

# Vanuatu's 40th anniversary: Review of the first decade of political independence from 1980 to 1990

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**Abstract:** The year 2020 is a particularly important one for Vanuatu. On 30 July, this SID (Small Island developing state) celebrated the 40th anniversary of its independence. And in December 2020 it should be leaving the list of the least developed countries in the world. We could say that at 40 years old, Vanuatu has reached adulthood, but its first ten years of life were critical for its development. Vanuatu's first two development plans set up the foundations for economic and social viability in the face of constraints imposed by insularity. Forty years after independence, many elements of these development plans are still present in national policy. The objective of this article is to look back at the first decade of independence in terms of Vanuatu's development policies, the rationale behind them, the hopes they raised and the constraints they encountered. Receptive to the concepts of the "Pacific Way" and "Melanesian renaissance", the first government of Vanuatu decided to build an endogenous development model. But to implement it, it chose economic planning, exogenous to the region. Despite undeniable successes, this model of endogenous development came up against constraints imposed by insularity and the international economic context.

**Keywords:** Vanuatu, independence, Pacific Way, SIDS (Small Island Developing State), development plans, insularity

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Figure 1: Impression from celebration of Vanuatu's Independence Day in 2019



## Introduction

The year 2020 is particularly important for Melanesia. On 4 October, the second referendum for political independence of New Caledonia was held, and on 30 July, Vanuatu celebrated the 40th “anniversary” of its independence from France and Great Britain (Fig 1 shows the celebration of independence in 2019, the 39th “anniversary”). This young Oceanian State divides voters in New Caledonia, where those loyal to the French Republic see Vanuatu’s independence as unsuccessful, leading the former New Hebrides towards failed development and misery. The proof, for them, is that Vanuatu is among the 47 least developed countries (LDCs) on the planet. The supporters of Kanaky, an independent New Caledonia, answer that on 20 December 2020 Vanuatu will leave the list of LDCs<sup>1</sup>, proof of the improvement of its economic situation as an independent nation. They also remind us that in 2016, it was ranked 4th happiest country in the world by the NEF (New Economics Foundation), a British independent research institute, that developed the Happy Planet Index (HPI), and was ranked first in this index in 2006.<sup>2</sup>

Vanuatu’s 40th anniversary marks the maturity of a State. This middle age is characterized by the emergence of new requirements, for example the desire to create a national university. The first decades of independence were devoted to ensure the country’s viability. When the question of higher education arose, these functions were fulfilled by the University of the South Pacific (USP), a regional university founded in 1968 (McCall 1984; Naidu 2019). After 30 to 40 years of independence, it seems logical to establish its own national university. Vanuatu follows the example of three other Small Islands Developing States (SIDS) in the South Pacific in having a national university: Fiji, the Solomon Islands and Samoa. As Vanuatu rejoices and celebrate its middle age, it is important to look back on the goals that the new country established at the outset of independence, and to see if, and how, they have been achieved. This article scrutinizes those early development policies, revisits the rationale behind them, the hopes they raised, and the constraints they encountered.

This study is based on two vectors of knowledge. The first is an analysis of public policy documents published

