

VANUATU CULTURAL CENTRE, INTANGIBLE CULTURAL HERITAGE AND DISASTER RISK REDUCTION IN VANUATU

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ICH – Relevance and Importance

Intangible Cultural Heritage (ICH), or traditional knowledge is the information, intelligence, ideas, wisdom, skills, awareness, understanding, manners, beliefs and practices that are developed, sustained and passed on from generation to generation within a society, often forming part of its cultural and spiritual identity.

Traditional knowledge in Vanuatu includes types of knowledge about technologies of subsistence (tools and techniques for agriculture and hunting), ethnobotany, food preparation (Figure 1), ecological knowledge, traditional medicine, celestial navigation, weather and climate. These types of knowledge are crucial for subsistence and survival, and are generally based on the accumulation of empirical information and long-term interaction with the environment. In traditional Vanuatu societies, knowledge is passed orally for generations from person to person, and find expression in the form of stories, legends, folklore, rituals, songs and customary laws.

Our traditional way of life is an accumulation of thousands of years of adapting with and in their respective environments, and through trial and error, our traditional cultures have been formulated and refined to achieve perfection in our lifeways in our respective environments and sustainability of the resources that provide these



Figure 1 ICH in food preparation. Cooking fish and shellfish in coconut shells. (Source: Vanuatu Cultural Centre)

Figure 2 ICH in food production. Planting water taro in swamp. (Source: Vanuatu Cultural Centre)

livelihoods. It is embedded in culture and is unique to a given location or society. Traditional knowledge is an important part of the lives of the poor. It is the basis for decision-making of communities in food security (Figure 2), human and animal health, education and natural resource management.

Traditional Knowledge is still significant, in this time and age, in that it is still used to provide livelihood for many of our people residing in rural areas and not employed in the formal economic sector. It is still being used in the agricultural sector in the different traditional crops patterns (or how to plant different crops in different areas at different times), cultivation (how to grow different crops), food preservation and food preparation. It is still being used in infrastructural constructions in the sourcing of material and the techniques of traditional architecture (Figure 3).

There is a type of traditional architecture in Vanuatu that is cyclone resistant, which is built in the shape of an upturned canoe, with the roof low to the ground, and is very much resistant to strong winds and earthquakes. It is still used in health, in the sourcing and utilisation of traditional medicines, and in rural areas where access to medical facilities are difficult, traditional medicines and traditional healing practices and still significant. It is still used in land, water and marine and terrestrial resource management. It has a significant role in our social structures, social relationships and social interaction in our indigenous societies. It is still used in mitigation of risk before, during and after disasters, such as cyclones, floods, droughts and famine, and all the benefits of traditional knowledge mentioned previously, can be utilised to mitigate risk, before, during and after natural disasters.

Living in island nations where not everyone is fully part of the formal economic system, in that most of our people do not make enough money to sustain themselves and to provide for their daily needs and wants, our traditional knowledge acts as a 'safety net' for our people to live sustainably within their natural and social environment, and in times of disasters.

Knowledge management is increasingly being recognized as the key to reduce impacts of climate change and disasters. Effective knowledge management requires policy and implementation guidelines. We have seen significant advancements in science and technology in recent years, and disaster related technology development is no exception.



Figure 3 ICH in traditional architecture.
(Source: Vanuatu Cultural Centre)

Though we rely much on Western scientific technology and knowledge, to live our lives and survive sustainably in our island environment (i.e. in the mitigation of disaster risk) there is a limitation to what can be achieved. Our traditional knowledge acts as a means of 'the last mile' to ensure that livelihood is sustained. There is, therefore, a need to combine both scientific and traditional knowledge to mitigate social and environmental concerns.

Though traditional knowledge is still very much part of our everyday lives, we are seeing a decrease in interest, practice and usage of TK in our societies. When we compare the traditional knowledge apparent in our societies today to what was practiced and available 50 or 100 years ago, we can see that much has been lost.

In 2006, the UK-based New Economics Foundation published 'The Happy Planet Index: An index of human well-being and environmental impact' in which countries were ranked in relation to three indicators of well-being: life satisfaction, life expectancy, and ecological footprint. These three indicators were chosen by the Foundation to represent the ecological efficiency of delivering human well-being within the constraints of equitable and responsible resource consumption. The report declared Vanuatu to be the 'happiest country in the world'.

