Decentralisation and rural water service delivery in Vanuatu

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Executive Summary

This research examines the strengths, challenges and opportunities associated with rural water service delivery in Vanuatu, with a specific focus on decentralisation.

Globally, there has been a slow but steady shift away from the community water management (CWM) model towards various alternative models – sometimes referred to as community water management plus (CWM+) (e.g., Baumann, 2006; Hutchings et al. 2015) – marked by increasing decentralisation, professionalisation, and a diversification in service delivery models, including various forms of private sector involvement (see Lockwood and Smits, 2011). However, there is little to no information of what this might look like in the Pacific Islands region. This research explores these wider global shifts and debates in the rural water supply, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) space in the context of Vanuatu.

Due to demographic, geographic, environmental and socio-economic particulars unique to Pacific Island Countries (PIC), the professionalisation of rural water service delivery at scale is unlikely in the near term, meaning that the community water management model will remain the dominant water service delivery approach for the foreseeable future. However, as Hutchings et al., (2017), among others argue, the balance of responsibility must eventually shift away from the expectation that rural communities can independently be successful "public service managers" (Hutchings et al., 2017). Communities need some kind of support.

While some PIC, such as Vanuatu, have adopted elements of CWM+ (by outsourcing training and strengthening community-level legal powers), there remains a widespread absence of systematic post-construction follow-up monitoring and support across the region. Lessons from Africa, Asia and Latin America demonstrate the value of institutionalised post-construction support and operationalising diverse service delivery approaches (e.g., government, private sector, CSOs). However, the unique character of the region questions the direct transferability of lessons from elsewhere to the Pacific Islands.

Decentralisation – including in the rural water sector – has been intensifying in PICs such as Solomon Islands, Fiji, and Vanuatu, including in the rural water sector with recent policies changes (all within the last decade) advancing (on paper at least) decentralisation aspirations. Evidence from around the world shows that decentralisation efforts vary widely, from "big bang" decentralisation (Hofman and Kaiser, 2004) through to gradual, well-resourced "wholesale planned decentralisation" to "phased", "partial" and "inadequately resourced" examples (Lockwood and Smits, 2011: 65-8). Under-funded decentralisation agendas and human resource gaps are challenges experienced elsewhere, and there remains debate about the net benefits that have derived from decentralisation in developing country contexts (see Faguet and Pöschl, 2015). Regardless, decentralisation unfolds over an extended period, taking decades not years. As Lockwood and Smits (2011) emphasise, effective decentralisation necessitates not only empowering but also resourcing lower levels of government.

Based on the analyses in this report, Vanuatu corresponds to a mix of "partial", "phased" and "inadequately resourced" decentralised rural water sector.

This research employed a mixed-methods approach, including literature reviews, stakeholder interviews, and participatory workshops, with interviews conducted across national, provincial, and village levels. Adapting and extending on the various extant WASH "building blocks" frameworks (e.g., Huston and Moriarty, 2018) and other key relevant literature (Lockwood and Smits, 2011; World Bank, 2017), this research utilises six critical "elements" or "building blocks" deemed critical to progressing decentralisation in the rural water sector in the PIC context:

- Policies, legal and regulatory frameworks
- Budgeting, finance, and (material) resources
- Information and knowledge sharing
- Monitoring, evaluation, and learning
- Harmonisation and coordination
- Human resources and capacity development.

These elements were examined within the broader context of the enabling environment (including the political economy) for sustainable rural water service delivery in Vanuatu (we did not explore sanitation). A total of 40 indicators were identified, with each element containing between 5 - 9 indicators. Each indicator was assigned a rating based on the evidence at hand (qualitative data and grey literature). Whilst a subjective process, applying a quantitative rating was deemed productive for identifying strengths, weaknesses, priority areas, and providing a benchmark for longitudinal purposes. Overall, the current state of decentralisation in the rural water sector in Vanuatu was rated as "weak" (mean 2.5 across 38 rated indicators), with one "moderate" element (policy, legal and regulatory frameworks) and five "weak" elements.

Vanuatu is nearly a decade into significant reforms in the sector, which began with legislative reviews conducted by the Vanuatu Law Reform Commission, which examined key water-related laws and led to subsequent amendments. This was followed by the development of the *National Water Policy* and *Strategy*, as well as the *National Implementation Plan* and its associated *Capital Assistance Program*. These reforms have contributed to a more structured and integrated governance framework, ensuring that rural water service delivery is better aligned with national development priorities and the country's long-standing decentralisation objectives.

With development partner support, the government and the Department of Water Resources (DoWR) have been attempting some regionally unique initiatives. These include outsourcing community-level training to service delivery partners (water safety planning, water committee training), strengthening community-level legal powers (e.g. water committee bylaws), seeking to register water committees as "legal entities", training water technicians at the subnational level to bolster local capacity, and experimenting with different cost-recovery approaches (loans and cooperatives).

While many of these initiatives are still in their early stages, and their long-term effectiveness and sustainability have yet to be fully assessed, they mark a significant policy shift away from the traditional CWM model towards a CWM+ approach. This transition reflects a broader move towards the professionalisation of the sector, aiming to enhance service delivery, strengthen governance, and improve long-term water security using the decentralised structures in place: central-provincial-area-village.

However, as with many countries, Vanuatu is struggling with turning policy into practice.

This is not solely due to financial and human constraints, but they play a determining role. Without more targeted support at the subnational level, the momentum and progress achieved could stall, and even regress.

The **policy, legal and regulatory landscape** governing WASH in Vanuatu is coherent and strong, with national and subnational policies guiding rural water delivery, and the National Sustainable Development Plan setting broad goals. The *National Water Policy* and *Strategy* emphasise decentralisation, with provincial DoWR staff and area councils responsible for facilitating and monitoring community Drinking Water Safety and Security Plans. In practice, however, this is restricted by resource constraints, and weather, environment, and disaster recovery disruptions, which weaken decentralised service delivery. Role definitions for subnational actors are not as clear or widely comprehended as required. Once formally registered, Water Committees (WCs) can enact bylaws and levy fees, with sample bylaws introduced in mid-2024. However, the DoWR faces challenges in formal registration. Nevertheless, exemplar cases demonstrate that formal recognition of water committee bylaws can hold up in court and result in community level adherence.

Vanuatu has enjoyed an increase in WASH funding since 2016, supporting **budgeting, finance and (material) resources** for rural water delivery. Total expenditure on WASH in Vanuatu has increased since 2019, to nearly USD$5 million in 2021 (USD$5.80 per capita). It has been estimated that VUV2 billion annually is required to meet the NIP targets. Legal frameworks for financial management are relatively strong at the national level, with gains being made at the subnational level. Provincial Water Supervisors and area councils have limited access to capital assistance and discretionary funds for community-aligned development projects. Most budget allocations go to staffing costs, leaving Provincial DoWR staff and Area Administrators struggling to secure funds for community visits, which are essential for monitoring Drinking Water Safety and Security Planning (DWSSP) no/low-cost improvements under the NIP. Community contributions to support water system operation and maintenance – water fees, fundraising – are strongly encouraged in Policy and trainings, but inconsistently practiced. Recent innovations include a *Community Water Supply Rules Samples* document, which includes a section on recommended fee retrieval, and a loan-based scheme which allows communities to receive water systems under a loan agreement repaid over five years; the latter having met with mixed success in early cases.

The cross-sectoral nature of WASH makes **information and knowledge sharing** a complex and resource-heavy task – this is not a challenge unique to Vanuatu. The DoWR's WASH database, launched in 2019, consolidates data from four main areas: water committees, water quality, DWSSP, and a water resources inventory (WRI). Community profile data is not linked to the WASH database. The 2022 ransomware attack on Vanuatu's Information and Communication Technology systems disrupted

government operations and weakened WASH sector data management, underscoring the need for stronger cybersecurity and data backup systems. Respondents described data collection as weak and challenging due to resource and capacity constraints, with a key data-management position still vacant. To improve accuracy and reduce delays, the DoWR plans to transition DWSSP reporting to electronic forms on tablets and smartphones.

Research highlights the critical role of **monitoring, evaluation, and learning** (MEL) systems in tracking progress and guiding adaptive management. The government monitors WASH progress using the National Sustainable Development Plan (NSDPs) Monitoring and Evaluation Framework, tracking progress toward policy objectives. The DoWR prioritises MEL through regular monitoring, but the focus is on overseeing water quality, compliance, advocacy, and hydrology. Provincial water officers monitor urban systems, while Community Development Officers handle rural initiatives but often face financial constraints, limiting field visits. Phase II of the Water Sector Partnership includes some limited funds to redress this; nevertheless, ongoing monitoring and WC support ("backstopping") is required beyond the 6-12 month no/low-cost DWSSP improvement phase for water system sustainability.

Harmonisation and coordination across the sector are challenging but have improved. Policy alignment is guided by the NSDP, and *National Water Policy* 2017-2030 and companion *National Water Strategy*. The DoWR leads WASH sector coordination through national, provincial, and area council-level meetings, engaging stakeholders to align rural water policy locally. Effective coordination depends on data accessibility, but resource constraints and ad hoc reporting limit comprehensive access. While DoWR manages WASH data, CSO input and access remains limited. Recent external initiatives have strengthened national databases and water supply coverage estimates (e.g., WRI). Integrating the WASH Cluster agenda into PWRAC meetings was suggested to streamline coordination. There is a missing link between area council and provincial administration in the rural water context. Improved coordination between provincial councils, area councils, and partners is required to drive progress in Vanuatu's WASH sector, and better support NSDP goals.

Human resources and capacity development are central to successful decentralisation. At both national and subnational levels, there is a marked shortage of skilled personnel and essential resources. The DoWR had several key unfilled positions at the time of data collection. Outsourcing community training to service delivery partners has expanded water safety planning coverage, increasing from 20 to 60 communities. This has boosted human resources and improved delivery consistency by minimising disruptions from disasters. However, challenges persist, including limited contractor oversight, quality control issues (e.g., incomplete reports, errors, and non-compliance), and high costs. Additionally, some respondents suggested that community engagement suffers when training is perceived as a commercial service, reducing in-kind labour contributions. According to some estimates, only 10% of communities sustained their DWSSP post-intervention, underscoring the need for follow-up training and ongoing external support for technical and governance issues. Innovations like the water technician training / rural plumbers' networks and area councils potentially operating as SPDs, are promising innovations that demand longitudinal investigation for impact and sustainability, with potential lessons for other Pacific nations.

In sum, despite challenges, Vanuatu has a solid policy base and established decentralised governance system with which to progress the CWM+ approach. This report aims to assist the government, development partners, and sector stakeholders prioritise resources and actions to enhance rural water service delivery and decentralisation efforts, ultimately improving WASH outcomes and strengthening the resilience and well-being of rural communities. More systematic and sustained financial and human resource support, alongside more strategic, real-time monitoring of the NIP/CAP, is arguably essential to sustain the transition from the CWM model to CWM+ that the country is already on; not building on the momentum and capacity that has been built over the last decade risks a misalignment between policy and practice.

Abbreviation

AA:	Area Administrator
AS:	Area Secretary
ATAC:	Area Technical Advisory Committee
CDO:	Community Development Officers (DoWR)
CWM:	Community Water Management
CWM+:	Community Water Management Plus
DLA:	Department of Local Authorities
DoWR:	Department of Water Resources
DWSSP:	Drinking Water Safety and Security Plans
GGI:	Global Green Growth Institute
ICT:	Information and Communication Technology
IWC:	International Water Centre
MEL:	Monitoring, Evaluation and Learning
NSDP:	National Sustainable Development Plan
PACWAM+:	Pacific Community Water Management Plus
PIC:	Pacific Island Countries
PKLE:	Pacific Knowledge and Learning Exchange
PWRAC:	Provincial Water Resource Advisory Committee
PWS:	Provincial Water Supervisor
PTAC:	Provincial Water Resource Advisory Council
NGOs:	Non-government organisations
NWRAC:	National Water Resources Advisory Committee
SDA:	Service Delivery Approach
SDP:	Service Delivery Partner
SOP:	Standard Operating Procedures
SPGC:	SHEFA Provincial Government Council
USP:	The University of the South Pacific
WASH:	Water, Sanitation and Hygiene
WC:	Water Committee
WHO:	World Health Organisation
VLC:	Vanuatu Law Reform Commission

Introduction

Pacific Island countries (PIC) face significant challenges in providing access to improved drinking water and sanitation services. Only half of the population uses basic drinking water sources, and just one-third have basic sanitation, placing these nations among the lowest globally in terms of access (United Nations, 2021). With limited government and private sector water services in rural areas, **community water management** (CWM) has become the dominant model for rural water service delivery, as reflected in numerous government policies.

