

“WHAT THE HELL AM I DOING HERE?”

THE REWARDS AND CHALLENGES OF VOLUNTEERING IN VANUATU, AND WORKING TOWARDS THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Ana Terry. Interviewed by Claire Goode

INTRODUCTION

Ana Terry joined the Learning and Teaching Development team at Otago Polytechnic in August 2018. In conversation, she has often mentioned her voluntary work overseas with VSA (Volunteer Service Abroad), but has not had the opportunity to talk about it in depth. She recently remedied this, in discussion with one of her colleagues, Claire Goode. While reflecting on her experiences in Vanuatu, Ana also addressed the challenges of embedding sustainable practices in work and education across this island nation, and of working towards the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, which underpin all VSA assignments.

Claire: So tell me, Ana, what first attracted you to VSA volunteering?

Ana: I was contacted about an assignment opportunity while teaching at the Otago Polytechnic School of Art in 2007. And I was, I guess, always interested in the idea of living and working in an alternative cultural environment... having that opportunity. I'd lived a nomadic life growing up and living overseas during my childhood, so I was keen to do this in my adult life. I had sent my CV several years beforehand, not really imagining getting anything, because I had considered at that time that aid work involved health or agricultural expertise, not imagining that they would be interested in someone with skills in communication design and marketing. So I was quite surprised to be asked to apply for the two-year communications design assignment based in Port Vila. But as development markets have developed and changed, other skills are required... and in terms of building capacity in education and working towards the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals, communication design is absolutely key. At the time, to be honest, I didn't even know where Vanuatu was - I had to go and find it on a map! And that was in itself, I guess, quite revealing to me to realise that in my own immediate neighbourhood in the South Pacific, I didn't know where Vanuatu was.

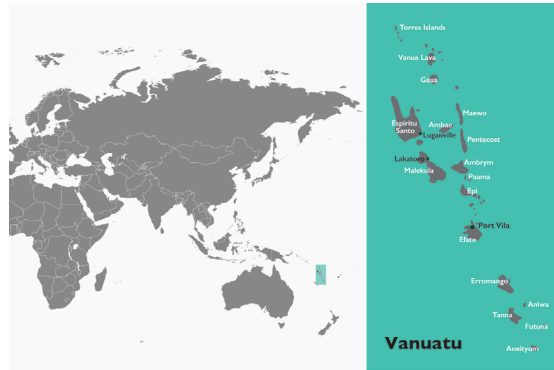


Figure 1. Geographical location and detail of the islands of Vanuatu. (Image attribution: World with Countries - Single Color by FreeVectorMaps.com; inset map of Vanuatu by Ana Terry)

Claire: Tell me more about that first role.

Ana: Well, the first assignment was between 2008-09, for two years, working with an NGO (non-government organisation) which has been working in the Pacific for over 25 years; they are a development theatre group, 'Wan Smolbag', aiming to create awareness and engagement around education, health, governance, the environment, youth and gender. My role was training and supporting several counterparts in designing and developing publications which supported the educational work that they do primarily through theatre and storytelling. The publications we produced were used by teachers, villages' leaders, community and health workers - locally and in the wider Pacific.



Figure 2. *40 Dei*, a Wan Smolbag play about the conflicts of Kustom culture and Christianity, domestic violence, and addiction, Port Vila 2009 (Photo credit: Ana Terry).

Claire: Can you tell me what “Wan Smolbag” means?

Ana: Wan Smolbag literally translates as “one small bag”. The group started out with half a dozen actors walking from village to village with a small bag of props and performing – thus the name. Their first show was ‘Sitsit Wota’ (which translates as diarrhoea). It’s a play about hygiene – and keeping drinking water clean. Many rural villages may only have one water source, a stream, or a single water tank supplying several families. Theatre and storytelling are very effective in engaging everyone – there is comedy, and storian. And telling stories is a big part of Ni-Vanuatu¹ culture. Plays are written and performed in response to what’s happening on the ground – such as an outbreak of dengue fever; issues around sexual health, environmental issues, or whatever is happening politically at the time, such as an election. Their base in Port Vila also offers a youth centre, nutrition centre and health clinic. Over two decades, they have grown and now employ over 200 staff and have satellite youth centres on other islands. It’s a big operation now, the storytelling has extended into other more easily distributed media – I mean, they now produce full feature films, TV series, and radio shows – which 25 years ago was a big deal, because radio was the only way of communicating across the archipelago then. When I joined them in 2008, they were into their third season of ‘Love Patrol’, a soap opera series based at Port Vila Police Station – a drama beautifully interwoven with some very big and difficult social issues.