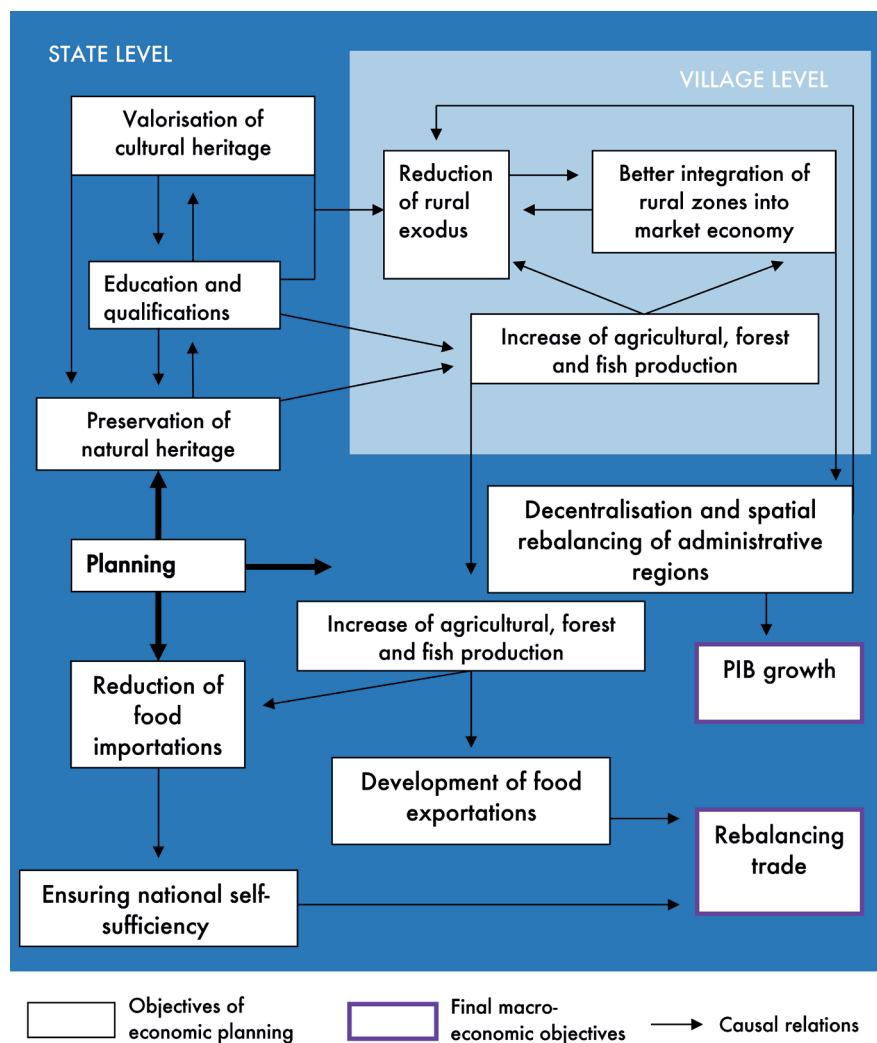


Figure 2: The objectives of Vanuatu’s first two development plans.

by the government of Vanuatu during the first ten years of independence. The second is participant observation. I lived in Vanuatu for a total of five years, working on two contracts (1984-85 and 1989-91). Based at the Fisheries Department in Port Vila, I studied the development of Vanuatu’s fisheries and the integration of the sector into public development policies (Cillaurren et al. 2001; David 2011). I also taught geography for three and a half years at the Port Vila branch of the USP (see David 1989).

The paper is structured in two parts. The first part is devoted to economic planning. Rebalancing the national territory and developing human capital were two early development priorities for the independent government. The second part provides an analysis of the first two development plans. Emphasis is put first on economic performance, including Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and the trade balance, and second, on geographical indicators, including schooling levels and internal migration.

## Economic planning as a “driver” of Vanuatu viability

The viability of small island states was the subject of in-depth studies initiated by UNCTAD in the early 1980s (David 2010). Viability was defined as the combination of a static state, “the meeting of the necessary and sufficient conditions to exist and endure”, and a dynamic state, “the conditions to ... achieve development both in terms of sustainable use of natural resources and in terms of improvement of the social and economic standard of living of the population” (Doumenge 1983, 1985).

On the eve of independence in 1980, the economy of the New Hebrides condominium had serious structural weaknesses, which were a powerful constraint for the viability of the future State of Vanuatu. Half of the cultivated land was committed to subsistence agriculture. Coconuts and copra production, the main, if not the only source of cash income for rural households, were in decline. The majority of coconut trees were over 50 years old (Weightman 1989).





Source: Kowasch 2019.

Figure 3: Customary wedding ceremony in Port-Vila.

In addition, consumption of imported food was rapidly increasing in rural areas, causing further deterioration in the trade balance. Four staple foods - rice, canned fish, flour processed into bread, and sugar - alone accounted for 42% of total household expenditures and 62% of expenditure on food (Marshall 1986). These structural weaknesses in Vanuatu's economy were compounded by a major political crisis. Secession attempts arose on Santo, Tanna and Lamap (South of Malakula), three of the country's main islands (Bonnemaïson 1985, 1986, 1987; Huffer 1993), with the result that exports fell by 30% between 1979 and 1989, and GDP declined from US\$ 80 million to US\$ 64 million.

Faced with the need to build a new economic base and to strengthen national unity, the new Government of Vanuatu opted for an original set of hopeful policies. Rejecting the liberal model, but without adhering to Marxist economic management as used in the Eastern Bloc, this policy relied on Oceanian cultural values and aimed to distance itself from the global East-West polarization. Under the government of Walter Lini<sup>3</sup>, Prime Minister from 1980 to September 1991, a model of self-centered development was set up, referring to "Melanesian socialism", an ideology developed by the Vanuaaku Pati (VAP) and based on Christian principles and the values of Oceanian culture (Tabani 2000).

For Lini, the viability of the young State of Vanuatu meant self-reliance. Viability is primarily an economic concept but self-reliance includes economic and political components. In 1983, Lini decided first to officially join the non-aligned movement, and second to establish diplomatic relations with Cuba. In 1986, while the Cold War was still going on, Vanuatu was the only country in Oceania not to align with the USA and the majority of Western nations. The Lini government established diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union (in July 1986) and also with the United States (in September 1986) (Huffer 1993). The desire for non-alignment and anti-colonialism appeared very early in Lini's reflections on the future of Vanuatu. It led him to consider economic planning, devoid of particular ideological directions, as a major tool to achieve Vanuatu's self-reliance. Looking back, Vanuatu is the country in Oceania that has most favoured state-led economic development. This was at variance with many of the newly independent African countries, with the exception of Tanzania and Guinea, that had followed European economic planning models or were strongly influenced by their former colonial powers.