The CWM model is entirely dependent on **water committees** (WCs) – a group of 'volunteers' who are tasked with managing and operating a water system (ideally) after some training. However, evidence from PIC and elsewhere demonstrates that most WCs are struggling to function sustainably and effectively (e.g., Bond et al., 2015; Clark et al., 2014; Hutchings et al., 2015; Love et al., 2020, 2021; Whittington et al., 2009; World Bank, 2017).

Poor CWM leads to poor water, sanitation, and hygiene (WASH) outcomes, such as inadequate accessibility, quality, and reliability of water and compromised hygiene practices.

Collectively, PIC have the lowest access to safely managed or basic drinking water and sanitation services in the world. As of 2020, only 47% of PIC rural populations had access to basic drinking water sources (WHO/UNICEF, 2021)

Since the 2000s, there has been a growing emphasis on the need for post-construction support and the rise of what has been called "community water management plus" (CWM+) approaches (e.g., Baumann, 2006; Hutchings et al., 2015, 2017). This has resulted in the emergence of alternative models marked by increasing **decentralisation,** professionalisation, and a diversification in service delivery models, including various forms of private sector involvement. There is a global shift towards a "**service delivery approach**" (SDA) to rural water supply, which means considering the entire life-cycle cost of water service delivery, incorporating both the hardware (engineering or construction elements) and software (management) components necessary for sustainable water services (Lockwood and Smits, 2011: 19-20, *et passim*; Moriarty et al., 2013; World Bank, 2017).

This shift in tackling rural water services also entails a greater appreciation for the enabling environment and its political economy, at all levels (international, national and subnational), and nuanced appreciation for the role of local (non-state) institutions (Whaley and Cleaver 2017).

Decentralisation

Decentralisation can be defined as "the transfer of authority to plan, make decisions or manage public functions from the national level to any organisation or agency at the sub-national level" (Mills et al., 1990: 89). In international development, decentralisation harks back to the post World War II reconstruction-era, where empowering local governments was a means to rebuild war-torn nations. It was refigured in the 1980s under the International Monetary Fund and World Bank as part of structural adjustment policies aimed to reduce central government expenditure and improve public sector efficiency and, since the 1990s, has been seen to enhance local governance and service delivery (Awortwi, 2011; Bergh, 2004; Conyers, 2007; Litvack and Seddon, 1999; Smoke 2003). Decentralisation is also an unmistakable feature of the water sector worldwide – considered a "critical building block" and a precursor to, or component of, the professionalisation of rural water service delivery (Lockwood and Smits, 2011; World Bank, 2017).

There remains debate amongst scholars and policy makers about the net development benefits that have derived from decentralisation in low- and middle-income countries (see esp. Faguet and Pöschl, 2015). Many **development partners** in the Pacific, including the Australian government, have not paid adequate attention to decentralisation. A 2014 evaluation of Australian aid found that it had only "variable success" in sustaining service delivery outcomes in decentralised contexts, and that subnational capacities and context were not appropriately taken into consideration in development policy, strategy, sectoral design and evaluation (ODE, 2014). A key recommendation was:

> **Aid is more likely to achieve sustainable improvements in services delivery if it works to improve *service delivery systems* rather than directly support the delivery of health, education, infrastructure or other services (ODE, 2015: 4)**

Decentralisation and service delivery

Service delivery refers to the mechanisms, processes, and activities involved in providing services (such as healthcare, education, water and sanitation etc.) to individuals, communities, or businesses. Key questions for service delivery include: What authority is held at the subnational level to make decisions about service delivery? Where does responsibility for planning, providing, and delivering services and monitoring lie? (ODE, 2014:92).

There are both **supply** and **demand** aspects of service delivery (Figure 1).

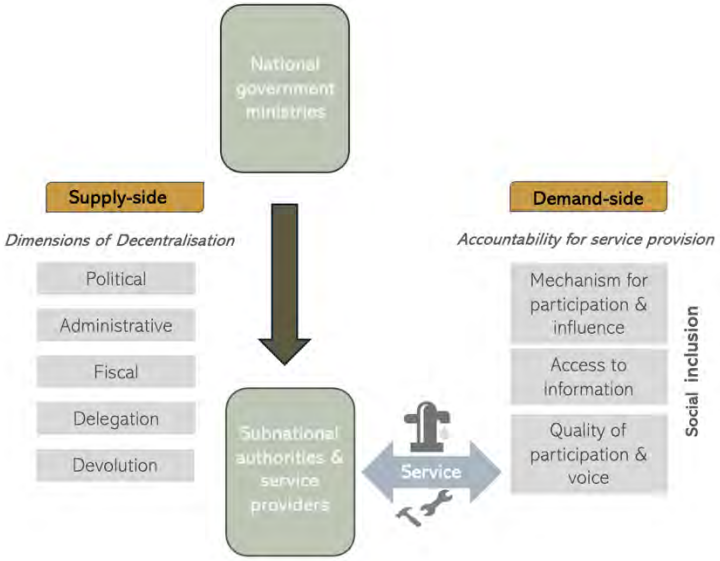


Figure 1: Service delivery and decentralisation[1]

The **supply side** focuses on the entities responsible for delivering the services and their capacity to provide quality services, and includes regulation and policies, resources, providers, and distribution and accessibility.

There are said to be four main **dimensions** or **types** of decentralisation.

> Dimensions of Decentralisation
>
> **Political**: The voice of citizens is integrated into policy decisions at a subnational level and civil society can hold the associated authorities and officials accountable
>
> **Administrative**: Redistributing authority and responsibility for providing public services from the central or national level of government to a subnational and/or local level
>
> **Fiscal**: The decentralisation of government expenditure and revenue-raising authority to subnational government structures in line with their allocated functional responsibilities
>
> **Market or divestment**: The transfer of functions to the private sector or non-government organisations.

Analysts also talk of three **modes** of decentralisation – deconcentration, delegation and devolution (below). In practice these modes co-exist, with political drivers and logistical realities rendering these categories less clear. This is especially evident in countries with low resources and capacity (ODE, 2014:91-2).

Modes of Decentralisation

Deconcentration: The weakest form of decentralisation, transferring administrative responsibilities to lower levels of central government (generally the first step in decentralisation)

Deconcentration entails the mere relocation of execution to the local level with decision-making power remaining at the centre

Delegation: Transfers managerial responsibility to semi-autonomous organisations, not wholly controlled by the central government but accountable to it

A more extensive form of decentralisation

Devolution: Transfers governance powers and responsibilities to subnational levels outside direct central government control, typically involving elected local governments

Devolution is the most far-reaching form of decentralisation and involves the transfer of governance powers and responsibilities to subnational levels that are largely outside the direct control of the central government, often through some electoral process which makes local governments directly accountable to local people.

The **demand side** of service delivery refers to the role and influence of users, customers, or beneficiaries in shaping the delivery of services. It emphasises the perspectives, preferences, and needs of individuals and communities who consume public or private services (such as healthcare, education, water etc.). Social inclusion is vital here - ensuring that all groups (women, men, children, and people with disabilities) can participate in decision making, hold providers accountable, and access services equitably.

Citizen demands for effective governance represent an important facet to effective service delivery in decentralised contexts. Their role is critical to support accountability for the quantity and quality of services and who gains access to those services (ODE, 2014). Three areas are of critical importance:

Accountability for service provision

Mechanisms for participation and influence: The structures and processes that ensure active participation of citizens in influencing the operations of government (elections and other means to participate in policy, planning, budgeting, and social auditing)

Access to information: Degree to which governments, especially at the subnational level, ensure accountability and transparency and the availability of information to citizens (e.g., public access to budgets and acquittals, user-friendly access to policy and processes, commitments and standards of service delivery)

Quality of participation and voice: Citizens' ability to engage in participation mechanisms, use information, and voice their opinions to influence government and services (ODE, 2014:93).

Rural water service delivery & decentralisation

The transfer of authority from central to local governments has significant implications for how water services are delivered in rural contexts. There are a range of decentralisation scenarios evidenced around the world. Decentralisation unfolds over an extended period, requiring many years, even decades. Evidence demonstrates that effective decentralisation requires meaningfully empowering lower levels of government, endowing them with not only service mandates but the resources, capacities, and decision-making autonomy required to meet those mandates. Without adequate resourcing and long-term commitment, service delivery falters and WASH situations can deteriorate rather than improve.

In their study of rural water service delivery in 13 countries, Lockwood and Smits (2011) identify four main decentralisation experiences associated with rural water service delivery:

Rural Water Service Delivery and Decentralisation

Phased Decentralisation: Initial deconcentration to the provincial level, followed by further decentralisation (e.g., Benin, Mozambique)

Partial Decentralisation: Varying degrees and dimensions of decentralisation applied in parallel (e.g., Ghana, India, USA, Ethiopia)

Inadequately Resourced Decentralisation: Implemented rapidly, often only on paper, without sufficient support or decentralisation of key capacities to local authorities (e.g., Burkina Faso)

Wholesale Planned Decentralisation: Well-planned and fully implemented (e.g., Colombia, South Africa, Uganda) (Lockwood & Smits, 2011:65-8).

The low population densities, geographical dispersal and isolation of many rural communities in PIC – among other factors unique to small island developing states – complicates the neat transferability of lessons learned from elsewhere to the PIC context.[2] This is perhaps most evident in regard to the professionalisation of rural water service delivery through market divestment or other means: **most PIC remain reliant on the CWM model** and a full service delivery approach to rural water supply is yet to be fully embraced (due to resource constraints and other factors).

Nevertheless, decentralisation trends have been intensifying in Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji, with each country enacting policy changes over the last decade or so that transfer greater responsibility to subnational actors to support (in varying ways and levels) rural water service delivery.

Context

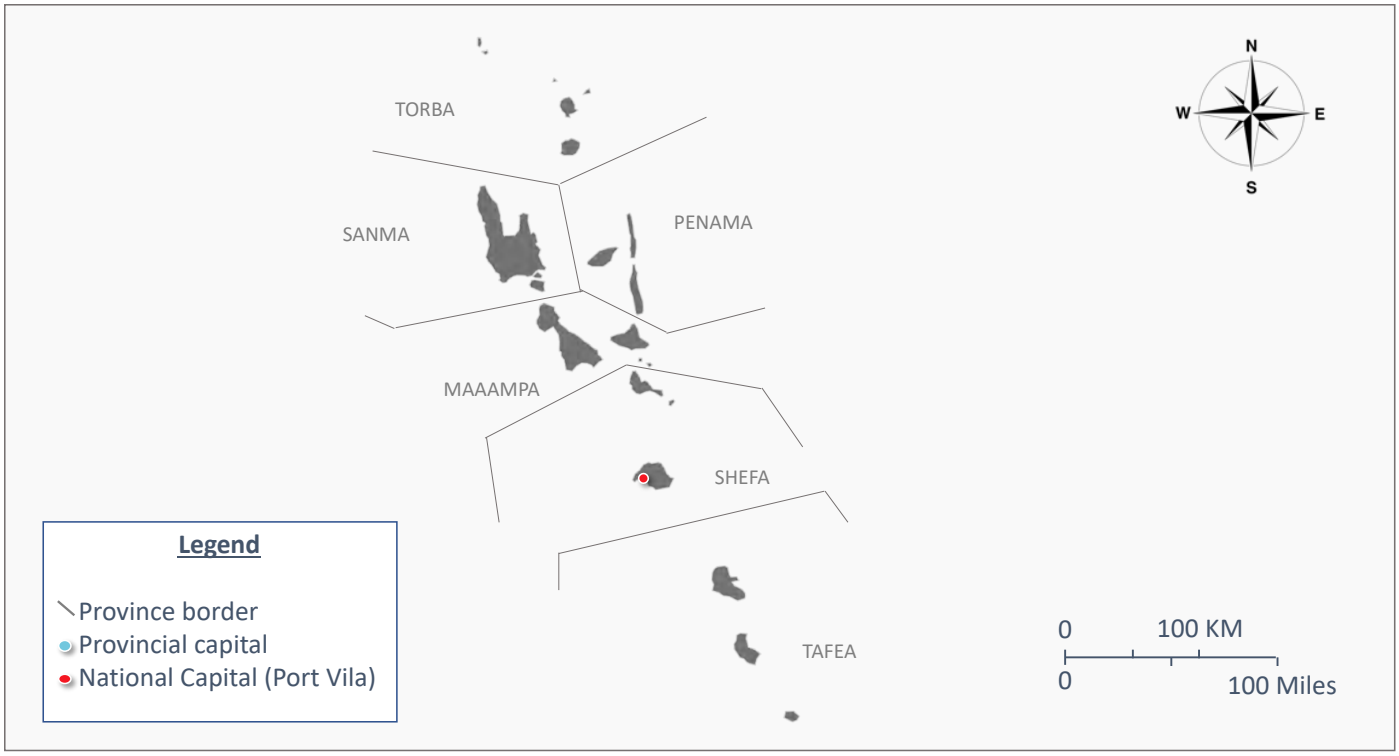


Figure 2: Map of Vanuatu – (source: Google maps and authors)

