

Program 11: Information, Education and Media

Access to information can contribute to good governance. But there are many obstacles to sharing information, including cultural, political and financial constraints on the media and education systems. What role can the media, community theatre and education play in raising civic awareness?

PEARSON VETUNA: Hi, I'm Pearson Vetuna from Radio Australia and it's 'Time to Talk'. Today in our series on governance issues in the Pacific, we look at 'Education and Information'.

SHARON BAGHWAN ROLLS: People want to know deep down they do, people were able to be manipulated because of their lack of knowledge, that just shows we've got to really keep people informed, and if the government's not doing it .

STEVENSON LIU: People come to realise the importance of media, people come to quote democracy as something that allows for freedom even though some people may not know the real meaning of democracy, they look at free media, the way they could express themselves in newspaper, editorial columns and call up talk-back shows.

ALFRED SASAKO: In the case of radio in small island countries and particularly here in the Solomons because your outreach is so widespread you almost have a monopoly here therefore the extent of the power that you have in terms of disseminating information but also providing that information which sort of enhances the understanding of the people about what to expect from their government, from their members of parliament.

VETUNA: Former journalist, media adviser and government minister in the Solomon Islands, Alfred Sasako.

ALFRED SASAKO: In the Solomons we have adopted the Westminster system. One of the things that we as a democracy sort of valued and cherished over the years is the need for checks and balances. And so the media, for example, has a very important role to play. Media is the agent of change in terms of shaping government policy.

VETUNA: But how powerful can the media be when literacy remains a challenge in several countries?

Grace Molisa is the President of Vanuatu's National Council of Women.

GRACE MOLISA: We are basically an oral society so until we can say that we are fully and properly literate many notions that are contained in constitutions and laws and conventions will not be readily accessible to the ordinary citizen. So the level, quality and rate of attitudinal change will

depend on the access to quality information, access to education.

VETEUNA: And for many people access to education is still a luxury.

PASTOR PAIAPORU: If somebody got ten pikininis in a family then you know that those ten people do not know how to read and write. It's growing, it seems that the school fees are getting higher and higher and most people are neglecting their children to go to, they do not let their children go to schools. Perhaps in one village you get about five or six families they do not send their children to school because they find it difficult to pay school fees.

KADLES SAMUEL: Hemi tru, long mifela mani hemi very hard long Vanuatu. Laif blong mifela hemi very expensive. Olsem mi bai mi telim mi gat four pikinini so mi lukim hemi big ekspensiv from taim long Grade 1 and Grade 3 no moa hemi kosim mi long 30,000 finis long First Term. First term long second born hemi already 32,000 vatu. Tokabaut ol term Form 5 hemi already 25,000 so hemi big lot of money long mi.

VETUNA: Kadles Samuel, a working mother of four from Santo, who struggles to pay schools fees and Pastor Paiaporu from Luganville who runs a literacy program for the Presbyterian Church.

HENRI VIRA: It's a fact that in Melanesia, in Vanuatu for example, there's 66 per cent of the adult population is actually illiterate, meaning that they cannot read and write.

VETUNA: Henri Vira, coordinator of the PIANGO secretariat in Port Vila. PIANGO is the Pacific Islands Association of Non-Government Organisations.

HENRI VIRA: I think in the Solomons it's somewhere around the same region - 66 to 70 per cent. It's a big stumbling block to people understanding. You have to really provide ways and means and things that people can really, really understand, really simplify whatever it is. Only you talk about a system for example, a legal system for example it's really, really difficult to be able to explain to the normal person, especially somebody who doesn't know how to read and write.

VETUNA: In Seaside Tongoa, one of Port Vila's settlements, not many kids go to school. Some of them attended a short-term literacy class run by Daniel Lukai, an unemployed youth.

DANIEL LUKAI: We made it a three-hour day, only in the morning then afternoon they're free. Most of the time they spend the time fishing. We have start a literacy class then we need help from government to complete it because it will help them to do something for their own.

JOHN NONGORR: One of the biggest problems in Papua New Guinea is education. Papua New Guinea has not put enough resources into education.

VETUNA: Constitutional law expert Dr. John Nongorr from Papua New Guinea.

JOHN NONGORR: The education system actually has gone from bad to worse recently. This is I'm talking about formal education. Formal education is a long way off but that is the key to any advancement of any country, not only in Papua New Guinea, and I don't mean Papua New Guinea should receive education so that all of them go to colleges or universities, but education to understand how the state institution structures work, simply. A simple understanding or rudimentary understanding of it at that level will actually make, contribute to accountability, good governance and the sort of issues that are finding currency right throughout the world now.

VETUNA: Good governance will only come about if people understand the system that governs them. The challenge is to start civic awareness as early as possible.

MARIE NOELLE FERRIEUX-PATTERSON: There are probably maybe about 80 per cent of the people who cannot go to secondary school, so there can be a very strong action put through the Minister of Education to introduce in a curriculum as early as primary school all over the country some courses on the citizen, the Constitution, the democracy to explain to the students early about the system and how to situate themselves and to a student that automatically a member of parliament is not the big chief that everyone has got to accept and not question, that he is in fact a servant of theirs, someone that they elect.