From the early days of the Republic, a National Planning Office (NPO) was created within the Prime Minister's Office to design the overall plan for self-reliance and to guide the sectoral

policies of each ministry. As Vanuatu did not have experts in these fields, the vast majority of the NPSO staff were foreign consultants, mainly from Western English-speaking countries, including Australia. Launched in 1982 for a period of 15 years, economic planning was designed to lead the country to economic self-reliance. The other two facets of Vanuatu's self-centred development model were first the priority given to the development of agriculture and natural resource exploitation, and second, the concern to make the village the reference place for economic development (Fig. 2). The importance given to the village is consistent with the significance given to custom (Fig. 3) and customary chiefs defined by a "Melanesian Renaissance". It is also in line with the model of African socialism developed by Julius Nyerere in Tanzania, particularly his policy of organizing village communities (the "ujamaas") along collectivist principles. This inspired Lini to design Vanuatu's policy of self-reliance.

Vanuatu's broad public policy guidelines were defined during the first development plan (1982-1986). This remained unchanged until 1991, the end of the second development plan and the "reign" of Walter Lini. In December 1991, the Union of Moderate Parties, the main opposition party since the country gained independence, won the parliamentary elections. In the absence of industry and mining, the guidelines





Figure 4: Development of domestic trade and transport by sea, here between Efate and Malakula.

promoted agriculture, forestry and fisheries, the first two sectors accounting for 40% of development investments in the first Plan. Efforts focused on the development of micro-projects at the village level with four objectives: (a) to ensure the country's food self-reliance; (b) to better integrate rural areas into the market economy; (c) to reduce the rural exodus to Port-Vila (on Efate island) and Luganville (on Santo island), the country's two urban centres; and (d) to diversify copra-dominated exports.

Development policy for the primary sector was accompanied by a strong desire to restructure the territorial administrative framework, which was inherited from the New Hebrides condominium. This administrative restructuring was supplemented by a will to spatially rebalance the archipelago, but not without ulterior political motives. The three secessionist islands of Santo, Tanna and Malakula were the agricultural lungs of the New Hebrides (fig. 4). For the young State of Vanuatu, it was vital to promote other poles of development that could stabilize the population and avoid rural-urban migration. At the macroeconomic level, the primary sector development policy was intended to provide an improvement of the trade balance, both by increasing exports and by better supplying the local market to improve import substitution.

### **Restructuring of the territorial administrative framework and regional rebalancing**

Under the British-French condominium, four administrative districts divided the New Hebrides into parallel bands along latitudes: North, North-Central, South-Central and South, the latter also known as Tafea. With political independence in 1980, eleven regions were created.<sup>4</sup> Known as "Local Government Regions" (L.G.R.), they were administered by a Local Government Council, with 10 to 30 members depending on the size of the population, supported by a small administration. This council was composed of two thirds of members elected by universal suffrage every four years, with one seat per 1,500 inhabitants, and one third of the members appointed by the central government: representatives of customary chiefs, women, youth and the churches. It had three main tasks: (a) the preparation and implementation of regional development plans; (b) the construction and maintenance of educational, health, transport and cultural infrastructure such as schools, health centres, roads, bridges, secondary airports, and cultural or community centres; (c) the control of commercial activities and the levying of local taxes, including an annual capitation tax of 500 to 1,600 vatus depending on the region (the equivalent of US\$5 to US\$16.

The administrative decentralization was accompanied by a programme of spatial rebalancing. In 1979, the internal migration from rural areas to Port-Vila or Luganville was already a matter of concern for public authorities. Between 1967 and 1979, Vanuatu's urban population doubled from 7,770 to 15,780 (Vanuatu O.S. 1983). On the eve of independence, one third of the population was concentrated on Efate and Santo islands. For the rest of the archipelago, the migratory balance was negative. The rural-urban migration was particularly strong in Paama and the Shepherds Islands. The majority of migrants were young adults seeking employment. In the cities, they were reunited with relatives or friends who had previously settled (Bonnemaison 1977). Family and ethnic affinities played an important role in the settlement of urban neighbourhoods. Problems of employment, social housing, education, health, water supply and pollution were the corollaries of urban growth (fig. 5).

For the new Prime Minister, Walter Lini, rural-urban migration was one of the main threats to Vanuatu's future. Combined with the deterioration of their standard of living, the new migrants who had chosen to settle in Port Vila and Luganville faced acculturation problems and loss of their roots. In order to absorb migration, Lini and his team reasoned that





Source: Gilbert David 2007.

Figure 5: Urbanisation process in coastal Pango (Efate island) in 2007.

more jobs had to be created in rural areas. The spatial rebalancing programme was a response to that need. It aimed first of all to create regional development poles from the eleven provincial capitals newly-established in the framework of administrative decentralization, along with specialization of regional economies.