Vanuatu

The Republic of Vanuatu is a Y-shaped archipelago located in the Southwest Pacific consisting of over 80 islands stretching 1,176 km from north to south. The nation's land area covers 12,281 km², with an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) spanning 680,000 km². Vanuatu is divided into six provinces: MALAMPA, PENAMA, SANMA, SHEFA, TAFEA, and TORBA (Figure 2). Twelve islands are considered crucial due to their economic and demographic significance. The largest islands include Espiritu Santo (4,010 km²), Malakula (2,069 km²), Efate (980 km²), Erromango (900 km²) and Tanna (561 km²).

Vanuatu has a population of around 334,500 (World Bank, 2023), with over 70% of ni-Vanuatu residing in rural areas and dependent on informal and subsistence economy (VBS, 2020), engaging in the cash-economy in a manner that has been referred to the "hybrid nature" of Pacific Islander livelihood strategies, with many people deriving income from multiple, rather than single, opportunistic and dynamic sources (Rodman 1987). The country has over 100 Indigenous languages (Tyron 1976) and three official languages (English, French and Bislama).

The mainstay of the economy is tourism, agriculture (mainly copra, cacao and kava), offshore financial services, and cattle (VNSO 2009).

There are two main urban centres: the national capital Port Vila, located on the central island of Efate, and Luganville, the country's "second town" located on Espiritu Santo.

Decentralisation in Vanuatu

Political and Administrative Decentralisation

Vanuatu's political and administrative structure has been shaped by its complex colonial legacy and the ongoing interplay between domestic political trends, socio-economic particulars, and development partner influence.

Prior to regular missionary/colonial intrusion (*c.* mid-1800s), the bulk of the population resided in small, family-related hamlets. The population was said to be so dense in some places that "young men who were landless were expected to do a little discreet stealing to supplement the

food they earned by working for their fathers and other relatives" (Larcom 1980:118-9). Following the arrival of missionaries and (later) other colonial agents, local engagement in the colonial-era plantation economy – including the "indentured labour trade" (see Gundert-Hock, 1991; Munro, 1995) – intensified and there was substantive internal population movement and re-settlement from inland to new "mission villages" on the coast (e.g., Love, 2016; Spriggs, 1985). This coincided with as well as substantial depopulation (e.g., MacArthur, 1981; Rivers, 1922; Shlomowitz, 1989).

The rise of larger and more densely populated coastal villages was paralleled by changes to local governance systems, with the appropriation of Christianity and rise of indigenous Church leaders becoming central to community life, altering hitherto entrenched customary leadership systems (Jolly, 1989; Eriksen, 2008; Proctor, 1999).

In 1906 Vanuatu came under joint colonial rule by the British and French – officially called the "Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides" – until independence in 1980. The colonial powers had few resources; there was one British District Officer and one French District Agent for each of the four divisions that covered the archipelago of 83 islands. Moreover, the British and French could agree on very little, hence, there was relatively little colonial intrusion in local village affairs. In many respects, ni-Vanuatu were largely self-governing, albeit with a strong connection to missionaries, with the indigenisation of some churches commencing in the 1940s (e.g., Presbyterian Church).

The British Empire's strategy of "indirect rule" further justified the relatively 'light touch' that the colonisers applied to both governance and indigenous development.[3] Missionaries ran most schools, hospitals, and clinics up until the 1960s with the colonial powers mainly focusing on protecting their respective subjects and assets (Van Trease, 1987). Due to this (and other factors), it has been said that there have been few places in the world where missionaries have had such a "free and strong hand" in local affairs as in Vanuatu (Forman 1972).

By the late 1960s, the British and French administrations had taken over financial responsibility for mission clinics, hospitals, and most schools. Bolstered by greater access to Commonwealth Welfare and Development (CW&D) grants, the British began implementing what they considered to be modernising programmes. Key to this were the establishment of local councils (see Woodward 2014:22, 31-52; Premdas and Steeves 1984).

However, before the councils could be inaugurated, existing administrative units (e.g., Central District No. 2) had to be divided into sub-districts: Central District No. 2, for example, was divided into 20 sub-districts. Concomitantly, new levels of leadership were instituted through the creation of Sub-District Chiefs (also referred to as Canton Chiefs), Assistant Chiefs and Supplementary Assessors (JR 1/1951 and 16/1951).

The establishment of local councils (also called "native councils") was mandated by Joint Regulation (JR) 9/1957, given fiscal powers under JR 1/1961, amended by JR 4/1964, and eventually superseded by JR 1/1975, which replaced the local councils with "municipal and community councils" [under Francophone influence] (F128/61/1 & F128/821/1 in NHBS 9/i).

Whether or not these councils were explicitly instigated as a "preparatory school towards self-government" or designed to placate "outside criticism" that not enough progress was being made "towards de-colonisation", the councils provided the mirage of working towards statehood (Premdas and Steeves 1984:232). Councils were empowered with a range of functions and responsibilities, including collecting a head-tax; maintaining law and order; cleanliness and sanitation; gathering population statistics and carrying out projects for community development such as "water schemes and road building". Funding for these "projects" was derived from both the head tax and CW&D grants. Local councils eventually covered 40-50% of the population (Premdas and Steeves 1989:29).

"Decentralisation" has been a charged political topic from colonial times through to the present. Along with language and education policy, decentralisation was a principal area of dispute between the Anglo and Francophone aligned political parties in the lead up to independence.

Walter Lini – the country's first Prime Minister and considered the "Father" of Independence – had strong ideas about decentralisation (see Lini, 1980). The colonial recognised pre-Independence Government of National Unity, which included the Vanuaku Pati (VP) and the Moderates, gained power in 1978 resulting in 10 community councils being established. A year later, new elections were held and the victorious Vanuaku Pati moved to redefining the legislation for local councils under their own vision of decentralisation (Premdas & Steeves, 1984). Lini favoured a system that began by developing local councils at village level then linking them to regional (provincial) government.

However, once in power, the Vanuaku Pati did not devolve as much responsibility (or resources) to the local level as initially espoused in the lead up to independence.

Decentralisation has remained a persistent and sometimes contested topic to this day, with mixed views about how best to achieve improved service delivery through decentralisation.

Decentralisation and local service delivery today

Vanuatu is a unitary state with three levels of government – the central government, provincial councils and area councils. The Constitution provides for a decentralised system of governance:

> *The Republic of Vanuatu, conscious of the importance of decentralisation to enable the people fully to participate in the government of their Local Government Region, shall enact legislation necessary to realise that ideal (GoV, 1980: §82).*

Over a decade after independence, in 1994, the government passed the *Decentralization and Local Government Regions Act* (No. 1 of 1994), paving the way for the establishment of Local Government Regions, Local Government Councils, and the division of Local Government Regions into Area council Divisions [and the establishment of a Decentralisation Review Commission] (*Decentralization Act,* 1994 §31A-J). The ***Decentralization Act*** aimed to decentralise government functions to local authorities, enabling local government councils to manage their affairs within specified regions.[4] There has been at least seven subsequent key amendments to the *Decentralization Act*.

There appears to be no current *Decentralisation Policy per se*; Prime Minister Charlot Salwai's (2016-2020) government spoke of a *Decentralization Policy* (2017-2027) but the only formal document where it is mentioned is the governments Voluntary National Review for the Sustainable Development Goals report (GoV, 2019). According to the government department responsible for decentralisation (Department of Local Authorities), there is "no such policy" (NDLG-M).

Regardless, the Voluntary National Review states that the combination of the *Decentralization Act* and *Decentralization Policy* is designed to bring:

> *…Government closer to the people by providing citizens with greater control over decision-making process and allowing their direct participation in public service delivery (GoV, 2019:9-10).*

Decentralisation and service delivery is a recurrent topic in kava bars and the local press. For example, an article from the *Daily Post* in 2017 cited the Malaria Surveillance Officer of TORBA criticising the poor service delivery and slow pace of decentralisation, calling for the "*Decentralisation Policy"* to be effectively implemented to address poor communication, inadequate infrastructure, and the general lack of government presence in the province (Napwat, 2017).

The Internal Affairs Minister from Salwai's government, Andrew Napuat, identified several challenges that had hindered effective decentralisation in Vanuatu to date. This included:

- the duplication of services in rural areas by both the government and NGOs
- central governments withholding funds intended for provincial councils
- a lack of effective communication and coordination between national, provincial, and area councils (in Ligo, 2018).

Three years later, Transparency International Vanuatu also criticised the government's decentralisation process in the *Daily Post*, arguing that without proper budget allocations and authority, decentralisation is merely a "big word" used to impress citizens. As an example, Transparency highlighted that while provincial health managers propose budgets that capture the needs of their regions, they often lack control over these budgets, which are managed by the central government in Port Vila (Vanuatu Daily Post, 2021).

As elucidated by Cox et al., (2007), and echoed more recently by Barbara (2022), political commitments to enhancing local service delivery in Vanuatu have not been accompanied by the **necessary resources and development of state capacities required to effectively improve service delivery** (Barbara, 2022:10). This is not uncommon in low- and middle-income countries, and further complicated in small island developing state contexts such as Vanuatu where geography, resources, and capacity constraints delimit the development of the formal economy, thereby hindering the government's ability to support rural service delivery. Julien Barbara (2022) writes:

> *Invigorating sub-national levels of government to be able to drive local development agendas and deliver services to local communities has proven immensely difficult. This is because of resource and capacity issues which have been particularly acute at the sub-national level. It also reflects broader systemic fragilities in terms of whole of government (vertical and horizontal) planning and coordination systems (Barbara, 2022:7).*

The broad specifics of decentralisation and rural water service delivery are discussed below. First, however, it is pertinent to discuss the political economy of Vanuatu.

Political economy

A political economy lens explores the relationships between political institutions, economic structures, and cultural forces, seeking to understand how they affect each other in shaping policy and development outcomes (e.g., Gilpin and Gilpin, 2001). In Vanuatu, formal and informal political and economic processes co-exist, their interactions informing how power and resources are distributed and contested across society. This has implications for policy making and development outcomes.

As implied in Section 83 of the Constitution, which not only recognises but makes space for "custom chiefs" as representatives in local government councils, Vanuatu is marked by the sharp intersection between formal and informal governance structures – between modern democratic institutions and customary or "traditional" leadership systems and values – resulting in what has been described as a form of "**hybrid-governance**" (Boege et al., 2009; Westoby and Brown, 2007). Given the poor reach of the state and the significant role they play in day-to-day life, chiefs [*Jif*s] and church leaders ostensibly serve "state-like" functions by directly contributing to social-order and well-being (Brown, 2007; cf. Tomlinson and McDougall [eds], 2012).