Claire: So, that was your first assignment; can you tell us about subsequent ones?

Ana: Okay, so then I came back to New Zealand and it was a bit of a reverse culture shock – I was pretty unsettled. But, financially, I had to come home, and I had other commitments, family and I was completing my Masters – things like that. And those are considerations you need to think about when you commit to a long-term assignment.

And then I was contacted again and asked to go over and work in the agriculture sector. So, I ended up working with an agronomist who’s been living in Vanuatu for over 25 years. He’d introduced vanilla growing into the country, set up a processing plant on Espiritu Santo (Vanuatu’s largest island), and supported locals who grew the vanilla. And so, we worked together on producing a vanilla manual to be used by farmers with low levels of literacy – that was the assignment’s primary goal.

It was what you call an ‘in-line aid position’; you’re given a specific short-term project which doesn’t directly involve training a counterpart. However, from my point of view, volunteering is all about empowering people – so you just naturally want to do this. Otherwise, it’s like, well, I’ll just stay at home and do the job... and at the same time, I was working with staff members through Farm Support Association (FSA), which is a cooperative, working with local farmers, supporting them by providing education programmes and resources.



Figure 3. Vanilla growers packing freshly cured vanilla pods ready for market, Venuii, Espiritu Santo, 2012 (Photo credit: Ana Terry).

The third assignment most recently was working in communication and marketing in the tourism industry in rural Vanuatu – based in Malekula. This assignment was all about capacity building in promoting rural tourism. I worked with both the Vanuatu Tourism Organisation (VTO) and Malampa Travel, which services the Malampa Province. There is a big economic push for locals to set up small tourist operations. And there's a growing market of tourists seeking off-the-beaten-track experiences. However, locals are limited in their communication skills and ability to promote and market their businesses – whether they are offering bungalow accommodation, for example, or eco, cultural or trekking tours. Malampa Travel works as a membership-based non-profit organisation, promoting and organising tourist bookings, while VTO provides the training in tourism.

Claire: So, these were both quite different from your first assignment?

Ana: Yes, they were different contexts and industries. But essentially similar concepts of, you know... they were both indirectly and directly aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), working towards decreasing poverty, gender equality, increasing health and education, and so on. Ni-Vanuatu are considered 'subsistent affluent' – given they have land, they can grow their own food; they can build their own houses out of local materials – you could argue that they are living sustainably. However, it's tenuous – there are often land disputes, or if a cyclone comes through – and these are increasing... The UN World Risk index lists Vanuatu as the world's most vulnerable country to disasters. And the islands are sitting on the 'Pacific ring of fire' – earthquakes were a daily occurrence. So, what we might see as a 'sustainable way of living' is actually extremely vulnerable. The reality is everyone needs cash – to pay school fees, for healthcare, a water tank or toilet... And that is where small money-making enterprises like growing a cash crop or offering bungalow accommodation can help.

Claire: It's interesting that there's this perception that voluntary work is only in fields like construction, agriculture, or engineering, but actually, you know, your own example of communication design is quite different.

Ana: Yes, the skills required are diverse and growing. I still keep an eye on VSA assignment opportunities – I know in Papua New Guinea, for instance, they've been looking for an audio technician, to work in the fisheries, developing educational resources, in film and video, and working alongside local people, training them up to develop these educational resources. So, there's this huge scope for our teachers and our graduates to volunteer in the aid industry.

Claire: And how do the Sustainable Development Goals particularly relate to volunteering?

Ana: The SDGs underpin VSA assignments and their values. And NZ Aid is working with developing countries like Vanuatu, who are using the SDG framework as a guiding principle towards their goals of sustainability and development. I would say, in all instances, you could account for most of those 17 goals in some form in the various assignments.

Claire: So, did you have particular objectives or particular goals that you were expected to meet?

Ana: Sure... When you take on a VSA voluntary assignment, you are given a job description, with usually at least three or four objectives and these align to the SDGs. Developing these objectives is a long and negotiated process, and is carefully considered because obviously, there's a huge investment in funding foreign aid, so the success of the assignment and the goalposts are referred to constantly. It's a bit like aligning your learning objectives and assessments against your learning outcomes. These are the goalposts you return to if things start to drift off.

Aid development has changed over the decades; it used to be very much about the Westerner coming into an 'underdeveloped' country and saying, "You need to do this, this, and this to grow and develop." It's now driven by those countries that are wanting the aid, or are needing the support or development. And our concepts of what defines 'development' is changing as we consider what is sustainable.