However, because of the limited diversity of economic resources on the different islands, due to the small size of the country, such specialization was difficult to implement. The development of coconut groves, cocoa and artisanal fishing was on the agenda everywhere, and none of the peripheral regions had specific characteristics. The four largest regions of the country (Santo/Malo, Malakula, Efate and Tafea) were the most specialized, as they had space for livestock and logging, and water for rice cultivation. The island of Tanna also had a virtual monopoly on the production of coffee (Arabica) for export, while Efate and Santo/Malo developed market gardening and local poultry and pig farming. As for industrial projects, they were mainly focused on the exploitation of natural resources, particularly timber. They could not be set up outside Efate and Luganville because of remoteness and the lack of local workforce training elsewhere. Moreover, any industrial development plans that promoted import

substitution were confronted with the very limited size of the national market.<sup>5</sup> With the exception of the brewery in Port-Vila, the industries created in the urban centres thus remained small. The second priority of the spatial rebalancing programme was therefore the strengthening of communication and road, sea and air transport infrastructures within and between the islands (Vanuatu NPO 1982; Vanuatu NPSO 1984). The creation of Air Vanuatu in 1981 supported this imperative.

### ***Development of the country's human capital and emergence of local entrepreneurs***

During the last years of the condominium, significant efforts had been made in primary and secondary education throughout the country. The Lini government has inherited higher education levels than the average of other States in Oceania at the moment of their accession to political independence. Nevertheless, school enrolment was poor. In 1979, nearly one person out of nine in the working population was illiterate and only one third of children aged between 10-14 attended school regularly. Five out of six students dropped out of school at the end of primary school. For the new Prime Minister, all children aged 6 to 11 were now required to attend primary

school, with the ultimate goal of having a quarter of them moving onto secondary school. The number of primary schools would increase by 20%. These quantitative educational targets were linked to qualitative goals. There was no point in opening new classes and increasing the number of students if the content of the curricula, developed by the former colonial powers, was not radically overhauled. It was no longer a question of bringing children the “enlightenment” of British or French education, but of preparing them to take charge of their country. The aim was to train citizens who could use their school knowledge for the development of rural communities. Young people, falling between formal knowledge gained in local schools and the daily demands of rural life, should be less inclined to migrate to the city (Fig. 6).

As a “lever of development”, education was proposed as a brake of rural-urban migration, not an accelerator. In this context, Lini wanted to see the emergence of local entrepreneurs capable of taking over the plantations and businesses abandoned by expatriates on the eve of independence. The final aim was to revitalize and animate economic activities at the village level. But no specific efforts were made outside schools and education. The identification and training of potential entrepreneurs were