Formal politics in Vanuatu – as in much of Melanesia – is characterised by unstable coalition governments who rarely complete their term: Since gaining independence in 1980, Vanuatu has experienced a significant amount of political instability – as of 2024, Vanuatu has experienced more changes in government than any other Pacific Island country. This instability is largely due to the frequent use of no-confidence motions, which have led to the ousting of many governments over the years: in 2022-2023, Vanuatu had four different prime ministers from four different political parties.[5] This has implications for Ministries and their departments workplans.[6]

Decision making by members of parliament (MPs) are often driven by patronage rather than policy platforms, leading to what has been described as chronic "short-termism" that has undermined a sustained, strategic and effective approach to rural development (Cox et al., 2007). Corruption in Vanuatu, however, should be viewed as a systemic problem rather than simply individual misconduct, influenced by long-established cultural norms based on reciprocity, obligation and complex asymmetrical relationships between leaders and communities.

> *Politicians in Vanuatu are under constant pressure to provide direct, material benefits to their constituents in exchange for their support. The small scale of political life, with some MPs elected with as few as 350 votes, exacerbates this tendency (Cox et al., 2007: ii).*

Walter Lini actively promoted the idea of creating unity from social diversity rather than despite it, promoting Christianity and *kastom* as the dual foundations of the state (e.g., Lini, 1980).

Kastom, land, and the primacy of the informal

Kastom is a concept that has attracted considerable (especially anthropological) attention and stands for much more than its lexical English equivalent "custom".[7] While "custom" was included in the 1906 *New Hebrides Protocol*, as a local referent *kastom* is of relatively recent origin in Vanuatu, arising in the lead-up to Independence (Tonkinson 1981, 1982) and forged in opposition to *skul* [Christianity] (Jolly, 1992a:341). However, it quickly become analogous with, rather than wholly opposed to, key Christian values (Lindstrom 1982) by encapsulating the same "axiomatic principles" of "unity, peace and respect" (Rousseau 2012:205; cf. Forsyth 2009:95-8; Hess 2006:287).

At Independence the state enshrined *kastom* in the Constitution (colloquially referred to as *Mamma Loa* [the Mother Law]). *Jif* Bongmatur – the first president of the National Council of Chiefs – signed the Constitution, the "… sacred document […] the foundational law and life of the country …" on top of a stone where a pig had been killed (Bongmatur in Lindstrom 1997:222).[8] This marks both the *kastom*isation of the state and the extension of the state into traditional [or non-state] domains (Lindstrom 1997). Articles 47 and 51 of the Constitution give Parliament the power to adopt legislative measures

permitting the courts to not only find but also apply *kastom* in the courts (Mosses, 2017).[9]

As elsewhere in Melanesia, **land in Vanuatu land is not merely an economic resource but central to individual and collective social identity**. This is well captured in the Bislama phrases "*man ples*" and "*yu man ples lo wea*"? [where are you from?]. Maxims such as "land is our mother" [*mamma graon*] and "My Land, my life" [*land blong mi hemi laef blong mi*] attest to the spiritual, socio-cultural and economic importance of land to ni-Vanuatu.

Land tenure has long been represented as a significant obstacle to development in the Melanesian Pacific due to numerous factors, with the legal ambiguity associated with "customary ownership" considered a major disincentive for foreign investors. Long-running land disputes have impacted rural development, most evident in the context of infrastructural development initiatives such as airports, roads, and government provincial offices (see Napuat in Ligo, 2018). Land disputes have also been an issue with water supply schemes. Section 4 of the *Water Resource Management Act (2002)* provides access to water for "every person", so long as no other customary users are "adversely affected" (§1.4.1-2).

To redress the challenges surrounding land rights and access, with Australian government assistance a Pacific Land Programme was undertaken in Vanuatu from the mid-2000s to 2012. The program included a component called *Mama Graon* which included the objective of mapping customary owners and boundaries. This was a response to concerns about land alienation but also integral to an aid-funded project entitled Making Land Work aimed at encouraging development and providing clarity through land registration that foreign investors are comfortable with (Farran and Corrin, 2017: 12). *Mama Graon* attracted acute local opposition, and the registration components of the program were ultimately dropped.

Alongside these developments, the Vanuatu government introduced a legal reform process which represents a substantial form of **jurisprudent devolution**. Following much debate, a land reform package and a series of Constitutional amendments were made, and a new *Custom Land Management Act* (2013) passed by Parliament **which devolve decision making powers around land tenure (ownership and disputes) to the local level**. The Act devolves the adjudication of land dispute to the level of the "nakamals" and "custom area land tribunals" (Part 1, §1-4). Matters can no longer be appealed or reviewed by any Court of law, but the Act does allow for mediation processes and for an Island Court (Land) to review decisions on grounds of incorrect composition, improper process or fraud (Part 1, §5-7).

The Constitutional amendments now also make it necessary for Parliament to "consult" with the National Council of Chiefs on any matters relating to land. The *Act* devolves the adjudication of land dispute to the level of the "nakamal" and "custom area land tribunals" (Part 1, §1-4). Some legal scholars have concluded that the Act, while well-intentioned, may not achieve its goals of protecting customary landowners and promoting development and instead result in a superficial form of legal pluralism that fails to genuinely empower customary law and its institutions (Farran and Corrin, 2017).

Chiefs are much more visible and active in Vanuatu relative to neighbouring Solomon Islands. This is due to numerous factors (historical, political, cultural and economic). Chiefs are generally held in high social regard and are formalised, to various degrees, through their recognition in various Acts and in other institutional forms. For example, article 30 of the Constitution established the **National Council of Chiefs** (known as the Malvatumauri) who are tasked with advising the government on matters relating to *kastom* and ensuring that traditional customs are respected in the law-making process.

There are also Island Councils of Chiefs, Area councils of Chiefs, and Town Council of Chiefs. Most villages have a Village Council of Chiefs (see Figure 3, below). In 2006, the *National Council of Chiefs Act* (No. 23 of 2006) was legislated after years of advocacy from the Malvatumauri (and others) to strengthen and further formalise the authority of Chiefs.[10] The draft legislation included the provision for Chiefs to make bylaws, but this was removed before the Bill went before Parliament (Forsyth, 2009).

The most formidable and energetic move towards greater decentralisation is evident in relation to the strengthening of Provincial and Area Administration.

Subnational Governance in Vanuatu

The **Department of Local Authorities** (DLA) within the Ministry of Internal Affairs is responsible for overseeing local government, which comprises six **Provincial Councils** (MALAMPA, PENAMA, SANMA, SHEFA, TAFEA, and TORBA) and three municipal councils (Port Vila, Luganville and Lenakel).

Provincial Councils

Provincial Councils have the authority to make bylaws, manage local resources, and oversee public services such as health, education, and infrastructure development. The typical staffing structure features a president as the chairperson of the Council, a secretary general, an accountant, and other council staff which include an assistant secretary general, an economist, a planner, a treasurer, a secretary and/or typist, and casual labourers. The secretary general, provincial accountant and some other town clerks are seconded from the Public Service Commission. Administration and salaries account for almost 80% of costs, with the balance of revenue used for small development projects (CLGF, 2017/18). The *Decentralization Act (1994)* provides the legal framework for provincial governance.

Parallel to, and integrated with, the state government system are the various councils of chiefs, which are formalised across four levels (Figure 3):

- Village Councils of Chiefs,
- Area councils of Chiefs
- Island Council of Chiefs
- Malvatumauri National Council of Chiefs.

The National Council of Chiefs is elected by subnational councils of chiefs and advises the government on matters concerning culture and language. Chief representatives are included in many government committees, e.g. the chairman of the Area Council of Chiefs is the chairperson of the local government Area Council.

Area councils

In 2024, there are 71 Area Coucnils. Area councils represent the most localised level of formal governance in rural Vanuatu. Under the *Decentralisation Act* [CAP 230], Area Councils serve as local governance structures responsible for community development, planning, and resource management. Previously, there were only Area Secretaries, and Area councils were grossly under-resourced with their main task being the collection of business licences.

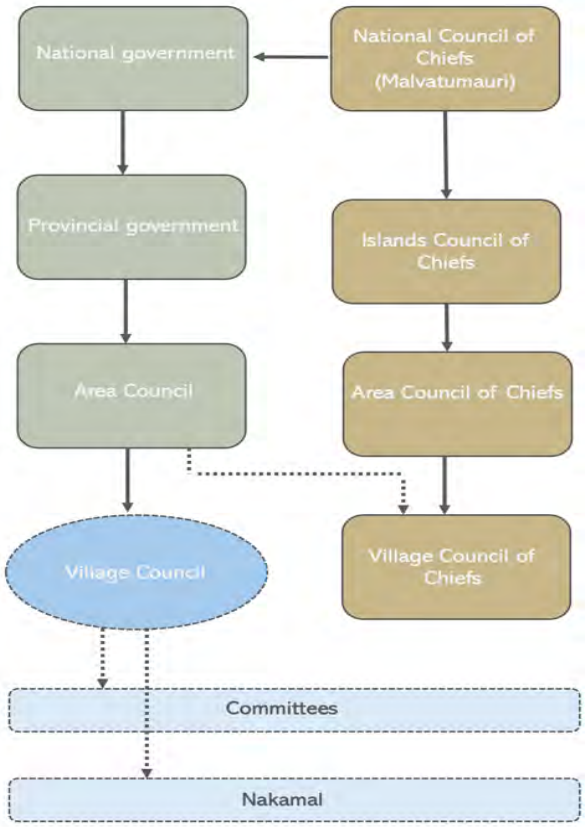


Figure 3: Governance Structure - Vanuatu

Following reforms over the last decade, since around 2018/19 area level administration has steadily been strengthened with the appointment of an Area Administrator and Area Secretary, a Finance Officer, and a Cleaner. There are plans, at least in some areas (e.g., Central Malekula Area Council), to also have a Technician and Foreman at the area council level (AA-F). In Malekula (*c.* late-2023), only four of the six Area councils had Area Secretaries.[11]

Under the local government **Area Administration** sits the Area council, which is chaired by the chairman of the Area council of Chiefs and meets quarterly. The Area Administration must approve the agenda before the first agenda item. The chairlady is the chairperson of the Women's Council. The Council also includes representatives from business, church, youth and people

with a disability, as well as the chief and women's council representatives.

Community profiling has now been completed in most/all Area council areas. Area Administration is also responsible for conducting risk and vulnerability assessments and producing and supporting **Area Development Plans**. These are relatively recent developments, and many development plans are still being progressed. Area councils receive grants from the government (DLA) that is then directed to communities, based on their community profile and most prioritised needs:

> *… adjustments The community works together with the area administration. If it's a need that the area administration can help with, like getting a water tank because they have all the buildings ready, or if it's a water project that broke down, the area council can pay for the materials (AA-F).*

As elaborated further below, Area councils have a role to play in supporting rural water service delivery as well as climate resilience. There was some concern voiced that "Area councils shoulder the whole of government" and while they are the obvious entry point in the devolution chain – "national-provincial-area-wards straight down to water committees" – it ultimately "depends on whether or not they have the capacity" (NDWR-2). Some targeted training has been undertaken with Area Administrators (see various elements below).

Village councils and committees

Below the area council sits **village councils** and various **committees**. These administrative structures have missionary, colonial and post-colonial antecedents but have been well and truly localised. There has been an expansion in committees and councils from before independence to today. Take Southwest Bay, Malekula, as an example: In the 1950s there was a handful of Presbyterian introduced committees (Presbyterian Women's Missionary Union [PWMU]), Evangelist, Youth, Sunday School, Church building committee) and a village headman.[12] Some villages had village councils at this point, many did not. Over subsequent decades, especially post-Independence, the number committees have expanded. Villages in the Bay have between 12 – 16 committees.[13] Typical groups/committees/councils include (Table 1):

Table 1: Typical village committees

Church	Sunday School
Water Supply	Chief
Evangelist	Kindergarten
School	Cooperative Society
PWMU	Building Committee
Dining Hall	Monday Work Group
Youth	Health/Aid Post
Village Council	Hydro
Tourism	Disaster

Many of these committees set their own budget (or it is set by the village council). The monetary contributions needed to meet a committee's budgetary target are generated, often exclusively, through fundraising. Committees – as well as kin-based groups (nakamal) – are strongly linked to fundraising, with committees, families and structured village sub-areas (e.g., "stations", "zones", "groups") often conducting fundraising. **Note that water committees must compete with a raft of community obligations.**

This "dualistic" or "hybrid" governance system – state and customary institutions – has both strengths and weaknesses. On the one hand, it allows for the integration of local customs into the national governance framework, which can help maintain social cohesion in highly dispersed populations that lack a strong state presence. On the other hand, it has been argued that this duality can lead to conflict between so-called "traditional" and "modern" values and institutions, complicating the implementation of national policies at the local level (e.g., Cox et al., 2007). In addition to *Jif*s **church leaders are critical**, and alongside local politicians and entrepreneurs can also have significant influence (e.g., Brown, 2007, 2008). It has been argued that the introduction of new institutional arrangements from "outside", and its interactions with extant informal norms and systems of meaning and authority, results in two institutional bricolage processes—elite capture and leakage of meaning—serves to alternately create and restrict opportunities for change (Vorbach and Ensor, 2022).

