANGE

Personal change

There has been a noticeable and positive change in motivation, enthusiasm, self-confidence and pride of the producers in the months since skills development activities through the Torba Skills Centre commenced. The Industry Coach observed that prior to these skills development activities, the producers were somewhat cynical about whether training would in fact be of benefit to them. However, after the first workshop participants were very excited about what they learnt, and the subsequent improvements in the quality and quantity of products made and increase in income earned.

Producer motivation and confidence was further encouraged by the fact that the Industry Coach “purchased” these initial items from the producers in recognition of their effort and work. This helped serve as a powerful motivator. These items were taken to the Vanuatu Skills Partnership Head Office in Port Vila to be displayed as examples not for commercial sale. This direct and immediate positive return helped ensure greater participation at the next workshop with more people wanting to join and the number of producers and members of the association has grown quickly. This motivation and self-confidence has been further strengthened by the ability to sell products to key “Big Men” in Vanuatu and to participants in national festivals and forums.

Members association

During workshops, producers were encouraged to establish the VHA and to meet weekly on a Friday to weave together and build knowledge while simultaneously mitigating jealousies or conflicts. During meetings members discussed orders and checked on progress while promoting unity and a supportive environment. The meetings are an important part of the association being seen as a members’ cooperative where all work closely together.

Members meet and share good news or challenges, or any problems or questions they have about their work and business. Weekly meetings offer the opportunity for members and the Torba Skills Centre PTC to communicate any upcoming activities and also monitor any potential risks such as tension between members or other issues, such as family violence.

The village Chief has visited the Torba Skills Centre and the weaving workshop location on several occasions and is publically supportive of it, the committee and members. The VHA executive committee is made up of women reflecting the high number of women members. Membership in the association is seen as a privilege as there is now a large community demand including family members, men, children and youth, helping out in the production.

New membership has currently been restricted until infrastructure for the work space is confirmed and commitment from new members to the VHA policies are confirmed. The absence of a meeting facility sometimes proved difficult during bad weather; however, the community is considering building better shelter for the meeting. The association has also recently secured rental of a large community building for weekly meetings and production. The building was secured for one year through a consignment of baskets.



Producers, Bernard and Vanessa, proudly displaying their handicraft products in Vetimboso



Kids Club

As many women attend association meetings with their children an informal babysitting arrangement was established to enable mothers with babies to fully participate and contribute during the meetings. A more formal Kids Club has now been proposed to be developed in 2019 to arrange care for children while producers meet together and weave. The Kids Club was also an idea to stimulate interest in handicrafts at an early age, and support transfer of traditional skills and knowledge to the next generation.

People with disabilities

Through participation in skills development activities there have been a number of positive changes for participants with disabilities both in terms of community perceptions and personally for the individuals involved. Prior to participating in these activities and becoming members of VHA the two members (a young woman and a young man) with disabilities had not been to school, and did not regularly leave the house or engage with or contribute to community activities. Through targeted, one-on-one coaching, and peer support from other participants, these two people have been able to participate equally alongside others. One participant is deaf, and as there is no sign language in Vanuatu, participants and the coaches have used modelling and demonstration to communicate and share information. Now, through recognition of their skills and abilities, and due to the positive economic change gained from sales, these two members have a sense of pride and now see themselves and their future differently.

"Bernard was ALWAYS first to arrive – usually at 7am and Victoria was usually the next! Their confidence continues to grow"

Industry Coach 2018

The community also views them differently. The female producer who is deaf is a talented weaver and is now recognised by the association as "the top producer and earner" in the group. A decision was made by the VHA's members not to compete with this producer who produces a unique beaded jewellery, so to ensure he has a dedicated market for his product. Through regular interaction with people with disabilities the Vetimboso community has also become more inclusive. An example of this is the children of association members who attend the informal Kids Club and who were previously scared or unsure of members with disabilities now love to play and dance with them.

School and education

Additional positive social outcomes include the planned reintroduction of art and crafts into the primary school curriculum. Having seen the importance and value of this skill for the community, the local teachers and Area Secretary are planning to reintroduce craft as a subject. The Torba Provincial Government Training Board as well as the Provincial Technical Advisory Committee have now agreed to reintroduce craft as subject in 2019.

The increase in income for members and community members has added to positive social impacts. School fees have been paid on time securing education, and solar panels have been purchased making lighting cheaper and more readily accessible. This, in turn, provides children and families with safe and secure lighting in their homes at night and makes it easier for kids to complete their homework and reading.