Claire: And in terms of measuring success as a volunteer; what is your best advice?

Ana: The key thing when you go into the field, whether it's six months or two years, is to slow down and observe, really get a handle on what's going on... on the ground. You also need to evaluate where your counterpart is at – the capacity of the organisation, their skill base, where they need help and support, what is the wider context, and what is sustainable. And while evaluating, remind yourself that you come into the environment with your own cultural baggage and expectations. Then it's a negotiated process between you and your counterpart. It's a matter of sitting down and asking "How can we reach this goal? Where do you identify your strengths and weaknesses?" It's very much about establishing a peer-to-peer relationship, helping build autonomy, and also the confidence to ask for help, which, for Melanesians, can be quite difficult.

Claire: Culturally, asking for help? Why is that?

Ana: It's complex, and you notice Ni-Vanuatu men also avoid asking for help. I think it's a hangover from colonisation and conservative Christianity. Vanuatu was governed by the French and English until 1980. Even though they've had independence for several decades now, there is a sense of inadequacy and continued dependency on the "weat man" (white man) – I remember on several occasions my Ni-Vanuatu counterparts undermining their abilities. "Black man i no sam mek long weat man – hemi no save plante samting" (in other words, "a black man is not the same as a white man – he's doesn't know very much").

And also, there are gender inequalities, and strong dominant perceptions of what a woman's role is through Kustom culture.² This is another of the challenges of working in Melanesia.

Claire: Can you tell me a bit more about those inequalities?

Ana: Basically, I mean, the practice of a 'bride price' is still current. The husband's family pay for the bride. While using money for this has been banned, the tradition continues using other commodities of exchange – like livestock, mats, baskets, and food. The legacy of this tradition is that woman is seen as a commodity and the husband owns her:

In my work, I had to look for ways to safely support women in helping them gain a voice, but also being acutely aware of what might happen outside of that working environment if they gained that confidence – often I would worry what happened to my female counterparts when they went home... Vanuatu has one of the highest rates of domestic violence in the South Pacific.

These inequalities are also reinforced through dominant traditional Christian beliefs such as 'women are seen, not heard', and similar ideas. In Vanuatu, religions in their various forms, including Islam, are becoming widespread, and these blend with Kustom culture – which is predominantly patriarchal. It's complex...

Claire: What would you say were some of your successes?

Ana: It's incremental, sometimes when you're in amongst at all, and you're dealing with the reality on the ground, it's hard to see the success. In Vanuatu, family comes first, in all instances, and so it's challenging when you come to work with expectations of getting on with the business, and your counterpart is not there. And then you hear through the grapevine that someone's died, and they've gone back to their island, and no one knows how many weeks (or months) they will be away for – they may not even return if family commitments require it. So, you grab the moments of small successes and hang on to them! I've been really fortunate as I've been able to stay in contact with some of my counterparts – including Florence Toka who I worked with at Wan Smolbag. She's now a communications consultant – contracting. Recently, she was working alongside a designer in developing Year 1 and 2 books for government schools, produced in 60 different vernacular languages of Vanuatu. She was also the communications coordinator for the Pacific Mini Games held in Port Vila in 2017. When I heard this, I thought "Yes! The hard work then has paid off... this is capacity building!" Florence also won a competition for designing the logo

for the newly formed Melanesian Spearhead Group in 2008 – that was a really a big achievement.

Claire: Wow! So, she's actually yes.... really making a difference...

Ana: Yes, and that to me, is success – her success – and she's built her confidence and skill set to be working alongside people in the industry doing good work in education and literacy, also in the cultural security and perpetuity of indigenous languages.

Claire: What were the biggest obstacles for you?

Ana: Where to begin? A lot of day-to-day basic stuff – being in a relentlessly hot tropical climate - the idea of living on a tropical island sounds idyllic – the reality is that it's hard work – there is nothing romantic about it! The logistical

realities of getting to work along dusty potholed washed-out roads, in decrepit buses falling apart, and working in an overcrowded office in tropical heat with no air con.... And then for my last assignment – living remotely – literally in a bamboo hut, with a natangora thatched roof,³ along with rats and cockroaches, constant mould, and during a drought. It's character building!



Figure 4. Sani Bebe and Ana Terry, Malampa Travel, Malekula, 2017 (Photo credit: Don Hunter)

Language was a big obstacle to begin with too. I was basically thrown in the deep end, as all the publications I was working on were in Bislama - which is the local pidgin English. So, I had to get to grips with the language quickly.