Taking "informality" into consideration when thinking about decentralisation and government functions more generally is critical. There is always a gap between organisational norms and actual practice, with the workings of organisations intrinsically shaped by informal practices and rules, not simply organisational structures, policies, and formal rules (see Bierschenk and de Sardan,

2021; Helmke & Levitsky, 2004). This is especially true in low-resourced, challenging contexts such as small island developing states.

Barabara (2022) correctly notes that a key reason that decentralisation policies struggle to advance in Vanuatu is because they are **treated as technical reforms that fail to account for the informal political and administrative dynamics that can shape policy (2022:16).**

A mismatch between policy and local values and practices results in failure. This can be demonstrated through the experience of the **Comprehensive Reform Programme** (CRP), which began implementation in Vanuatu in 1997 as an Asian Development Bank/internationally driven structural reform package. The CRP was a significant economic and administrative reform initiative, influenced by the principles of the Washington Consensus that aimed to restructure the economy, public administration, and governance in Vanuatu. The program faced challenges due to its top-down approach and lack of appreciation for, and adaptation to, the local context, resulting in national economic decline rather than improvement (Gay, 2009; see also Gay, 2004).[14]

As Barbara (2022) further argues, **"reforms must be complemented by informal processes and invigorated by effective relationships traversing diverse networks of government and non-government stakeholders**" and requires "the development of shared public administration norms and cultures, operating procedures and routines that ease decision making and coordination within bureaucracies" (Barbara, 2022:16).

Vanuatu's decentralised governance system is intended to empower local governments and improve service delivery. "Strengthening local authorities and municipal institutions to enable decentralised service delivery" is a key objective of the *National Sustainable Development Plan 2016 – 2030* (Gov, 2016: 12). Decentralisation in Vanuatu seeks to balance modern administrative structures with local context through the engagement of customary institutions (e.g. chiefs in area councils). However, challenges persist with limited financial resources, capacity constraints, and coordination issues between national and subnational levels.

Efforts to improve decentralisation have included, national summits and various reforms, as well as some **capacity-building initiatives at the sub-national level.** The Vanuatu Skills Partnership program and activities associated with Provincial Skills Centres is said to be an enabler for advancing decentralisation (Barbara, 2022 5).

Water service access, delivery, and enabling environment

Water access situation

The mountainous, volcanic islands of Vanuatu (approx. 65) have rich groundwater and surface water supplies, whereas the low-lying, drier islands (approx. 15) depend heavily on rainwater due to limited groundwater in shallow aquifers. The rugged terrain of Vanuatu poses challenges for water collection, primarily done by women and children, especially when sources are far from villages. The acute population movement associated with missionary and colonial intrusion has also 'complicated' water service delivery. First, migration to the coast has resulted in the rise of comparatively high-density villages typically relying on tap stands from a single primary source, e.g. spring or river gravity-fed system or borehole.[15] Dams are often a long way away from villages (e.g., 12 km, Laravat, Malekula). Second, land tenure disputes and chiefly title issues – all aggravated by historical forces – can also complicate water management.

Rainfall varies widely, from less than 100 mm per month in July to more than 400 mm in January, with significant differences between the north and south, and rain shadows on the leeward sides of mountains. Around 33% of the population are dependent on rainwater, which is less reliable with climate change (Sammy, 2019).

In rural areas, water supply is either taken from groundwater via open wells and bores, from surface water sources, or rainwater collection with storage in ferro-cement or polyethylene tanks (there is also a handful of small-scale desalination plants). Water is typically piped to central access points in a village (shared standpipes). According to data from 2017, there were a total of **4,090 water supply schemes in Vanuatu**, with rainwater constituting the majority (2,793) (GoV, 2017: 14).

Self-supply through rainwater harvesting (household or community) comes with strengths and challenges (see Foster et al., 2021). The DoWR view the country's **reliance on rainwater collection systems as a significant obstacle to achieving SDG target 6.1,** with piped systems drawn from groundwater considered the most reliable and resilient (Sammy, 2024).

In rural areas there is a range of problems with the delivery of safe drinking water, including intermittent supply caused by drought or damaged infrastructure, and contaminated drinking water, with **over 50% of 429 community water supplies tested were contaminated** (Sammy, 2019). The DoWR Water Quality Dashboard

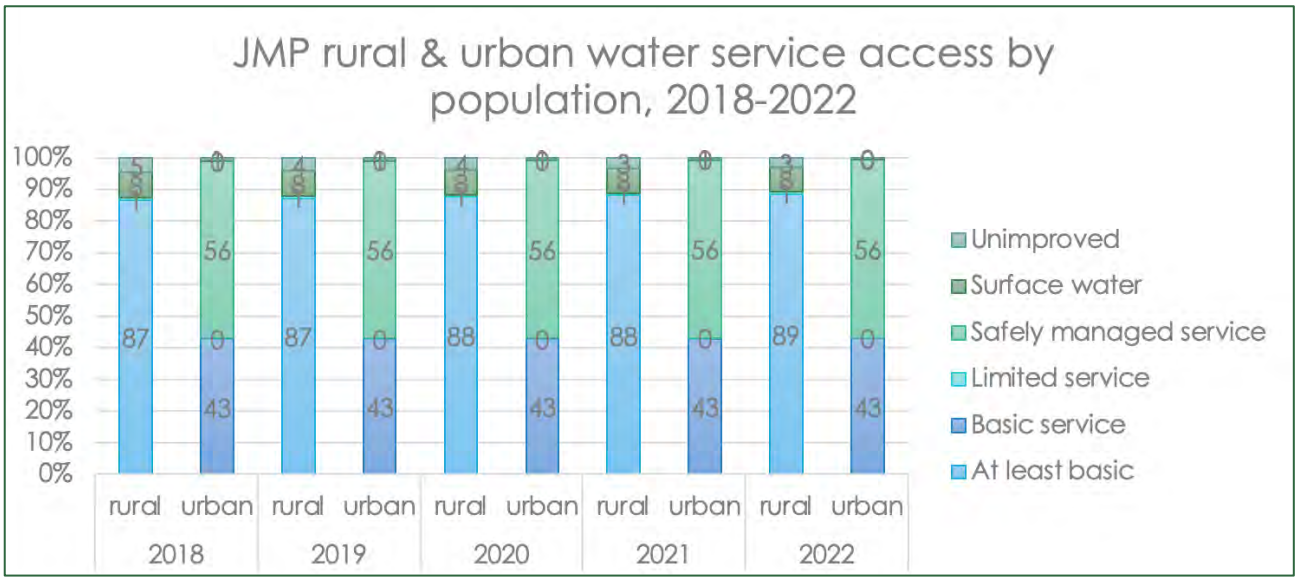
reports that **37% of water samples tested positive for *E. coli*** and further notes that sources fed by a spring have 5.8 times the diarrhoea incidences than boreholes.

Despite limited funding, Vanuatu has managed to achieve one of the fastest rates of improvement in access to basic water services in the Pacific; although not enough to achieve Sustainable Development Goal 6 (Foster, 2022 in Faerua et al., 2022:4).

According to DoWR data, system functionality was deemed "reasonable" with 50% of schemes functioning "good", 31% "fair", 14% "poor" and only 7% "not working" (GoV, 2017: 15). A more recent presentation by the DoWR stated that 84% of systems reported being fully functional, with 51% of systems providing a year-round supply of water, with piped systems fed by springs or surface water more likely to experience disruptions (Sammy, 2024). These are comparatively high levels of functionality.[16]

WHO/UNICEF JMP data for rural and urban water service levels covering the 2018 to 2021 period shows a consistent pattern of basic rural water service coverage sitting at between 87-89% (Figure 2).[17] Note that the definition of "basic" does not require this water to be available on the premises, available when needed, or free of faecal or other contaminates

Figure 4: Household data Vanuatu-service level (Source: WHO/UNICEF JMP, 2023)



Over the past 20-years, **basic water services have improved by just 10%** – from 77.9% in 2000 to 88.4% in 2020 (WHO/UNICEF, 2021). WASH coverage varies considerably by geography**. According to the National Sustainable Development Plan Baseline Survey** (NSDP) TAFEA has the highest proportion of HHs sourcing drinking water from a river, lake or spring, whilst MALAMPA has the highest proportion of shared rainwater tanks (Figure 5, below).

The province of SANMA is reported to have the greatest burden of WASH-related diseases per 1,000 persons in the country (World Vision, 2020: 20). Surveys completed by World Vision Vanuatu also show that WASH access in SANMA are significantly lower than national averages (30% lower for access to clean water, and 21% lower for improved sanitation facilities) and over half of HHs surveyed in both SANMA and TORBA reported insufficient water supply in the last month (World Vision, 2020:70).

Inadequate water and sanitation underlie many critical public health issues, including diarrhoea, typhoid, yaws, leptospirosis, malnutrition, dengue, scabies and respiratory infections (MoH, 2017; WHO, 2018) Insufficient and poor-quality water during childhood can inform stunting – which is calculated to affect 29% of all children under 5 in Vanuatu (MoH, 2017:8).

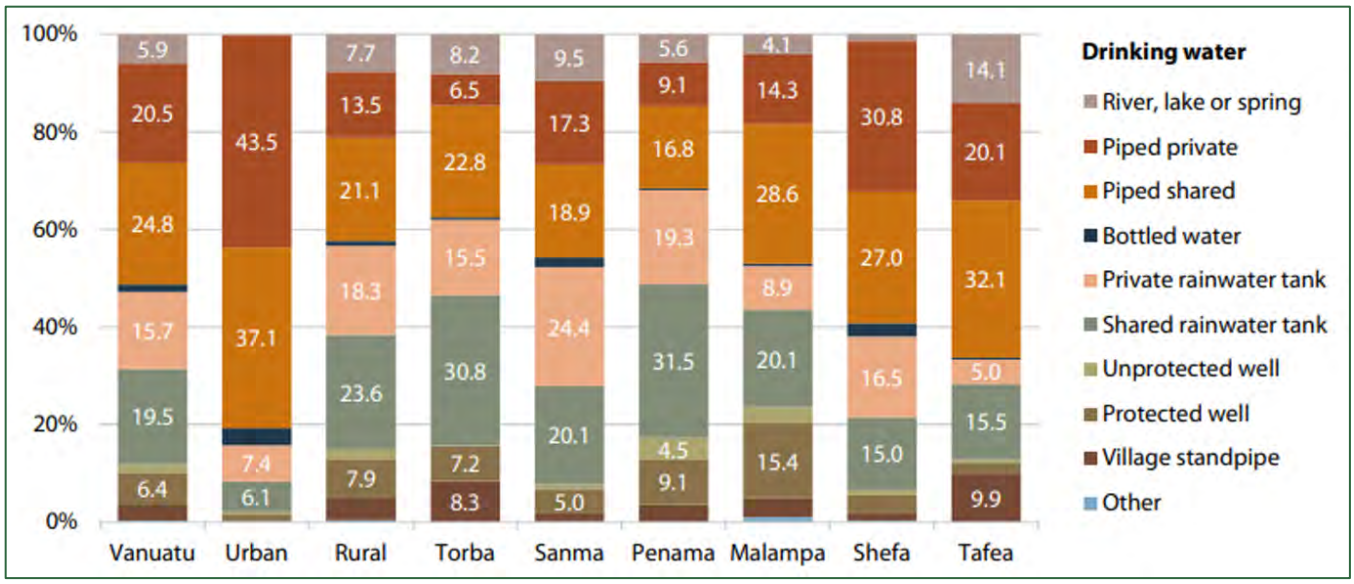


Figure 5: Proportion of private HHs by place of residence and main source of drinking water

(Source: NSDP Baseline Survey 2019–2020

WASH and climate change

Climate change disproportionately affects PICs due to geographic and socioeconomic factors (McIver et al., 2016). **Vanuatu has been especially impacted by both sudden and slow-onset disasters that are related to climate change** (NAB, 2018: 7) and is commonly ranked the most vulnerable country in the world, experiencing more disasters than any other place on earth (The World Risk Report, 2020). This poses an extra challenge for WASH infrastructure and service delivery.