Vanuatu was and still is worthy of such a title. However, Vanuatu is currently classified by the United Nations as one of the world's most impoverished countries and is labelled by the organization as 'economically handicapped'. The Happy Planet Index brought forth awareness in the region of the need for new indicators to be developed that take into account the income-neutral factors contributing to Melanesian well-being, rather than continuing to rely solely on GDP growth to measure success or progress.

In 2012 Vanuatu embarked on a project called the Alternative Indicators of Wellbeing where we measured other qualities which we believe constitutes better well-being or quality of life, based upon the respondent's perception. The project measured:

Subjective Wellbeing: how people understand the quality of their own lives – measured happiness, satisfaction, stress

Resource Access: measured access to customary land, land tenure structure, land size, land use, supporting capacity of land, leasing of customary land, access to forest resource, access to marine resources, resource access and happiness

Cultural Practice: assessed the strength and significance of various aspects of culture in Vanuatu through the perceptions of respondents towards basic cultural elements – measured language, traditional knowledge and wisdom, traditional skills, traditional wealth access, ceremonial practice, cultural practice and happiness

Community Vitality: examined interactions and relationships within communities in order to capture social capital contributions to well-being – measured

community meeting, community support, trust, leadership, safety, family vitality, values

Community Wellbeing: measured outlook of traditional leaders, outlook of women leaders, outlook of church leaders, ceremonial activities

Overall, TORBA Province, the furthest to the north of the country and the province with the least economic activities and income, measured highest on the scale for alternative indicators of wellbeing, and this is attributed mainly to their continuous utilisation of their traditional knowledge for sustenance.

ICH and Disaster Risk Reduction

ICH or traditional knowledge, has an important role in the mitigation of risk, in times of extreme natural hazards and I will be presenting a few examples of the use of traditional knowledge on food and architecture in disaster risk reduction before and after a cyclone. Food and architecture are used as examples in this presentation since these are two essential components of human survival which the Vanuatu Cultural Centre (VKS) has identified that affect most populations in times of disaster, especially cyclones, since they are more frequent and destructive than other natural hazards.

ICH before natural disaster

Vanuatu is situated in a cyclone prone part of the world, as we all know, and traditionally people would prepare months in advance before the cyclone season at the end and beginning of the year. Food can be dried, smoked (dried breadfruits in the Banks/Torres islands and dried *putongi* (fish) on Futuna) or fermented (banana and breadfruit in south Vanuatu) (Figure 4) and this can provide ongoing sustenance or can be kept for times when there is a drought or after a cyclone.

To dry breadfruit and fish, they are first baked on ground ovens with hot stones until all the moisture has been removed, then they are hung up over a fireplace where the smoke and heat keeps them dry. To ferment banana or breadfruit, they are peeled, pitted, soaked in water and placed in half a metre deep pits near rivers of the sea, in a covering of banana leaves. This can be left for years but the water has to be changed every three to four months. To prepare, it is normally wrapped in banana leaves and baked or boiled. It smells awful but has a soft cheese-like texture. Just prior to the cyclone, people will also cut down banana trees



Figure 4 ICH in food preservation. Fermenting banana.
(Source: Vanuatu Cultural Centre)

and manioc tops so that they can survive the strong winds and will still provide food after the cyclone.

Prior to European arrival, all forms of traditional architecture had low stooping roofs or roofs imbedded into the ground. With the appropriate materials and construction techniques, these houses were highly cyclone resistant. Today many people build local houses with higher walls to provide more space. A survey carried out by the VKS and UNESCO after Cyclone Pam showed that in many villages on Tanna and in the Shepherds Islands, many of these traditional houses with low roofs survived whereas much of the traditional houses with higher walls collapsed. On Tanna there are accounts of whole communities finding shelter in these cyclone resistant traditional houses.

A recent project completed on the island of Tanna involving Kyoto University, the Ministry of Education and Training and RTCs, came up with an assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the *nimalatan* (Tannese name for these cyclone resistant houses), and collaborated with the locals to come up with further ideas on how to advance the *nimalatan* with respects to strength, durability and comfortability.

ICH after natural disaster

What kinds of ICH are still being used after cyclones? After a cyclone, most food crops can last for a few days, but otherwise crops like banana and breadfruit have to be fermented so they can last longer. In addition to the normal traditional food crops we eat, there are numerous edible plants that people can eat during times of scarcity, such as black palm (Figure 5), giant taro, and edible ferns.