Also, some of the broader challenges of volunteer work... there is this phenomenon known as 'aid fatigue' where countries which have been receiving decades of aid.... assumptions are made by your counterparts that if they don't do the work, you or another volunteer will. So that expectation is what you're up against sometimes. The concept of the 'cargo cult'⁴ also feeds into the expectations of a continuous flow of foreign aid – particularly on the remote islands.

It's really important to, you know, regularly sit down with your counterpart and ask, "Okay, where do YOU want to go? What are your aspirations? How can I support you in this goal? What do you perceive as my role? And what is

yours in reaching our goals?" Those conversations and reassessments were ongoing.

When I first got to Vanuatu, because I was coming from a background as a contractor, I remember asking "What's the deadline?" And the response was pretty much that there is no such thing as a deadline – you get it done when you can – when the boat comes in with that computer part, when your counterpart comes back from their island,

or whatever it may be... when the planets align!

Claire: So, there are a lot of variables to take into consideration. What changes did you see, if any - thinking in terms of sustainability development goals - during your time, perhaps, from when you first arrived to when you left after your most recent assignment?

Ana: I think, well, there have been some changes. In terms of the SDGs – I mean, Vanuatu was the first country in the Pacific to initiate banning plastic bags in 2017, which is massive in leading by example.

In terms of some of the more immediate projects I was involved in, I assisted in the communications on turtle conservation. In the Maskelyne islands, there's a traditional harvesting of these animals for an annual feast – and they are endangered. So Wan Smolbag got involved collectively with marine scientists, locals, and with the support of village chiefs, an education and turtle monitoring programme. And so, the practice of harvesting turtles now is every two years. This is a positive outcome – sustaining their cultural values and contributing to turtle conservation.

Also, there has been a gradual shift in women's empowerment. There has been a UN programme called 'Markets for Change – Vanuatu' running since 2014 which has supported women participating in economic activities. In addition to economic empowerment, the project's focus is on market vendors – the 'mamas' are supported and encouraged to be vocal and participate in governance structures within marketplaces.

But it's incredibly complex and things like, ironically, foreign aid, can undermine this progress towards gender equality. For example, while I was working and living in Malekula, aid came in after Cyclone Pam.... clothes donated from Australia and New Zealand. Unfortunately, locals ended up with clothes that were not considered appropriate for women to be wearing – particularly in rural Vanuatu. And then when there was an attack or a young woman was raped, it was 'justified' because it's considered that they were dressed inappropriately. That sort of tension is ongoing. And I think there's a lot to reflect on here. In providing aid, we must ask ourselves, and ensure we consult on, what is appropriate in that cultural context? Working towards goals like gender equality, it's nuanced and culturally specific.

Claire: So, donating things – the islands can become almost dumping grounds?

Ana: In some instances, yes. I'll give you an example... One of the best libraries I've come across in Vanuatu was at the Malekula Culture Centre – great for tourists or volunteers, but no locals used it. I found a highly relevant technical book – on building a missile! Most of the books were not appropriate or useful. Ni-Vanuatu, while often fluent in speaking several different languages, have low levels of literacy. These books had been donated over the years by Western libraries, volunteers, and, ironically, linguists studying and recording local languages. But they were not accessible, I mean in terms of their content, relevance and level, to the local people.

Claire: What about technology?

Ana: Communication advances have made a huge difference to the islands. Even on the remotest island, cellular technology was surprisingly reliable. Cell phones are so vital – because transport is unreliable and the coral roads are often washed out... so the 'mamas' coming from the villages to sell fresh produce at the local market, can check in before harvesting if the transport is going to be available – or if there has been a big rainfall which will stop them from getting there. Getting accurate information on cyclones and weather events has also dramatically improved through cellular technology. I remember the hourly text messages coming through when Cyclone Donna - a Category 2 - was dancing around the top of our island for about 48 tense hours. We were lucky that the centre of it never hit us but it moved north and took out a whole island – about 1000 locals lost their homes and ended up sheltering in caves - with little water or food for more than two weeks.



Figure 5. Mamas' market, at Lakatoro, Malekula, 2016 (Photo credit: Ana Terry).

Claire: In terms of your own professional practice, how has VSA volunteering impacted on your learning and your skills?

Ana: I think the experience of going into that kind of context is very rewarding – it takes you out of your comfort zone. And it's project based – hands-on facilitating with limited resources. I think that this kind of opportunity is really useful for teachers. Taking on a VSA voluntary assignment challenges you. You have to stop and take stock, and think, how do I manage this task and work with my counterpart on the ground in this complex and alien context?