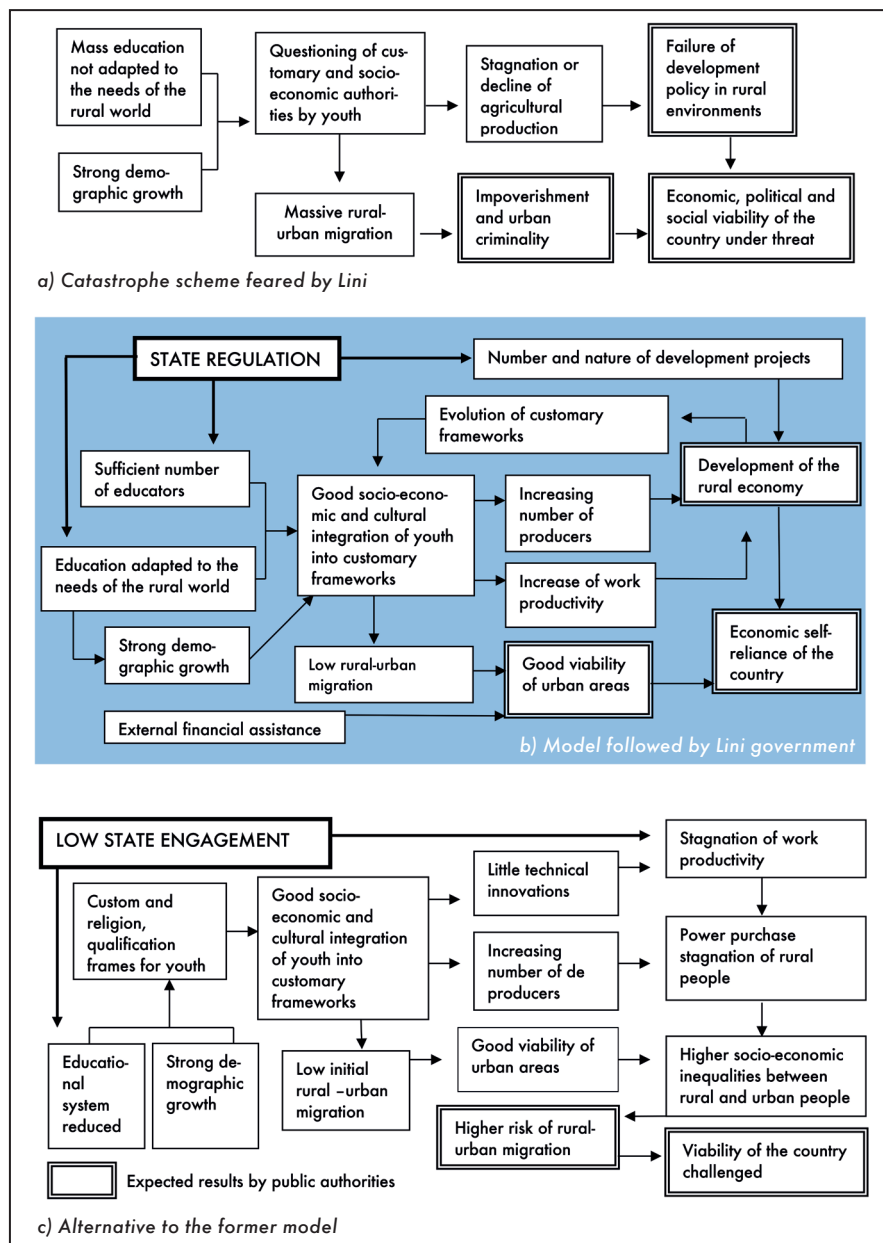


Figure 6: The relationship between education and development, the ideological models of the VAP

left to agricultural extension officers and fisheries departments. This ambiguity reflects the contradictions of the Prime Minister's approach to education, which are indicative to his ideological perspective on urban-rural and population-development relationships.

On the one hand, education was seen as a priority for a country where half the population was under 16 years old and where the intention was to build economic independence. On the other hand, the government highlighted the ambiguous effects of education in terms of rural-urban migration, unemployment and crime as evidenced by this excerpt from the mid-term review of Vanuatu's first National Development Plan: "As many countries have discovered, too rapid, an expansion of a formal educational system, with the foreign curricu-

lum, techniques, and built in values that it brings with it, can be overdone and lead to the phenomenon of "educated unemployed". The "educated" soon push the less educated out of work, and the desperate circle of unemployment and crime begins. Once this cycle starts, there is virtually no means of reversing it. Few people, after tasting the pleasures and freedoms of city life wish to return to the village (Vanuatu NPSO 1984:72). Lini perceived the urban environment as hostile, foreign to customs and to traditional ways of life, and shaped by the values of the former colonial powers. There were potential dangers for newly arrived migrants from rural areas. Christian references and pan-Pacific nationalism combined to equate rural Oceania with heaven on earth, and hell with the "city of the whites". Therefore, educa-

tion and development programmes were the two main tools of the government to ensure the sustainability of rural areas and to delay urban growth.

Fig. 6 shows three models dealing with the effects on development in Vanuatu related to three different types of education policies. These models were created from the analysis and interpretation of various planning documents produced by the Prime Minister's Office during the launch of the first national development plan (Vanuatu NPO 1982) and during the mid-term evaluation of this plan (Vanuatu NPSO 1984). These 'ideal types' illustrate the possible effects of high population growth. Despite an average increase of 3.2% between 1967 and 1979, the VAP did not actually consider population growth to be a problem. On the contrary, demographic dynamism was seen as Vanuatu's "revenge" on its colonial history, and a prerequisite for rebuilding the nation's economic viability. The reality was somewhat different.

Fig. 6a shows the catastrophic outcomes feared by Lini. In this model, budget spending on education is high, resulting in mass education. All schools and colleges built by the colonial administration remain, and new schools open. The literacy rate increases significantly despite high population growth. Quantitatively, the challenges of population growth are addressed. But the programmes taught to rural students, who made up more than 95% of Vanuatu's youth at independence, were not adapted to the needs of village economies and island self-reliance. Educational programmes are colonial, based on the curriculum of the French and British regimes. These did not lead to increase agricultural production expected by the development plan. Feeling useless in their village, young graduates perceived urban migration as their best solution. As a result of increased migration, urban population growth quickly outstripped job opportunities. The imbalance between the number of applicants and jobs opportunities led to impoverishment and more petty crime. In rural areas, migration to the city leads to the departure of motivated young people, which has a negative impact on development projects. Ultimately, this model leads to serious threats to the economic and social viability of the country and the failure of the concept of Melanesian renaissance.

Fig. 6b shows the model followed by



the Lini government. The State plays a central role and has a quantitative and qualitative input on education. First, content knowledge corresponds to the needs of village economy and society. Second, the number of teachers is sufficient to cover teaching needs. Third, those teachers are properly trained to adapt their instruction to the village context. This educational input results in better labour productivity and more effective implementation of development programmes. In the end, this model leads to reduced rural-urban migration and good viability of the urban areas, whose population remains limited.

Fig. 6c shows a model where the State is almost absent, due to insufficient budgetary capacity. The State is unable to maintain the dense network of primary and secondary schools inherited from the condominium. The very limited State involvement in education is partly compensated by the participation of customary systems and churches in the education of young villagers. This type of training is not compatible with the development of innovative agricultural practices. In the end, labour productivity stagnates, and purchasing power falls in village communities, generating dissatisfaction. There is a high risk of widening of social-economic disparities between urban and rural areas, promoting rural-urban migration. Young people a) no longer recognize themselves in the customary village organization and subsistence farming, where the cash economy remains underdeveloped and b) are attracted by a certain level of employment and rising wages of urban areas. In the short or medium term, such growing inequalities in employment and income between rural and urban areas may lead to more migration, followed by rapid urban growth. This leads to the same problems as detailed in Fig. 6a.