The social and economic costs of disasters are extremely high – It has been estimated that the impact of tropical cyclone (TC) Harold on **WASH infrastructure alone** was VUV319,164,119 [US$2.9 million] (GoV, 2020). TC Harold was just five years after TC Pam, which was similarly catastrophic (Esler, 2015). Vanuatu has also experienced two category 4 TCs – Judy and Kevin – in March 2023, and has also been severely impacted by the Manaro Voui volcano eruption on Ambae Island (2017-18) and a 7.3 earthquake struck near Port Vila in December 2024.

Disaster management and adaptation services have become an increasingly important resource in Vanuatu (NAB, 2018).

Key climate change particulars and their projected impacts for Vanuatu include:

- **Sea levels have risen** by 10–15 cm since 1993, posing a growing threat to low-lying coastal areas through flooding and erosion
- Sea level rise is expected to reach 17–37 cm by 2050, further heightening coastal flooding and erosion risks, though vertical land motion in some areas may mitigate these effects
- **Rainfall extremes** have shown a slight increase since 1951, though significant interannual variability persists
- Extreme daily rainfall is expected to become more frequent and intense, and while TC frequency may decrease overall, those that occur are projected to be stronger
- While TC frequency has decreased since 1971, their intensity has increased, adding to the region's vulnerabilities
- El Niño-related events are likely to bring more intense TCs and sea level extremes, while La Niña events may result in fewer TCs.

These combined changes are expected to exacerbate food and **water insecurity**, result in the displacement of coastal communities, and damage critical infrastructure and ecosystems (University of Hawaii, CSIRO and Climate Comms, 2023).

Rural water service delivery - Governance

Rural water service delivery is both centrally and provincially controlled. Resources, systems and some delegatory power are deconcentrated and devolved, with some key activities outsourced to external actors, mainly non-government organisations and some private sector contractors.

Vanuatu commenced water sector reforms in the 2010s[18], culminating in a range of legislative and institutional strategic reviews and reforms. The Vanuatu Law Reform Commission reviewed **the *Water Supply Act* [CAP 24] (No. 9 of 1985)** and the ***Water Resources Management Act (No. 9 of 2002)*** and, among other things, highlighted a gap between national and subnational levels, with limited provisions for community involvement in water resource management (Vire et al., 2014: 12). [19]

In response to recommendations from this and other reviews, the **Department of Water Resources (DoWR)** was established in 2016; previously, the Public Works Department (PWD) was responsible for the urban water and the Department of Geology, Mines and Water Resources was responsible for rural water.

Key Departments, Ministries and other sector actors

The **Department of Water Resources (DoWR)** was officially established in 2016 to consolidate water resource management under a single department, and to improve the coordination, sustainability, and effectiveness of water services across the country. The water section of the Public Works Department (PWD) was transferred to the DoWR.

The DoWR sits under the Ministry of Lands and **is the sector facilitator, coordinator and regulator,** and is also tasked with building decentralised capacity and decision making at the provincial and community levels (DoWR, 2018b:19).

The DoWR is responsible for the enforcement of the *Water Resources Management (Amendment) Act (No. 32 of 201*6) and the *National Water Policy 2017-2030.* The department is also the national coordinator of *Drinking Water Safety and Security Planning* (a training program for rural water committees), maintain a National Register of Community Water Supply Schemes and ensure compliance with national water quality standards (DoWR, 2018b, 2018a).

The DoWR consists of four units: Administration, Projects, Technical and Monitoring and Evaluation.

The **Ministry of Health** (MoH) is responsible for household water treatment and storage, sanitation and hygiene, as well as WASH in health clinics. The MoH has an Environmental Health Unit, which sits within the Department of Public Health. The MoH has developed a *National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy 2017-2030 (*MoH, 2017) which includes several WASH aspects within the six priority areas. There is not yet an approved Implementation Plan.

The **Ministry of Education and Training (**MoET) is responsible for the WASH in Schools (WinS) Program, which aims to ensure access to safe water and sanitation facilities in all schools and enable appropriate hygiene practices. In May 2016, the Ministry of Education and Training (MoET) hosted a call-to-action stakeholder workshop for WASH in schools. MFAT – one of the central and consistent supporters of the WASH sector in Vanuatu – supported the implementation of the WinS program in Penama and other provinces (Massing, 2019).

Numerous **civil society organisations (CSOs)** – including international and local non-governmental organisations (NGOs) as well as multilateral organisations such as the United Nations Children Fund (UNICEF) – are actively involved in WASH initiatives in Vanuatu. UNICEF has been especially active in coordination and supporting capacity-building within the government.

The National WASH Cluster coordinates WASH emergency preparedness and response, with DoWR as lead and UNICEF as co-lead; the Ministry of Health leads the sanitation, hygiene promotion and WASH in health care facility components (DoWR, 2022).[20]

The **Department of Strategic Policy, Planning & Aid Coordination** (DSPPAC) – which operates under the Prime Minister's Office – is important due to its role in in the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of national policies. The DSPPAC is responsible for monitoring the NSDP. Its formal mandate is to support the Prime Minister and the Council of Ministers and collaborating with governmental bodies to ensure cohesive and effective policy development and execution (DSPPAC, 2024; NDLG-M). In 2021, the DSPPAC conducted a review of NSDP implementation and socialised the review report at the "1st Summit of the People and Their Government" in June 2023 (DSPPAC, 2023b). In 2024 a revised planning and reporting framework was released (DSPPAC, 2024).[21]

Rural Water Policies and Approaches

Around 2016, when Vanuatu's ***National Sustainable Development Plan*** (NSDP) was launched, a suite of complementary policies, plans and regulatory assessments were steadily enacted. This included the

passing of the *Water Supply (Amendment) Act* (No. 31 of 2016) and the *Water Resource Management (Amendment) Act* (No. 32 of 2016).

The ***Water Supply (Amendment) Act* (2016)** provided for the delegation of water management to private operators – with UNELCO currently holding the concession [22] – although the DoWR retains responsibility for the maintenance and regulation of water sources for urban areas.[23] The amendment improved the legal framework governing water supply in Vanuatu, including clearer definitions of responsibilities and powers, and the power to prescribe National Drinking Water Quality Standards (GoV, 2016).

The ***Water Resource Management (Amendment) Act*** (2016) applied far greater attention to the communities' roles and responsibilities in maintaining water systems and managing water resources and included clearly defined roles and responsibilities for subnational actors (see further below). The amended act also provided scope for the establishment of *Water Protection Zones* and *Buffer Zones* (§26.6-7-27A.1-5). In sum, **the original Act centralised authority within national structures** (particularly under the Director of DoWR and the *National Water Resources Advisory Committee*).

The following year, the *Vanuatu National Implementation Plan for Safe and Secure Community Drinking Water: A Guide to the Plan* (DoWR, 2018a) and *Guide to the Capital Assistance Programme* (DoWR, 2018b**)** were introduced. The *Vanuatu National Water Policy 2018–2030* was also launched (DoWR, 2018c). Simultaneously, Community Development Officers and Area Administrators slowly began to be established across the country. Some provincial DoWR buildings also began to be upgraded.

The cornerstone of the government's rural water services approach is the **community water management model**, supported by capacity training for communities, specifically a designated **water committee**. A risk-based methodology -water safety planning – now forms the foundation of the governments approach to rural water service delivery in Vanuatu.

Vanuatu National Implementation Plan for Safe and Secure Community Drinking Water

The *Vanuatu National Implementation for Safe and Secure Community Drinking Water Plan* (NIP, also called the "*National DWSSP*" in government documents) was developed to formalise Drinking Water Safety and Security Planning nationwide (DoWR, 2018a). **The NIP provides a service delivery approach** that focusses coordinated support where it is most needed, targeting the most at-risk or vulnerable communities (DoWR, 2018a: 3).

Drinking Water Safety and Security Planning (DWSSP) is based on Water Safety Planning – a multi-barrier risk-based approach which became an internationally accepted approach following inclusion in the 3rd edition of the World Health Organization (WHO) *Guidelines on Drinking-water Quality (*WHO, 2004). The Pacific islands, including Vanuatu, were triggered to adopt the approach following the WHO Workshop on *Drinking Water Quality Standards and Monitoring in Pacific Island Countries in 2005*. The second "S" in DWSSP stands for security and is a more recent addition that acknowledges the need to also plan for adequate supply of water (especially in anticipation of, and during, times of drought).

Vanuatu adopted and contextualised WSP into the Vanuatu DWSSP in 2013. For the first three years only a small number of DWSSP were completed nationally, but since 2016 the number has increased to more than 40 per year (Rand et al., 2022:678). This is the same time that the DoWR started contracting DWSSP training out to NGOs and the private sector. As a result of research by Rand et al., (2022) and recommendations from academics (e.g. Kohlitz 2018) and UNICEF (UNICEF 2020), DoWR has further adapted water safety planning to address climate change risks (2022:682).

The effectiveness of water safety planning in the Pacific islands has, thus far, been mixed (see: Keimel, 2021; Love et al., 2022; Rand et al., 2022; String et al., 2017, 2020). Increased localisation and adaptation, with ongoing monitoring and follow-up support, has been recommended to improve efficacy (Souter et al., 2024).

Key legislation and policies – the *Water Resources Management (Amendment) Act* (2016), *Water Supply (Amendment) Act* (2016) and the *Vanuatu National Water Policy 2017–2030* (DoWR, 2018c), all require community water supplies to have a DWSSP.

Both the previous (2008-2018) and current *National Water Strategy (2018–2030)* and *Water Policy (2017–2030)* (DoWR, 2018a) include strategic directions and targets for introducing DWSSP to rural contexts. The aim is for all communities to have a DWSSP by 2030. However, given that DWSSP is currently only undertaken in 10 communities in each province per year (total 60), this goal will not be met. DWSSP is primarily implemented by service delivery partners (SDPs) - **private sector entities** and **non-government organisations**. There is a standard Facilitators Guide used by SDPs (DoWR, n.d.).

The NIP was developed to formalise DWSSPs nationwide (DoWR, 2018a) and uses the *Capital Assistance*

Programme (CAP) to allocate financial assistance to improve water systems for communities who:

- have completed the DWSSP process
- registered a water committee,
- completed no/low-cost improvements identified in the community DWSSP (DoWR, 2018a, 2018b).

The CAP outlines a prioritisation process (using risk scores), and this information is based on community DWSSP reports (DoWR, 2018b; see also: Rand et al., 2022; UNICEF, 2020).

The process for managing community capital assistance is as follows: A community sends a request for improved or new water system from the government – via the area council or sometimes the Community Development Officer (CDO) (PWS-M2) – and the request is registered in the DoWR system. Consent is also required from the relevant communities' Area Administrator. These requests are then sent to the **Provincial Water Resource Advisory Committee** (PWRAC). The PWACs role is to prioritise the communities according to the risk-rank assessments. When the list is sent to the office in Vila, the National **Water Resource Advisory Committee** (NWRAC), whose role is simply to endorse (DoWR, 2018a, 2018b; MPO-M).

The PWRAC is chaired by the Secretary General of the province and its members closely resembles the structure of TACs [Technical Advisory Committees] where there are members of other department such as health and education on the committee. **The PWAC approve 10 DWSSP sites per year.**

DWSSP activities relate to four levels – community, area council, provincial government, and national government. **The NIP seeks to better mainstream DWSSP through government policies and regulations, provincial government and area level planning,** acting as a community support tool that guides day-to-day water supply operation, maintenance and improvements (DoWR, 2018a).

The NIP supports national scale-up **through devolving responsibilities and actions from government to provincial governments and area councils**, in the aim of creating demand-driven requests for assistance and supporting local community participation in planning and action: "It is a bottom-up approach on how we can reach that 100% coverage" (NDWR-2).