I think this process of evaluation and adaptation has been useful to my teaching becoming more learner-focused.

Claire: I imagine your ability to adapt to change and uncertainty is very strong as well. So, the ability to adapt becomes key?

Ana: Yes, you just have to, you have to act on the fly. Regularly writing reports also assists in guiding you back to the assignment objectives. What have I achieved? What's realisable? Do we need to review these objectives? Has the goalpost shifted in some shape or form, given the context and the reality on the ground? And often they do!

Claire: What would you say to anyone considering volunteering overseas?

Ana: As an opportunity for personal and professional growth, it was invaluable. I mean, you know, at the time, it's a struggle, it's challenging, and some days I'd ask, "What the hell am I doing here!?" ...it's challenging, but I think in terms of getting an idea of you know, how 90% of the world's population live – a real lived experience – it's priceless. But, you know, there are all these other aspects impacting on developing countries; dealing with climate change, for example, things are shifting and changing dramatically in our Pacific Island nations. And also, while you're on the ground doing the work, you are also aware of the politics – that you are occupying a space as a volunteer... representing a nation – New Zealand, in this case. The increase in Chinese aid in Vanuatu is enormous, the amount of work being done on infrastructure like roading and ports – and, as much as these improve Vanuatu's economy, it's also about China's political presence.



Figure 6. A typical wash out after heavy rainfall. Lakatoro, Vanuatu, 2017 (Photo credit: Ana Terry).

Claire: Are there aspects of volunteering that you would like to see change?

Ana: One of the things that I would have liked to have had was the capacity to be able to continue mentoring in a formal role with my counterparts. Because I think that... what happens is, people come in for a year or two years, do all this work, and then they leave. And I think there's a lack of continuity for our counterparts, suddenly being left in the lurch... or possibly another volunteer comes in, and they need to then adjust again, you know... it's providing that consistency and support.

Claire: And what about the future in terms of sustainable development goals? In terms of your individual experience, how do you see things developing?

Ana: It's constantly on the radar. I think socialising the SDGs is vital... and in the communications field, that is what all three assignments were about. It's about working with your counterparts, the key stakeholders, and with those organisations... educating the educators increases their capacity and awareness, and the knowledge starts to initiate changes in understanding and behaviour.

Two years ago, for example, New Zealand supermarkets thought they would lose business if they didn't provide plastic bags to their shoppers – but with education, awareness, and community pressure, an attitudinal shift has occurred. But we need to move quicker in terms of climate change.

I think what we call 'developing countries' have so much to offer us in reviewing what is sustainable, how much land do we need? How big a house do we really need? What are our personal priorities? Is life just about making money to the detriment of our relationships? How do we achieve a sustainable balance in all aspects of living, with each other, and on the planet?

Claire: Do you think there is anything that educational institutions could do better to support the Pacific nations?

Ana: Awareness. Providing and supporting opportunities for students from Pacific countries to come and learn in New Zealand through scholarships and vice-versa – giving our learners opportunities to experience these environments and ways of life.

The VSA *Univol* Programme, for example, which has been running for the last 10 years has been very successful. Students in their second or third year of their degree can apply and go on a short-term voluntary assignment. They end up doing some great work and, in some instances, it can set them up on their career path. One *Univol* I worked alongside in 2008, for example, has ended up working for MFAT.⁵ He is now working in the area of disaster management in Vanuatu. It's a fantastic opportunity, and it would be great if Otago Polytechnic could partner up with VSA and provide opportunities for our learners to experience this sort of voluntary development work. There is huge scope for this. Volunteering used to be perceived as something you did when you retired, but this is no longer the case... I think people are more and more socially aware and want to be contributing to their communities, locally and internationally. A healthy community is about supporting our neighbours!

Ana Terry and **Claire Goode** are Learning and Teaching Specialists in the Learning and Teaching Development Team at Otago Polytechnic.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 The Ni-Vanuatu are the Melanesian people that make up the population of Vanuatu.
- 2 “Kustom culture” is the term used for the indigenous custom culture of Vanuatu.
- 3 Leaf roofing is made with leaves from the Natangora (or sago palm) tree.
- 4 A cargo cult is a belief system generated from early contact with explorers and colonisers, where commodities are often gifted. The belief is that, if certain rituals are performed, modern commodities and technologies will be supplied by more advanced societies.
- 5 The New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade.