

Australia Awards Women's Leadership Initiative

The end of advisers? Locally led aid and development in the Pacific

Summary Paper



Photo: ESHPHOTO / DFAT

Background

About the Women's Leadership Initiative

The Australia Awards *Women's Leadership Initiative* (WLI) is an Australian Government initiative promoting women's leadership and building a future generation of women leaders from the Pacific region. WLI offers Australia Awards emerging leaders from Pacific countries skills development, networking opportunities and mentoring to build leadership capability and boost gender equality. Open to scholars studying at Australian universities and institutions, the program also aims to forge links between women leaders in the Pacific and Australia.

Introduction

In May 2022, the WLI hosted a virtual [Learning & Networking event](#) on the role of foreign technical advisers in locally led aid and development in the Pacific. Featuring a Q&A, small group reflection circles

and an expert panel moderated by Australian development practitioner Anna Gibert, the event focused on the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on hastening the transition to locally led development programming and the practical strategies foreign development professionals can enact to make space for leaders from Pacific Island countries.

The panel

Mereani Rokotuibau, Executive Director, Balance of Power is a development practitioner with over 15 years of experience working across a number of Pacific Island countries. She is currently the Executive Director of the multi-country Balance of Power initiative, funded by DFAT, which aims to increase women's leadership in the political sphere.

Jennifer Kalpokas-Doan, Director, Strategy & Programs at Balance of Power, the Director, Strategy and Programs for the Balance of Power initiative, based

in Vanuatu. Jennifer is an advocate for inclusive and representative leadership, and has written and spoken on this issue in a range of regional forums. She has over 17 years' experience in the development field.

Fremden Yanhambath, Director, Vanuatu Skills

Partnership, the Director of the Vanuatu Skills Partnership and was the first ni-Vanuatu to be appointed as head of a DFAT-funded program. Fremden is an Australia Awards recipient and completed a Masters in Leadership and Management (Vocational Education and Training) at the University of Newcastle in 2013.

Facilitator Anna Gibert, Strategic Adviser, Vanuatu Skills Partnership / Balance of Power, has been supporting local leadership in the Pacific for over ten years, including through her roles with the Vanuatu Skills Partnership, Balance of Power and the Vanuatu Health Program, all funded through DFAT. She was previously the Team Leader of the Vanuatu Skills Partnership and facilitated the transfer of this leadership position to a ni-Vanuatu – the first for a DFAT-funded program in Vanuatu. Anna has also previously been engaged as a mentor with the Women's Leadership Initiative.

Foreign advisers: friend or foe?

Foreign advisers have long been a mainstay of Australia's aid and development program. Panellists discussed the difference between a foreign adviser who makes a positive impact on a program versus one who may be less effective.

Positive

- Advisers who are able to 'blend in' i.e. tailor, adapt to local needs and context
- Advisers who value knowledge and skills of local people
- Advisers who understand and respect the context of the country and the region they are working in (including the impact of colonisation on systems and mindsets)
- Advisers who are able to manage power dynamics and expectations between foreign and national staff (including the relationship between 'Canberra' or 'Post' and the program team)
- Advisers who have the ability to park their own biases and have a balanced opinion.

Less effective

- Programs that have an over-reliance on foreign advisers where it is not needed (e.g. where there are locals who can provide that advice)
- Advisers who arrive with a pre-determined plan of action and fail to adapt to the local needs and context (sometimes constrained by terms of reference that have rigid timeframes and objectives)
- Advisers who work in a way that prioritises their own personal gain (e.g. to progress their career and build their professional networks) over the needs of the program

"We have to de-colonise the way we think about foreign advisors, we have been preconditioned to think that the foreign advisor is the one who has the expertise and will tell us what to do, so sometimes we sit back and think 'I won't do it because I know the adviser will do it for me'."

- Jennifer Kalpokas-Doan

Language matters!

Panellists discussed the role of language in perpetuating inequality between foreigners and nationals working on aid and development programs and the importance of embracing terminology that foregrounds the leadership of local actors. Key messages from panellists included:

- The term 'capacity building' assumes that foreign people and institutions are inherently more able than local people and institutions and can be perceived as patronising. Try 'support' instead.
- The Vanuatu Skills Partnership refers to 'nation building' instead of 'development', because it motivates people to contribute to improving their country for the benefit of everyone.
- The term 'adviser' implies that foreigners know everything, and local people know nothing. Sometimes imbued by their job title, foreigners can assume the role of the team leader. Try 'support person' instead.
- Don't only refer to foreigners as advisers (or assume that advisers will be foreigners); there are also technical experts among locals, who also have an understanding of the nuances and the culture. This expertise is often overlooked.
- Instead of using the terms 'mentor / mentee', emphasise the importance of shared learning and valuing each other's knowledge.
- Language can be used as a mechanism of disempowerment, for example, 'gender adviser' (noting the word 'gender' does not translate into Pacific languages).

"The use of language influences behaviours and actions ... Once you are called an 'adviser' you think 'I better start acting like one, I better start advising'."

- Anna Gibert

The importance of program design

Panellists discussed how the program design period is critical for building the foundation for locally led development programs, including ensuring that local people are recruited as senior decision-makers in program design teams and influence decisions and what technical advice is needed and where it can be sourced.

"What normally you have is people come in and do the design and then decide what foreign advice is needed, but it is the people who are leading the implementation of the project that should make those decisions, because they know exactly what advice is needed."

- Jennifer Kalpokas-Doan

"Local people should determine exactly where the need is – Contractors put together their teams based on the design, so it's written to include foreign technical expertise, rather than acknowledging that those skills exist in the local market."

- Fremden Yanhambath

A case study of the Vanuatu Skills Partnership and the Balance of Power Initiative

The Vanuatu Skills Partnership was one of the first DFAT-funded programs to engage a national person as a Team Leader during its design and subsequently the ongoing implementation of the program. Reflecting on his experience, Fremden said, 'Leading the design team gave me the authority to decide where to invest resources to address gaps, instead of being a passive

member ... people were more confident to speak openly to me because I was Ni-Van – they knew the project was going to be relevant to local needs’.

The Balance of Power Initiative is an example of a program that was designed by foreign advisers but was still able to promote local decision-making and remain adaptive to local contexts. This involved a wide consultation process and included a requirement that each country participating in the initiative would undertake a country-level design led by Pacific Islanders. Of her experience operationalising the program design, Mereani said, ‘We have changed track a few times, pivoted and made changes to suit changing context and DFAT has given that flexibility’.

Are there useful roles that foreign advisers can play?

Panellists agreed that foreigners can bring a wealth of skills and knowledge that can contribute to the nation building of Pacific countries. In addition to filling genuine skills gaps, panellists agreed that the most useful thing that foreign advisers can do is act as ‘glorified secretaries’ by supporting local teams to ‘package’ their outputs in a way that meets the expectations of donor posts / headquarters. Jennifer described this as providing the ‘cosmetic finish’.

“Pacific Islanders do not lack the ability, the expertise or the knowledge to lead development programs, but what we might not have developed all of the skills for yet is the final cosmetic finish to make outputs palatable to those that need to be convinced, even people in our own countries. We have the raw product (i.e. the knowledge and skills) but we need (foreign advisers) to make it palatable / sellable, help package it up and make it look good / convincing.”

- Jennifer Kalpokas-Doan

Actions & Opportunities

Panellists discussed a range of practical things that different groups could do to promote locally led development in the Pacific.

- **Donors** can stipulate that bids (for design and implementation of development programs) must include Pacific Islanders in senior leadership positions.
- **Leaders** responsible for recruiting development professionals can ‘promote on potential’ i.e. consider promoting Pacific Islanders into senior positions based on their work history and future potential (even if their qualifications and experience are outmatched by a foreigner).
- **Foreign development practitioners** can practice *yielding* power by making space for local development practitioners to lead.
- **Local development practitioners** can practice *wielding* power by claiming their space and asserting themselves in decision-making fora.

Conclusion & Reflections

The information in this document summarises the key points and insights shared during the Learning & Networking event on locally led aid and development in the Pacific Islands. Panellists reflected on how the COVID-19 pandemic has created a ‘vacuum’ of foreign advisers unable to travel to the Pacific, forcing local people to step up and take ownership in the roles that they play in the development sector. This has given locals an opportunity to demonstrate their capabilities, without foreign intervention, resulting in a mental shift among local development practitioners. With borders set to open again soon, panellists emphasised the importance of sustaining this new normal and not returning to pre-pandemic ways of working.

“When they (foreign advisers) return they will see a well-oiled machine already running because local actors have developed the confidence to lead.”

- Jennifer Kalpokas-Doan

Interested? Want to know more?



Listen to the full webinar recording: <https://bit.ly/3NjYt3L>

For more information on the *Women’s Leadership Initiative* and how you can get involved:



<https://womensleadershipinitiative.org.au/>



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