The following excerpt from the mid-term review of Vanuatu's first National Development is an interesting illustration of the questions raised by the Government of Vanuatu. "Few, if any, countries have succeeded in achieving growth in incomes without also suffering growth in unemployment and crime, as well as a general breakdown of traditional institutional structures and values. Vanuatu may be fortunate, in some ways, in that development has only started of late, leaving traditional institutions largely intact. By examining other countries experiences, Vanuatu can take steps towards

minimizing the adverse social impacts of modernization and structural transformation. One option is to go slow and with caution rather than rushing ahead along an uncertain path which has failed more often than not elsewhere. In any case, the speed with which development efforts are pushed forward should always take into consideration the availability of local manpower. If such manpower is not available, efforts may proceed on two fronts; one option is to train the manpower, while the other is to phase out or delay the project until sufficient manpower is available" (Vanuatu NPSO 1984:71).

### **Analysis of the first two development plans: political convictions in the face of island realities**

At the beginning of Vanuatu's first development plan, economic self-reliance was defined according to macro-economic criteria: "The stage of economic self-reliance will have been reached when Vanuatu is able to meet import requirements from foreign exchange earnings and fiscal requirements from domestic revenues" (Vanuatu NPO 1982:3). The chronic deficit in the State budget, low savings in relation to development needs, and a trade balance unbalanced in favour of imports were identified as the three main macro-economic constraints needed to be removed to achieve economic self-reliance. Despite the fact that these objectives were made obsolete by ideological content of Lini's discourse and thinking, a first analysis of the development plans has to refer to the macro-economic principles, to education measures and to the field of eco-demography.

### **Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and trade balance**

Although the GDP is a poor indicator of economic activities in a country like Vanuatu, where the food sector still dominates many islands, its temporal variation is a valuable indicator of government development efforts. A better integration of rural areas into the cash economy should have resulted in an overall increase in GDP and in agricultural growth relative to other economic sectors in GDP formation, since the development of village agriculture was one of Lini's priorities.

From 1983 to 1990, Vanuatu's GDP grew by 18.5% from 10,078 million to

11,938 million vatus (at 1983 prices, equivalent to US\$100-120 million). Only the industrial sector enjoyed steady growth and its share in GDP increased from 7.5 to 15%. In contrast, the respective shares of services and the primary sector in GDP showed a slightly negative trend (66-62% and 26-23%). The decline in the share of services in GDP occurred only in 1989 and 1990 and is explained by the decline of administration expenses, which fell by 15% between 1987-1988 and 1989-1990 – the first results of an "austerity cure" enacted by the country's donors. After ten years of self-governance, the Government of Vanuatu had to comply with the rules of "good governance" established at an international level and embarked on a structural adjustment programme, described below (Vanuatu BNP 1992).

This situation was an induced effect of Lini's willingness to open up the country to international donors. At first glance, this seems to be paradoxical and counter to the principles of Melanesian socialism. But it was consistent with Vanuatu's political non-alignment, which is reflected in the diversification of bilateral donors and the country's integration into international bodies (Huffer 1993). It is also consistent with Lini's desire to secure the budgets that could finance development operations in Vanuatu. This strategy was proven to be very effective. Over the periods 1980-84 and 1985-89, international aid amounted to US\$612 and US\$425 per capita respectively. In the period 1990-94, it was only US\$350 per capita (World Bank 2005).

While donors provided significant funding to the Vanuatu economy, making this small island State one of the world's most aided countries per capita (Antheaume and Lawrence 1985; Antheaume and Bonnemaïson 1988), aid had also a counterpart: Vanuatu's obligation to comply with donor recommendations, particularly in terms of structural adjustment. This dependency, or even subjugation, of Vanuatu to certain international donors clearly did run counter to the principles of Melanesian renaissance and Melanesian socialism, in particular the principle of island self-reliance. It was a very heavy cost, but VAP and Lini hoped that the benefits to be derived from this aid would be much greater and would constitute an essential contribution to the national policy implemented by the first development plan. Jarayaman and Ward (2006) rec-



ognize that exports have had a positive effect on social-economic growth. And international aid may have helped to support exports, although available data do not allow this hypothesis to be verified. Hughes and Sodhi (2006) are more severe and note that international aid did not benefit Vanuatu.