VETUNA: Former Ombudsman Marie-Noelle Ferrieux-Patterson who established the Vanuatu Chapter of Transparency International in 2001.

Education must go on beyond the school system, particularly when it comes to the guiding principles of good governance - transparency and accountability to start with. These remain big words and lofty notions for many people.

Heather Lini-Leo, Vanuatu's public prosecutor.

HEATHER LINI-LEO: I remember a training session with parliamentarians taking into account different levels of education by our members of parliament and how they would go and explain back to their voters, to the constituency it is difficult. My explanation then was that, and that as many especially for transparency, imagine a white clear plastic paper. Housed in that is every leader and each leader's movement and actions can be watched by everybody else from outside. So that you can sit back but you know what's going on and you can just see this leader is moving there, going there or is doing this, giving it to this person and all that. That was the explanation, I said that would be the best to be used for the local population and then most of them have never been to school or even gone as far as grade six.

VETUNA: This is 'Time To Talk' - and today we discuss education and information.

In places where literacy is low, where a majority of people live in rural and remote areas, radio become a major player in the delivery of information and education.

William Parkinson, President of PINA - the Pacific Islands News Association.

WILLIAM PARKINSON: Well obviously I'm a radio man so I'm a bit biased in this but yeah, I would have to say that radio would remain the most powerful of the mediums. In the countries where we see audience research done we can still see it being very much dominant. And the good thing about it is we're seeing the blossoming of a whole range of radio stations, private radio stations, they're starting to niche market, they're broadcasting in different languages. So I think that radio remains probably the most effective in terms of getting a message out in the South Pacific.

VETUNA: One good indicator of a healthy democracy is the extent of freedom of expression and freedom of the press. While the media in the Pacific has developed over time there are still some constraints to overcome.

WILLIAM PARKINSON: In most of the South Pacific we're dealing with very small societies, so for a start you've got to work on that. You know everybody, everybody knows you, you have ties to them socially or you're related to them. So that places pressure on you straightaway.

VETUNA: Stevenson Liu is a journalist with Radio Vanuatu, the Government-run radio. He agrees there are cultural constraints to what can be reported.

STEVENSON LIU: Responsible reporting for me is something that you take into consideration the different factors in the society, and at the same time taking into consideration your customs, ni-Vanuatu for that matter, and the religion and anything that you report with consideration that it would not affect another group of persons or stir up things. I mean for me what's the point in telling the truth if the truth will make things worse, that's how I look at responsible reporting.

VETUNA: So what happens in times of crisis when ethnic allegiances and cultural sensitivities are exacerbated?

Francis Hermann from the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation recalls the May 2000 coup in Suva.

FRANCIS HERMANN: For the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation as the national broadcaster we were caught in a very awkward position. We had one set of instructions from Government House saying you are not to give George Speight publicity, we had one set of instructions from the army camp saying don't give George Speight publicity, and we had a third set of instructions from George Speight saying don't give them publicity. So we were caught in the middle of this triangle. We decided to report everyone and we were prepared to suffer the consequences, but we were always careful not to be seen or heard on air as pushing a particular cause. So we had to be very careful.

We couldn't really send Indian reporters out to report on the May 19th event for their own safety, so we had to send our Fijian journalists out. Those Fijian journalists we put out were also put under immense pressure because of what province they came from, so the supporters of George Speight and his group expected the indigenous Fijian journalists that were employed by us or we sent into

the field to conform to their set of principles and their beliefs. So the journalists I believe had a difficult time in the field trying to put their journalism on one side and weighing it up against their traditional obligations to the vanua.

VETUNA: Stevenson Liu from Radio Vanuatu recognises journalists have cultural obligations, particularly when dealing with traditional leaders.

STEVENSON LIU: We regard chiefs as very different from politicians. Politicians they are chosen by the people, they are elected by the people, but for Chiefs they inherit titles, so we tend to respect that right, we tend to respect that person they are in the society. So reporting on the issues, political issues would be different from cultural issues.

VETUNA: So what happens to reporting when political leaders acquire chiefly titles? Could culture and custom be used as a screen?

Edward Natapei, who became Prime Minister of Vanuatu in 2001.

EDWARD NATAPEI: I think that's one area that us politician tend to make use of all the time (laughs). We tend to use cultural excuses and we say that no there's cultural issues involved and we should consider this aspect. I feel that you know that's just being used as a cover-up for other things. Culturally when you look at it in the traditional way of life a lot of the things that happen in and around villages are common knowledge to everyone. In fact if we decided to do something, if a chief decided to do something it was important that he call everyone together and inform everyone about it. As far as I am concerned, the leaders of this nation were elected by the people of this nation and they the people of this nation need to be informed of what's happening.

VETUNA: Tied in with culture is the diversity of languages spoken. In many countries of the region the colonial language - adopted in most cases as the national language - is not understood by everybody.

Alfred Maesulia, director of the Solomon Islands Government Information and Communication division.