As stated in the NIP, the **provincial governments** role is to be a "decision-making conduit between its communities and government", which includes encouraging communities to engage in DWSSP, coordinate the provision of DWSSP and technical training to communities, compile and prioritise community DWSSP improvements that require government assistance, and "administer and coordinate interactions with government for DWSSP approvals, water committee registration, requesting government assistance, tracking and reporting on spend and progress" (DoWR, 2018a:7). The steps and process associated with the NIP/CAP are elucidated in Figure 7.

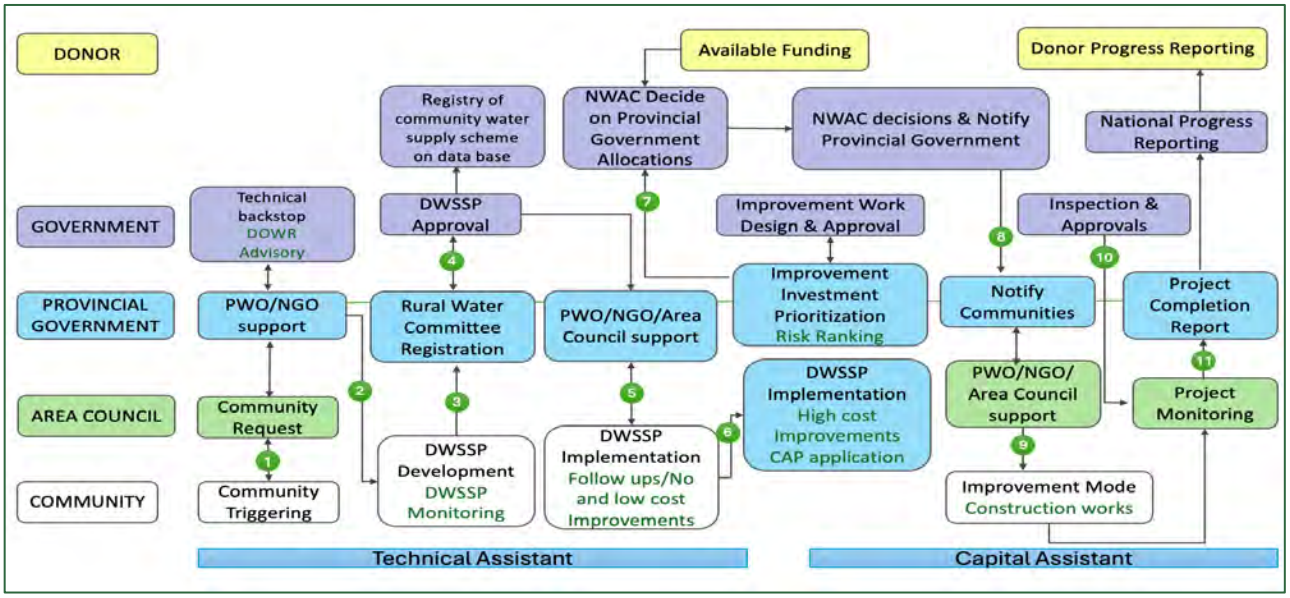


Figure 6: NIP / CAP flow-chart (source: after DoWR, 2023)

Subnational: Provincial and Area council level's role

As elucidated above (Figure 7) the decentralisation of WASH service delivery is government policy: Provincial governments and area councils are tasked with supporting DWSSP and are also enabled to make Provincial Water bylaws.

According to the NIP:

The function assigned to **provincial government-level** relates to administering decentralised assistance to communities; it is the decision-making conduit between its communities and government. It includes activities that:

- Encourage communities to engage with DWSSP
- Provide DWSSP and technical training to communities
- Administer and coordinate community requests for support to develop and implement DWSSP, allocating provincial expertise and support from NGOs or other technical expertise to assist communities
- Compile and prioritise community DWSSP improvements that require government assistance
- Administer and coordinate interactions with government for DWSSP approvals, Rural Water Committee registration, requesting government assistance, tracking and reporting on spend and progress
- Implement a provincial drinking water quality testing and compliance programme (DoWR, 2018a: 6).

The function assigned to **area/ward council-level** relates to supporting decentralised assistance from provincial government to communities. According to the NIP, area councils are to:

- Encourage communities to engage with DWSSP.
- Support and coordinate community requests to provincial government for support to develop and implement DWSSP.
- Support and coordinate provincial government engagement with communities (DoWR, 2018a: 7).

Kohlitz (2018) recommended that **Area Secretaries** and **area councils** were the most appropriate officials / level to support more climate resilient WASH in rural communities in Vanuatu. Although area councils are not mentioned in the amended *Water Resource Management Act (2016)*, they play "a huge role" when it comes to implementing activities at the community-level (e.g., NDWR-2).

This decentralisation structure is also designed to enhance rapid response capability following disasters (e.g., needs assessments, awareness raising/advice, temporary quick-fix solutions). This supports objective 6.5 (SOC) of the NSDP – "**strengthening local authorities … to enable decentralised service delivery**" (GoV, 2016).

Recently, there was a donor supported pilot activity that placed Sanitation Officers at the area council level in three provinces (workshop, Nov. 24) Additionally, targeted vocational training (Certificate II in plumbing) is being rolled-out in some provincial training centres (see further below).

In terms of day-to-day operation and management of community rural water services, water committees remain the basis of the national strategy.

Water committees

Water committees are central to the rural water sector policy, with whole strategy built on the objective that water committees "Effectively manage maintain rural water supply systems and sanitation" (DoWR, 2018c: 17).

The ***National Water Strategy (2018–2030)*** states that water committees should: "monitor water" and "pricing systems"; with assistance from Provincial Officers "develop Watershed Management Plans"; and WC training should establish links with other villages for "mutual problem solving" (DoWR, 2018c: 16–22).

The *Water Resource Management (Amendment) Act* (2016) stipulates that the "Rural Water Committee" must include "at least 40% women" and can only be registered if the names have been nominated by the relevant community (§20F.4-5) The Act also provides a mechanism to **register water committees** that have undergone "community development training" and "water management and financial training" (§20F).

According to the Act, a "Rural Water Committee" has the following functions:

20G Rural Water Committee functions

(1) (a) to develop, implement and maintain:

(i) water supply conservation measures; and

(ii) management of the water supply scheme; and

(iii) a community drinking water safety plan to ensure water safety and security; and

(b) to represent the community on the ownership of the water supply system and facilitate decision making in the community; and

(c) to make rules to regulate water resource management issues in the community; and

(d) to perform any other functions as required by the Provincial Water Resources Advisory Committee.

(2) A Rural Water Committee must negotiate and establish formal Agreements to be filed with the relevant Provincial Government Council and the Department, between the landowners and the community to allow land access for a water supply system.

(3) A Rural Water Committee may apply for assistance from the Director in the assessment, conservation or management of any water resources.

The amended Act also provides provisions for creating local bylaws:

20H Rural Water Committee rules

(1) A Rural Water Committee may make rules regulating water sources within the relevant community.

(2) Without limiting subsection (1), the Rural Water Committee may make rules on the following matters:

(a) the use of water sources; and

(b) setting fees to be paid for the use of water sources as approved by the Director.

(3) Water resources must be used in accordance with the rules made under this section.

Section 20I concerns the "**Structure of water delivery and management system in rural areas**":

(1) The Rural Water Committees are to report to the Provincial Water Resources Advisory Committee on any matter concerning water supply or water resources management in their respective communities

(2) A Provincial Water Resources Advisory Committee in each province is to report annually to the Department and the National Water Resource Advisory Committee on the overall water supply services and water resource management in its respective Province.

The *NIP* states that WCs "…usually takes overall responsibility for developing their supply-specific DWSSP" (DoWR, 2018: 12). However, for the DWSSP process itself, a DWSSP team is established that **includes members of the WC as well as other village committees (women, youth, men, church reps, etc.).** During previous IWC/USP research on DWSSP in Vanuatu (Love et al., 2022) there was evidence of confusion in this regard, with examples of two committees being established but neither doing anything to progress low/no-cost actions due to disputes over roles and responsibilities (2022:13).

Key challenges with the CWM model in Vanuatu

A review of the literature identifies many of the challenges associated with rural water management and service delivery found in other Pacific Islands contexts. In Vanuatu these include:

Drinking water quality and safety

- Lack of robust drinking water quality testing regimes
- Limited knowledge of contamination risks (e.g., faecal bacteria causing stunting in children under five)
- Absence of enforceable limits on water abstraction and usage (GoV, 2017:2; MoH, 2017)

Water storage and security

- Dependence on rainwater with inadequate storage facilities
- Increasing variability of weather patterns affecting water availability (GoV, 2017:2, Sammy, 2024)

Community management / water committees

- Poor functionality and lower efficiency of community-managed piped water supply systems
- Repairs and maintenance primarily depend on external subsidies or private financing
- Limited financial contributions from communities for operation and maintenance
- Build-neglect-rebuild cycles due to lack of incentives and poor revenue retention
- Communities often struggle to access to finance for upgrading water systems (e.g., rainwater tanks, major repairs)
- Demand deficit - communities/individuals are not motivated to prioritise low/no-cost improvements
- Water committees have limited technical, financial and governance capacity, and membership participation is often weak, with governance fragmentation and competing priorities (GoV, 2017:3; Love et al., 2022; Rand et al., 2022; Sammy, 2024; Vorbach and Ensor, 2022:178-9).

Water system management and accountability

- Water committees lack formalised legal status, limiting their ability to own assets, incur liabilities, or ensure accountability for service quality (GoV, 2017:5; Rand et al., 2022:678)

Water system monitoring and compliance

- Absence of a system for updating the functionality and O&M status of water assets
- Lack of a unified process for licensing and monitoring water abstraction and usage
- Absence of follow-up monitoring and support for water committees (GoV, 2017:4; Love et al., 2022; Rand et al., 2022: 678-9)

Gender Inequities in water Management

- Greater representation of women in WCs is associated with improved WASH outcomes (Mommen et al., 2017), but this is not consistently implemented (GoV, 2017:6)

Decentralised governance and regulations

- Negligible role of provincial governments in water service provision despite legislative mandates
- Limited delegation of funds and functionaries to provincial governments
- Weak enforcement of water service regulations at the community level
- Poor coordination between sectors for long-term planning and investment in water resource management (GoV, 2017:7-8).

Research Design & Methodology

This report summarises the results of research conducted in **Vanuatu** from early 2023 to mid-late 2024. Data was collected at three levels – village, provincial and national:

I. **Village level:** Water committee and select community leaders/members

II. **Provincial level:** Provincial Water Supervisors, Community Development Officers, Area Administrators, DoWR technicians, Provincial government staff

III. **National level:** DoWR national staff, Department of Local Authorities.

Data collection

A desktop review commenced in January 2023. Grey literature was sourced through internet searches, during field visits, and via correspondence. The bulk of the interview data was collected from mid-2023 to mid-2024 by Mark Love (IWC) and Heather Molitambe (USP). Data collection spanned four provinces: SHEFA, MALAMPA, PENAMA and SANMA

A **stakeholder validation** workshop was conducted in November 2024. This provided the opportunity to gather further data, validate findings, fill gaps and fix errors, and elicit some agreed recommendations. Data collected at the workshop is cited in the report as "(workshop, Nov. 24)". We were also fortunate to attend the World Water Day celebrations facilitated by the DoWR and the Vanuatu government held in Ambae, March 2024, at the same time as the department's Annual retreat. This provided a valuable opportunity for productive informal discussions

Ethics approval was granted by Griffith University (GU Ref No: 2023/161), the SAGEONS Academic Unit Research Committee (USP) (4th of May 2023), and a research permit granted by the Vanuatu National Cultural Council (*Vanuatu National Kaljoral Kansel*). Informed consent (oral) was granted from all participants prior the commencement of interviews.

A total of 27 interviews were undertaken with 24 individuals across SHEFA, MALAMPA, PENAMA and SANMA, including national-level interviews in Port Vila; two respondents were interviewed more than once. Most interviews were conducted face-to-face, but there were also several email and phone responses to follow-up questions.