The endogenous development policy put in place by the successive Lini governments should have led to a spectacular expansion of the primary sector economy. However, this did not happen. The erosion of the sector after 1985 reflects the vulnerability of agriculture due to fluctuations in copra prices on the international market, and to the risk of hurricanes. Such vulnerability already prevailed before independence, and the government's policy of diversifying commercial agriculture hardly changed this. The agricultural sector as a whole still mirrors trends among the three main export crops (copra, cocoa, coffee). Food crops remained the main alternative to copra production (Fig. 7). Their share in the value added of agriculture increased from 1983 to 1990, from 36% at the beginning of the period (1983-1985) to 48% in 1988-1989, a period of very low copra production following the devastating passage of cyclone Uma in 1987 (David and Lille 1992). Except for 1989, 1990 and 1991, during which GDP growth exceeded 4%, the population always grew at a faster rate, leading to a deterioration in GDP per capita. This undermined the government's goal of economic independence, including the policy of import substitution. From 1982-1983 to 1990-1991, import substitution doubled in value, while export coverage fell from 25 to 20%, with exports growing by only 16% over the same period (Vanuatu SO 1983; Vanuatu NPSO 1986; Vanuatu BNP 1992).

### **Level of schooling and net migration between rural and urban areas**

Education is a sector where demographic growth was neglected in the first national plan of 1981 and 1982. The mid-term review of Vanuatu's first National Development Plan drew the government's attention to the dramatic increase in student numbers. From 50,250 students in 1984, this population rose to 59,410 students in 1989 and 70,760 ten years later (Vanuatu NPSO 1984). In 1984, education already accounted for a quarter of government expenditure,

at an average cost per child enrolled of US\$232 per year in primary schools and US\$950 in secondary schools.<sup>6</sup> It was almost impossible to spend more money on education. Greater expenditure on education became even more difficult following political unrest in 1988.<sup>7</sup> Considerable spending was then needed on law enforcement. Therefore, the budget allocated to education was reduced to 20% of total expenditure (Vanuatu NPSO 1990).

To compensate for these financial restrictions and to cope with school population growth, the government raised the number of students per class, and unified the English and French school systems. This cut costs. In 1987, 956 primary school teachers taught 22,367 students, i.e. one teacher for 23.4 students. In 1994, the ratio was one teacher per 29 students, the number of teachers having been reduced by 8% and student numbers increased by 15%. Between 1982-1991, those measures do not seem to have affected school performance unduly. The quantitative targets set by the government were met, relatively cheaply. The number of primary schools (244 in 1984) did not increase much (to 260 in 1990) while youth illiteracy rate fell considerably. By 1992, over 95% of 6-year-olds were enrolled in school (Vanuatu NPSO 1984; Vanuatu BNP 1992). These undeniable quantitative successes should not mask two key negative elements. First, the limited budget for the school system against population growth. Second, the continuing cultural gap between schooling and the rural world.

To reduce the financial budget for education, the government of Vanuatu decided to entrust the maintenance of schools to local governments as part of its policy of administrative decentralization. The idea was interesting, but the transfer of competences was done without granting the local governments adequate financial resources. Most of regional income came from capitation taxes (per-person or household taxation), but its novelty hampered tax collection. By the end of the 1980s, a large number of Local Government Regions were unable to maintain their school systems. The Minister of Education then urged the village communities to take over. Many of them refused, deeming governmental actions to be inadequate in relation to the amount of tax they received and the total cost of schooling.<sup>8</sup> They considered that education was the

exclusive responsibility of public authorities, just like health, even if it meant allowing school buildings to deteriorate: broken bulbs and windows, for example, were not replaced. A generalized deterioration could be avoided thanks to the intervention of the European Union. The 4th European Development Fund provided a subvention to renovate the worst primary schools and to ensure the maintenance of others.

The ongoing cultural gap between schooling and the rural world, feared by Lini, illustrates the slow pace of "modernization". It also seems that combining the "way blong skul" (the way of school and religion) and the "way blong custom" (the way of custom) was an utopian project, seeking to rely on the former without altering the latter. Once they had returned to their villages, most of the students who had completed "classical" secondary education could not or did not want to use their school knowledge. Many of them, refusing agricultural work, after a period of a few months to several years of idleness, decided to try "their luck" in the city. This was also a strategy chosen by many technical education graduates faced with the low purchasing power of their rural fellow citizens. The prospect of being paid in food seemed to be neither stimulating nor economically viable for young entrepreneurs selling spare parts and tools they had bought in Port-Vila or Luganville.

Poor adaptation of schooling and strong demographic growth have only encouraged migration to the country's two urban centres. The failure of the Lini government's policies are evident. The urban population actually grew by almost 74% between 1979 and 1989<sup>9</sup> and, with the exception of Santo-Malo, Efate and Epi, all areas of Vanuatu had negative net migration (Vanuatu SO 1991). Paama and the Shepherd Islands had the highest outmigration. Over ten years, they lost 23.8% and 10.5% of their population respectively. These migrants, mostly young adults looking for work, accounted for 32% of the new urban dwellers in Port-Vila and Luganville, with Tafea natives making up a quarter.<sup>10</sup> Apparently, the development programmes implemented by the government have thus proved unable to stop the rural exodus. There has been at most a slight decline in the rate of urban population growth from 7.9% per annum between 1967-1979 to 7.5% between 1979-1989 (Vanuatu OS 1983; Vanuatu SO 1991).