ALFRED MAESULIA: A lot of people misunderstood a lot of issues because of language problem. We here in Solomon Islands should think about those and try to improve on them, like most of our parliamentarians during their debate in Parliament they speak in English and more than half of the population in Solomon Islands do not understand that. And even those who try to promote certain things over the radio they speak in English. That is something that we should think about if we want people to understand what we're trying to promote we should use the language that people understand.

VETUNA: Another way to break through communication barriers, to overcome literacy problems and to raise awareness is through theatre.

FRANCIS IRO: Theatre is one of the tools, there is a new approach that you can sort of get information of what is so important to the people should know about in our country today.

JO DORRAS: I think it is enormously strong theatre or radio in that context because there is no other way of getting that information. And I mean one often sees it that people are talked at and at the end they come away with absolutely no idea of what the hell was going on really.

VETUNA: Jo Dorras, co-founder of the Vanuatu-based Wan Smolbag theatre company and Francis Iro, coordinator of the Radio and Theatre Unit at SIDT - the Solomon Islands Development Trust.

Wan Smolbag theatre was established in 1989 in Port Vila. It has toured all over Vanuatu and throughout the region.

The group has tackled a number of issues ranging from health and environment to controversial social issues - like domestic violence - and political ones such as corruption.

And the company has now broadened its reach with the production of radio dramas.

Jo Dorras again.

JO DORRAS: I think you have more in your heart after a theatre performance and radio you see a lot in your head and it has a very different effect. But I also believe you have to do everything, you have to do theatre, radio. I mean when you're looking at good governance it's such a massive issue and it involves so much that is difficult. People don't understand what good governance means, they don't understand what politicians do, they don't understand why certain practices might be considered wrong. One's looking at such a vast range of things that really you've got to use a vast range of media and radio drama has just been a revelation, the power of it and it's such a cheap, I mean this sounds awful, but it's a cheap form of theatre. To pay actors to go all over the Pacific is massively expensive and so radio drama is a way of reaching out to your most remote village, providing they've got a radio, and you can be there every week in person in their house. And of course you can't do that with a theatre group.

VETUNA: Francis Iro has worked in theatre for over 13 years in the Solomon Islands. He started the SIDT theatre group. Just like Wan Smolbag in Vanuatu, it challenges people to think and to discuss social and political issues. One of its radio productions is 'The Power of the Chair'.

FRANCIS IRO: We are trying to educate our people to think rightly and who to choose as their leaders in the parliament. We have a production we call 'The Power of the Chair'. So we are trying to pass the message right to the community people that they have the power to put somebody on the chair and to get him off after four years. The whole idea about this 'Power of the Chair' is that we're not trying to point fingers at somebody or criticise him for that. No, but we are trying to sort of encourage him and say: "Well if you don't do this then you know that the power is in our hands, and

we can just change you after four years". So the leaders have to know that it's the people who put them up there.

VETUNA: Theatre and radio drama enable people to understand issues whatever their level of education. The impact is immediate.

JO DORRAS: The minute you make it a question you've changed something, the minute you get people to say well should you beat your wife? Is it right? Why do you do it and what does she feel? Then you've changed something, instead of it being yes of course that's what he does and we accept it.

VETUNA: Next week we explore 'Human Rights and Gender Issues'.

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I'm Pearson Vetuna. Till next week, bye!

Program Participants:

- Pearson Vetuna, Executive Producer of the Tok Pisin service at Radio Australia
- Stevenson Liu, journalist with Radio Vanuatu in Port Vila
- Sharon Baghwan Rolls, journalist and women's activist in Fiji, and co-ordinates FemLink
- Alfred Sasako, journalist and former Government Minister in the Solomon Islands
- The late Grace Molisa was President of the National Council of Women in Vanuatu, and a leading poet, writer and activist until her death in January 2002
- Pastor Paiaporu Antfalo, Presbyterian Church in Vanuatu
- Kadles Samuel, working mother of four from Santo in Vanuatu
- Henry Vira, Co-ordinator of the Port Vila Secretariat of the Pacific Island Association of Non-Government Organisations (PIANGO)
- Daniel Lukai, unemployed youth worker from the Seaside Tongoa settlement in Port Vila, Vanuatu
- Doctor John Nongorr, Constitutional lawyer in Papua New Guinea
- Marie Noelle Ferrieux-Patterson, former Ombudsman in Vanuatu
- Heather Lini-Leo, Vanuatu's Public Prosecutor
- William Parkinson, President of the Pacific Islands News Association (PINA) in Suva, Fiji
- Francis Hermann, General Manager (Commercial) with the Fiji Broadcasting Corporation
- Edward Natapei, Prime Minister of Vanuatu in 2001
- Alfred Maesulia, director of the Solomon Islands Government Information and Communication division
- Jo Dorras, co-founder of the Wan Smolbag theatre company, based in Port Vila, Vanuatu
- Francis Iro, co-ordinator of the Radio and Theatre unit at the Solomon Islands Development Trust (SIDT) in Honiara