In March 2019, VKS in collaboration with other government stakeholders, such as the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Forestry, Fisheries and Biodiversity, and the Ministry of Health, will be hosting the second Slow Food Festival on the island of Maewo, to showcase different traditional edible produce and different food preparation techniques in Vanuatu. In addition, the Festival aims to promote traditional food as a means of reducing dependency on imported food after disasters. This Festival will be bringing together traditional practitioners from all over Vanuatu who will be demonstrating their various traditional knowledge on food.



Figure 5 Disaster food. Black palm trunk.
(Source: Vanuatu Cultural Centre)

ICH and Less Dependence

The more people living in their traditional environments rely on their traditional knowledge for food and appropriate traditional shelters, gradually, the more rural Vanuatu will become less dependent on food and shelter and the less the government will have to spend on these two necessities.

On the other hand, as we continue to develop, there is a great danger that much of traditional knowledge will eventually become marginalised and overlooked. There is a great need for investment in programs aimed at encouraging Ni-Vanuatu to retain, utilise and pass on important aspects of our ICH, especially regarding DRR. It is in the continual practice and sharing of ICH that important parts of our ICH regarding DRR can be retained and developed to ensure better resistance to natural disasters.

ICH and Education – A Way Forward

As we continue to develop more and more as Pacific Nations, there is a great danger that much of traditional knowledge will eventually become disregarded. The majority of our children today are exposed to so much external influences and it is possible that in the next few generations, traditional knowledge will be something we read about only in books.

Most of our rural societies still rely on the resources within their environmental surroundings and there is risk that our education system does not provide adequate teaching to assist those students that do not end up working in the formal economy but teaches them to yearn for a kind of livelihood that they aspire towards but do not have the financial means to afford.

In recent years, the VKS has embarked on some initiatives to assist the Ministry of Education by the creation of a set of curriculum on traditional knowledge for grades 2, 4 and 6 (Figure 6). The aim was to assist teachers to teach traditional knowledge in schools. Due to the diversity of cultures in Vanuatu, there was no way to write about a specific culture, and so the curriculum set comprises of guidelines on how to teach traditional knowledge, and examples from parts of Vanuatu where teachers could use as a guide to teach their students in the local cultures and traditions in their respective areas. The teaching materials produced by the Vanuatu Cultural Centre has already been provided to the education but it is not yet compulsory for the schools to use.

In addition, as the repository for cultural

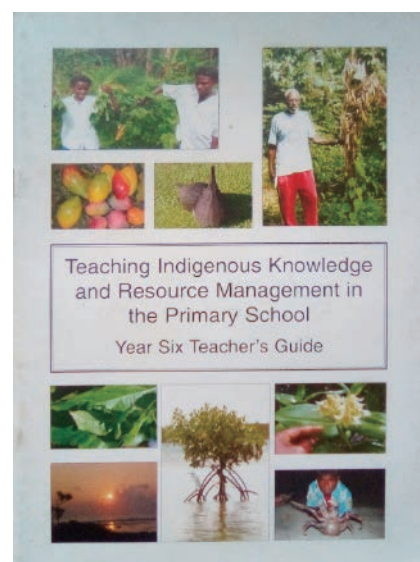


Figure 6 Year 6 Teachers Guide to teaching ICH. (Source: Vanuatu Cultural Centre)

heritage in Vanuatu, VKS has a wide range of literature, videos, artefacts and photographic resources, available to the general public which is used by students, teachers, researchers and the general public to access cultural, historical, anthropological, archaeological and ethnographical information.

Many rural primary schools have one or two hours each week dedicated to cultural activities. Some secondary schools are already including cultural activities into their curriculum and the Lycee Louis Antoine de Bougainville is a good example of a school that has introduced cultural activities as an optional part of the school curricular, and has grown in student participation, interest and variation of cultural activities (Figure 7).

It is imperative that traditional knowledge and cultural heritage is continually taught in schools in that they provide a means of adapting to the natural and social environment, sustainability to the resources available and to provide resilience to population during and after disasters.

Thank you for your patience and I hope that what I have presented has assisted in our understanding of the importance of traditional knowledge.



Figure 7 Lycee students constructing traditional house.
(Source: Vanuatu Cultural Centre)