Figure 7: Selling of yams at the food market in Port-Vila.

Source: Kowasch 2019.

## Conclusion

Since the first decade of political independence, Vanuatu's situation has involved the emergence of major risks, including climate change, in public policy. In 2015, one year before being ranked fourth among the world's happiest countries, Vanuatu was ranked the world's most dangerous country according to the risk index developed by the United Nations (BEH/UNU-HES, 2015). Profound changes are currently underway in Vanuatu. The future of this nation of about 308,000 inhabitants (at the end of 2020) is uncertain in a world of serious climatic change and pandemics. In a subsequent issue of *Pacific Geographies*, I will return to the example of Vanuatu and show the constraints that insularity and global changes are placing on this SIDS. At the 40th anniversary of Vanuatu's independence, I hope that this review on the country's first ten years of independence will provide food for thought to the younger generations striving for the future of their country.

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## Endnotes

<sup>1)</sup> The list of LDCs is reviewed every three years by the 24 members of the Committee for Development Policy. This committee is a subsidiary body of the United Nations Economic and Social Council. Its members are nominated by the United Nations Secretary-General for a period of three years. Four Pacific island states are on the list of LDCs: Kiribati, Solomon, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. All share low-income and are highly vulnerable to economic and environmental shocks (Guillaumont 2010).

<sup>2)</sup> In 2006, the HPI was calculated using three parameters: the ecological footprint, life expectancy, and the degree of well-being of the population. In 2016, a fourth parameter was added: income inequality. It is this last criterion that allowed Vanuatu to return to the list of countries of happiness, as income inequality is very low compared to New Caledonia, Papua New Guinea or other Pacific Island countries. The HPI is an alternative indicator to GDP and the Human Development Index HDI developed by the United Nations.

<sup>3)</sup> Walter Lini (1942-1999) was an Anglican priest born on Pentecost Island. He can be considered as the Father of Vanuatu Independence (Tabani 2000). On 17 August 1971, he formed the New Hebridean Cultural Association which

became the New Hebrides National Party NHHN at the end of the same year. In 1977, NHHN was renamed Vanuak'u Pati (VAP). In 1979, VAP won the pre-independence elections and Lini became the last chief minister of the New Hebrides Condominium. On 30 July 1980, the country gained independence and was named Vanuatu. Lini became its first Prime Minister and remained in the post until 1991 (Premadas and Steeves 1995; Morgan 2006).

<sup>4)</sup> Six of these regions consisted of a single island: Malakula, Pentecost, Ambrym, Epi, Paama, Efate. Two other regions (Ambae-Maewo and Paama-Lopevi) were formed from the combination of two islands of neighbouring areas. There were more complex constructions combining a main island and secondary islands in the same region. There were three of them: Santo-Malo (including Santo, Malo and Aore), Efate (including Efate, Emao, and the Nguna-Pele association), Taféa (including Tanna, Erromango, Aniwa, Futuna and Anatom). The latter was the only one that corresponded to a former district of the Condominium. A last region grouped together all the islands of a single archipelago into a single entity, as was the case of the Shepherds region, or associated two neighbouring archipelagos such as the Banks-Torrès region.



<sup>5</sup> In his study on viability criteria for island states, Doumenge (1983, 1985) considers that a minimum population of one million inhabitants is required to develop viable industries targeting the domestic market in response to imports.

<sup>6</sup> By way of comparison, in 1985 these average costs were US\$223 and US\$612 in Papua New Guinea, US\$67 and US\$361 in the Solomon Islands, and US\$40 and US\$90 in Indonesia; the share of education in government expenses in these three countries is much lower than in Vanuatu: 16% in Papua New Guinea, 17% in Solomon Islands and 9% in Indonesia (Vanuatu NPSO 1990:408).

<sup>7</sup> In May 1988, during a demonstration in Port-Vila, the police were overwhelmed and the Prime Minister Lini had to leave the city in a hurry for a few hours. However, better trained and much better equipped, the forces of law and order were in complete control in December of the same year when the President of the Republic, G.A. Sokomanu, attempted to deprive Lini of power in a coup.

<sup>8</sup> For example, school fees increased significantly and kindergarten enrolment, which was also subject to fees, became compulsory before the transition to primary school. In consequence, many rural families could no longer afford the financial burden of sending 4 to 5 children to school. This situation also led Maxime Carlot Korman, the new Prime Minister, after the departure of the VAP from the government in 1991, to decide to make education free of charge in early 1992. But a few weeks later, for budgetary reasons, he had to go back in part on this generous measure.

<sup>9</sup> The development of Port-Vila was more spectacular (+93.5%) than of Luganville (+34.5%) (Vanuatu SO 1991).

<sup>10</sup> In 1989, 12% of the inhabitants of Port Vila were from Paama, 17% from the Shepherds and 15.5% from Tafea (Vanuatu BNP 1992).

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