Cultural rejuvenation

The participatory and community-led approach used to develop the community’s cultural inventory is a tool for cultural revitalization which was endorsed by the previous Director of the Vanuatu National Cultural Centre, now the Minister for Foreign Affairs.¹ In Vetimboso the process of creating the cultural handicraft inventory has identified local designs and products that were at risk of being lost, and it has raised awareness of the high value of unique and authentic Torba products. The inventory has also helped the community to identify traditional materials for products that they have not been used for some time including the use of locally produced turmeric dye.

The inventory has promoted a discussion on traditional skills and knowledge and given community members a sense of pride and ownership as well as a responsibility for their traditional products and local natural resources. The elderly members of the association now realise they have an obligation to pass on and strengthen the continuation of traditional skills. The THC, PTC and Industry Coach noted positive feedback from the community, other communities as well as the general public on the range and quality of products produced and the styles of traditional craft utilized in this new and modern way.

1 Ralph Regenvanu, Director, Vanuatu National Cultural Council First International Symposium on Heritage and Culture of East Timor, Timor Leste, 2009

Traditional knowledge

The pride and motivation from the community has led to an increase in younger producers. Five new young carvers joined the producer group during the second workshop in June 2018. These aspiring carvers are now being mentored and trained by the group elders. In addition, four new young weavers joined the association and are being supported by the more experienced members. The number of community members now practicing these traditional skills has increased, and the age range from younger to older members has also widened and more people are now willing to share skills with others in their community. In 2019 the plan is to reach younger people through the introduction of jewellery. Further work with the school and introduction of crafts in the curriculum will continue to strengthen the development of traditional knowledge.

Cultural respect

Leadership within the community is supportive of the producers’ approach to cultural respect and revitalization. This has strengthened the location of skills development activities as part of cultural and traditional practices beyond just being about ‘money making’ opportunities. The community Chief and Area Secretary have attended workshops to encourage and support these activities and skills sharing within the community. These leaders have publically reminded producers of their responsibility to pass on cultural heritage to the next generation by engaging and encouraging youth and younger children to help and learn.

While respecting traditional and cultural icons local to Torba, the process of product development has allowed producers to adapt them for contemporary markets and sales. For example, the producers are adapting styles and sizes of traditional carved products such as nalot knives and woven products including chicken baskets, so they appeal to both visitors/tourists and other community members.

ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGE

The increase in production in local handicrafts does create risk of potential negative environmental outcomes. The process of mapping all raw materials in the inventory helps to mitigate this risk as it helps producers and community members to see the list of all materials used and their availability from “smol” to “planti”. The cultural inventory helps the community to recognise and monitor the risk and to determine ways to work together to find solutions to manage and protect the local natural resources.

Sustainability strategies have been introduced for at-risk materials, such as limiting harvest, replanting, and increasing prices on larger products to encourage the sale of smaller designs. Natural and traditional dyes such as turmeric and red seed have been reintroduced through this process and opportunities for other products such as bamboo jewellery or cow bone carvings have been discussed. The Chief has also promoted environmental protection and risk management of natural resources during his attendance at the workshops.

The Provincial Government Training Board and the Provincial Technical Advisory Committee have recognised the potential for Torba handicrafts and its impact for the Province. There is acknowledgement of the need for a long term plan to ensure the ongoing development of skills required to produce their handicraft, and at the same time managing the risks associated with the natural resource availability.

Additional environmental outcomes from the increase in production and income include the purchase and use of solar panels within the community. The use of solar power not only promotes safer and healthy livelihoods for community members, it also reduces the use of generators, candles, kerosene lamps and wood fires. This promotes sustainable energy and a reduction in greenhouse gases emissions.



Key contributors

The core people and groups that drove this initiative and supported positive change include:

THE VETIMBOSO COMMUNITY

It is not only producers who have led to this positive change, but rather it has been a full community effort. There is strong commitment and engagement from all members of the community and from leadership through the Chief and Area Secretary.

THE TORBA SKILLS CENTRE PROVINCIAL TRAINING COORDINATOR (PTC)

Initial interactions between the Industry Coach and the producers were facilitated by the PTC who is well known and has strong and positive relations in the community. The PTC took time to get to know the community beyond completing his immediate responsibilities in making arrangements and logistics for training activities. This encouraged a strong relationship and assisted the Industry Coach to build further rapport.

THE INDUSTRY COACH

Despite coming from overseas, the Industry coach approached the community and producers in a participatory and locally-led way. The Coach's ability to introduce skills development within a community driven model, framed by priorities in the three pillars of the People's Plan, ensured community and participant buy-in and ownership. Her approach in working closely with the PTC, while understanding the industry locally and from an international perspective, has proven highly valuable. Her understanding of the potential market encouraged producers to aim high for niche markets that are seeking and respect culturally unique products.

THE ASSOCIATION AND ITS MEMBERS AND PRODUCERS

The commitment to product development, production and unity between members has been key in contributing to the impressive positive changes. This commitment has been further maximised through ongoing regular meetings and in the future will be reinforced through the planned recruitment of a Manager for the Association in early 2019 to support procurement and work with THC.

Key strategies used

While support provided through the Vanuatu Skills Partnership and the Torba Skills Centre working with the handicraft sector in Torba is still in its infancy, significant outcomes have been achieved. The key strategies employed to achieve these early positive outcomes for participants and the community include:

- Fostering of commitment, cooperation and motivation from the Association and producers.
- Engagement with senior community leaders, importantly the Chief.
- Access to skills and product development that align with community-led assets, followed by an understanding of the potential for increased demand.
- Access to appropriate markets – the focus on “niche”, high-end customers means that there is potential for smaller-sized scale of production for higher unit price.
- Developing a brand and product identity that is strong and that links to a story and a sense of pride within the community.
- Access to tools needed for high quality work that are not easy to procure locally. For example: sharp clippers to improve finishing quality on vine baskets, sandpaper and mini files for carving.
- PTC and Industry Coach engagement with the producers and community as ‘facilitators’ employing a culturally located approach that reinforces local leadership and Melanesian values.
- PTC, Industry Coach and community identifying and overcoming collectively challenges to inclusion so that everyone can participate, regardless of gender or disability.

Additional skills development training and support inputs are expected to be provided in Vetimboso through the Torba Skills Centre/ Partnership in the future to help improve written and financial literacy and value adding of products. The overwhelming positive reaction from the community and the generation of what is seen as a huge amount of income is already a success story.

Key lessons learned

Respecting that each location and sector varies, this approach of creating a community owned inventory is unique in the current context. The early signs are that it has contributed to positive changes that have taken place within a short time period. This indicates that there is merit in the Vanuatu Skills Partnership and other provincial Skills Centres considering wider application of a community owned inventory approach in other locations and sectors. Through the implementation of this approach to skills development, a number of specific lessons have been identified by the Skills Centre and Vanuatu Skills Partnership staff:

- Skills Centres, Government Partners and Industry Coaches/trainers need to provide time to understand and invest in processes that promote and support community participation and engagement. This will foster locally led identification of the strengths, gaps and priorities for skills development and will help ensure stronger local commitment to and ownership of the process, and better results.
- There are benefits in fully exploring and understanding the presence of local design and craft assets within a community and its culture and then using this as the basis for expanding and introducing new designs and product development, rather than basing skills development on existing market demand only.
- The positive changes from skills development outcomes are broader than business and economic results, and in fact for some communities the wider cultural and social impacts may be as important or even more important than the income earned.

“It is pride in their culture and not only the money that motivates and creates the commitment of the producers and the community”

Provincial Training Coordinator,
Torba Skills Centre

- The benefits of driving new business ideas and opportunities in complementary sectors, such as turmeric farming, is important for community buy-in and diversifying the local economy.
- The presence and successful participation by people with disabilities in community skills development activities is a powerful trigger for the positive shift in awareness and attitude of the community members, and in strengthening confidence and change in attitude and self-perception of the people with disabilities.

Significance and implications for the Vanuatu Skills Partnership

This approach to framing skills development needs in a community-led inventory holds many implications and opportunities for the Partnership and the work of the Skills Centres.

- It is an integrated, participatory, approach that starts with the community and enables its members to identify collective strengths, assets and desires and helps to reinforce and strengthen their knowledge, ownership and culture. There is already interest and demand for this approach in other Skills Centres and among other partners. For example, the 2019 Partnership Implementation Framework for the Handicraft Sector between the Vanuatu Skills Partnership and the Department of Industry includes a request for a similar approach to be tried in Malekula.
- The approach to skills development highlights links to the Vanuatu Skills Partnership's foundational commitments of social inclusion, local values-based leadership and Melanesian values. Having goals and aims beyond income generation are important for rural Vanuatu communities.
- The potential to reach high-end markets and ‘Big Men’, while recognising this might not be possible for all products in all situations, is an interesting approach that reinforces the sense of value and pride for the producer and the community more widely, and further increases motivation and commitment. There is potential to consider this approach in additional productive sectors and provinces.
- A community inventory is a valid, and practical approach which provides a baseline and process for monitoring the contribution that the Vanuatu Skills Partnership and the Skills Centres make to economic, social, cultural and environmental impact over time.

Data collection and analysis:

Drawing on outcome harvest methodology, data sources for this case story included: Torba Skills Centre coaching completion reports, inventory recordings, business records, activity reports, the Torba Skills Centre photo library, interviews, observations and anecdotal evidence.

The analysis of this qualitative data and quantitative data provides the basis for the findings presented in this case study.