Additionally, a total of 27 short video interviews were recorded with water committee members across the same four provinces (two of which are included in the interview counts above). The bulk of the community level data drawn on in this report is taken from the video interviews that were conducted as part of a related but separate action research activity.[24] See Appendix, Tables A1-A4 for respondent details.

All interviews were conducted in Bislama. The qualitative data was then translated, ensuring as much linguistic precision and cultural nuance were preserved as possible. Subsequently, interview transcripts were coded using NVivo® (see Jackson & Bazeley, 2019; Saldaña 2013). Two cycles of coding were applied: i) a broad-brush coding based on emergent themes and (some) predetermined descriptive codes; and ii) a further round of coding following the **Pacific Knowledge and Learning Exchange** (PKLE) workshops in Suva, Fiji, in November 2023, which was attended by academics and water sector professionals from Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and Fiji (see Appendix, Table A5).

Through free listing and then recourse to the broad "building blocks" categories and definitions, participants at the PKLE workshop identified what they considered to be the key **elements of effective decentralisation** for rural water service delivery. This became the framework for our analysis of decentralisation in Solomon Islands, Fiji and Vanuatu

Framework: Elements of effective decentralisation for rural water service delivery

The **enabling environment** is critical to furthering rural water service delivery and enhancing WASH outcomes more generally. There are a growing number of guidance documents on what the required "building blocks" of an effective WASH sector are. These include UNICEF's (2016) *Strengthening the Enabling Environment for Water, Sanitation and Hygiene* (which builds on the five Sanitation and Water for All (SWA) sector strengthening building blocks), and the IRC International Water and Sanitation Centre's *Understanding the WASH system and its building blocks* (Huston and Moriarty, 2018). In specific rural water service delivery terms, Lockwood and Smits (2011) *Supporting Rural Water Supply: Moving Towards a Service Delivery Approach* (based on the results of the Sustainable Services at Scale (Triple-S) research program) and the World Bank's (2017) *Sustainability Assessment of Rural Water Service Delivery Models* both identify "building blocks" deemed essential to improving rural water service delivery.

Combined with the participatory data analyses and verification processes undertaken during the PKLE event, we co-identified six key "elements" or "building blocks" deemed critical to progressing decentralisation in the rural water sector in the PIC context:

- Policies, legal and regulatory frameworks
- Budgeting, finance, and (material) resources
- Information and knowledge sharing
- Monitoring, evaluation, and learning
- Harmonisation and coordination
- Human resources and capacity development.

Framework Indicators

Numerous indicators were developed/adopted for each key element (see Figure 8, below). These were developed through reference to the 'building blocks' literature and the first cycle coding of primary qualitative data. A total of 40 indicators were ultimately identified, with each element containing 5 - 9 indicators. Each indicator was assigned a rating based on the evidence at hand (qualitative data and grey literature).

Following analyses of the data, and validated at the stakeholder workshop, each indicator was assigned a rating using a Likert five-point scale, with 1 equating to "very weak" and 5 "strong".

Whilst ultimately a subjective approach, the ratings are based on a detailed analysis of the data (qualitative and desktop). Applying a quantitative rating can be productive for numerous reasons, from easily identifying strengths and weaknesses, providing a means for comparative (cross-country) analysis to identify regional challenges and strengths, and as a benchmark for longitudinal purposes and tracking change over time.

- Very weak
- Weak
- Moderate
- Moderately Strong
- Strong

We considered applying the traffic light scoring system – green, amber, red – used, for example, by World Bank (2017), but ultimately choose to use a Likert five-point scale as it provided a more **granular assessment**.

The numerical value given the ratings were aggregated for each element, then divided by the number of indicators, resulting in an overall score for each element. Thirty-eight of the 40 indicators were rated; two (sound legal and institutional frameworks for financial transactions; financial alignment and harmonisation) were not assessed and are excluded from the means. In 2026 the ratings were harmonised across the three country studies, and this edition reports the harmonised values (see the Version note before the References).

The elements are high-level and neither exhaustive nor exclusive; rather, they are inter-related and overlap (to varying degrees), e.g., "information and knowledge sharing" is critical to "harmonisation and coordination" and "monitoring, evaluation and learning"; "human resources and capacity development" and "budget, finance and (material) resources" are critical to everything. This reflects the complex, cross-sectoral character of WASH.

Elements and indicators of effective decentralisation for rural water service delivery

Policies, legal & regulatory framework

- Single, overarching national plan and subnational plans (overarching and sectorial) that support WASH and decentralisation.
- WASH policy plans and targets- *Put into practice.*
- Role definitions for all involved national ministries & departments support decentralisation goals.
- Mechanisms for consumer feedback and complaints.
- Traditional and community leaders represented and engaged in the planning process.
- Local and intermediate institutional levels (sub-national, e.g., provincial and community levels) can and do adapt and apply local bylaws or ordinances.
- *WCs and their bylaws are legally recognised and supported by the State.*
- Internal control mechanisms (e.g., policy reviews and audits).
- Design standards and types are appropriate, effective, adequately resourced and implemented.
- Staff are aware of policies, plans regulations etc.,

Budgeting, finance & resources

- Budget & funding for rural water service delivery is adequate and disaggregated between hardware and software.
- Funding is dispersed effectively and devolved to Provincial levels. (*Effective national - Provincial financial disbursement and payment processes; Provincial - community financial support systems; Review/audit process).*
- Adequate financial information. *Budget and expenditure are publicly available. Financial flows are known and predictable. Financial needs for sector operations are known; Amount of funding available is known.)*
- Sound legal and institutional frameworks in place for financial transactions. (e.g., acquittal procedures).
- Financing institutions in place support decentralisation.
- Staff have access to necessary equipment and resources to undertake their duties. (*e.g., computers, vehicles, fuel. Access to materials/parts.)*
- Community contributions (in-kind and/or monetary) are clear, understood and systematically applied.

Human resources & Capacity development

- Adequate staff to meet policy & planning objectives (and all positions filled).
- Government-led sector capacity development.(*capacity needs assessment).*
- Staff have access to professional development training opportunities.
- Service delivery partners are adequately trained (in line with national policy and strategies).
- Structured follow-up (or backstopping) to support community water-mangers following handover.
- Non-government implementation partners provide or fund community training (in line with government standards).
- Community capacity development. (*iterative, scaffolded learning (e.g., backstopping).*
- Contextually appropriate & effective training manuals & pedagogy.*e.g., vernacular language, visual aids (slides/flipcharts, videos)* .

Information & knowledge sharing

- Clear national coordination process/mechanism for information sharing.
- National WASH database exists, is accessible, up-to-date, and utilised by multiple actors across the sector.
- Information reporting process/mechanisms exist that are clear, practical, and utilised.
- Asset management procedures are undertaken.
- Data transparency and public access to information.

Harmonisation & coordination

- Evidence of all sectors contributing to a single national plan.
- Policy and strategy alignment and harmonisation to support decentralisation goals.
- Harmonisation and coordination strategies and policy are practiced by all actors working in the sector (e.g. SDPs).
- Financial alignment and harmonisation (to support decentralisation goals).
- WASH information is collected and stored in a central depository that is accessible and used by WASH sector actors.
- Regular stakeholder meetings, operational taskforce/working group, sector specific MOUs.

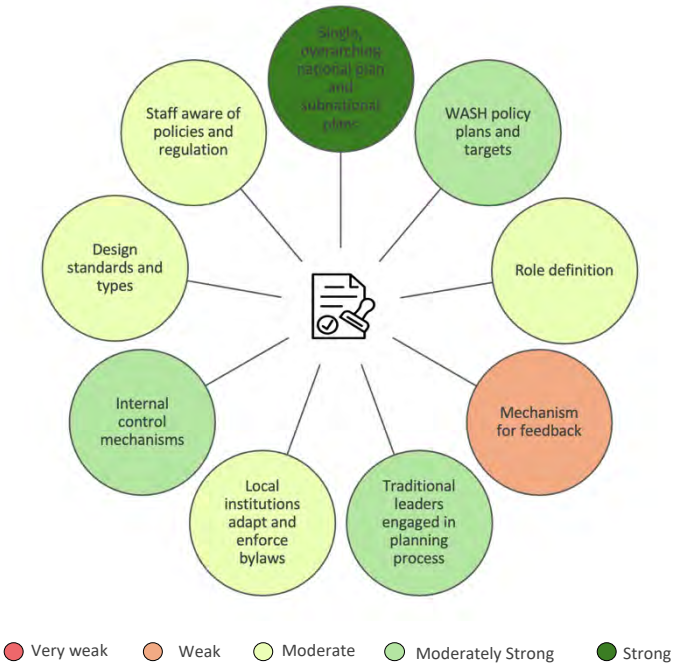
Monitoring, evaluation & learning

- Monitoring & evaluation of water service delivery and management is undertaken.
- WASH reports and sector reviews (*National & sub-national).*
- Appropriate indicators exist to monitor and report on service delivery sustainability and effectiveness.(*Software and hardware).*
- Monitoring at the community level *(Software and hardware).*
- Follow-up support and monitoring (post construction).

Figure 7 : Elements of effective decentralisation for rural water service delivery

Policies, Legal and Regulatory Frameworks

A critical element for effective WASH decentralisation is ensuring that the appropriate policy, legal, and regulatory architecture is in place; without a 'proper' suite of national and subnational (provincial and community level) policies and plans, decentralisation falters and stalls.



Overarching national and subnational planning supports rural WASH and decentralisation

The overarching guidance for national and subnational planning for rural water service delivery is guided by various legislation, policies, and strategies and support decentralisation – on paper.

The overarching development strategy is the ***National Sustainable Development Plan 2016 - 2030*** which consists of three focus areas or "pillars": environment, economy, and society. Each pillar has a discrete but cross-cutting suite of goals, policy objectives, indicators, and targets. The NSDP is designed to chart the country's vision for achieving a "stable, sustainable and prosperous Vanuatu", setting-out the national priorities and context for the implementation of the SDGs over a fifteen-year period (GoV, 2016). The three pillars and 15 Policy Objectives are presented in Figure 9.

The NSDP is focused on preserving the natural environment and its resources, enhancing resilience to climate change and natural disasters, and strengthening both the traditional and formal economies to improve the well-being of ni-Vanuatu (GoV, 2016; Love, Rantes and Souter, 2021).

In terms of **decentralisation** the NSDP emphasises the need to enhance the capacity of public officials to deliver services at rural levels through the strengthening of "national institutions to ensure they are cost-effective and well-resourced to deliver quality public services" so that "local authorities and municipal institutions" are enabled to undertake "decentralised service delivery" (GoV, 2016:12).

The NSDP emphasises that people need improved healthcare facilities, including **access to safe drinking water and sanitation**, as well as better access to essential services such as energy. The NSDP acknowledges the generative relationship between WASH and the economy: under the economy pillar, goal 2.2 seeks to ensure that all people have reliable access to safe drinking water and sanitation services (GoV, 2016).

Figure 8: NSDP pillars (source Gov, 2016)

The ***National Planning Framework (NPF)*** provides a standardised methodology for planning across all levels of Vanuatu's government and serves to align government activities with the NSDP and ensure that efforts are aligned with national priorities and sustainable development goals (SDGs) (DSPPAC, 2024).

The NPF is designed to ensure and that national efforts are aligned with national priorities and sustainable development goals (SDGs) (DSPPAC, 2024).

The NPF is designed to ensure coherence in strategic planning, resource allocation, and implementation efforts across government agencies and assist ministry decision-makers in aligning their corporate and business plans with the goals of the NSDP, particularly regarding service delivery, transparency, and performance management. The NPF outlines three tiers of planning:

- **Long-term planning**: Focuses on overarching goals set in the NSDP (10–15 years)
- **Medium-term planning:** Includes sectoral and corporate plans spanning 3–5 years
- **Short-term planning:** Focuses on annual business plans and budgets (DSPPAC, 2024:9).

In terms of **decentralisation and subnational governance,** the NPF stresses that "decentralisation of planning is a priority of the current government" but notes that the role of coordinating provincial and local authority planning rests with the Ministry of Internal Affairs and DLA (DSPPAC, 2018: 11, 8).

The NPF plays an important role in facilitating the periodic reviews that track progress against the goals and targets outlined in the NSDP.

The ***Vanuatu National Water Policy 2017-2030*** seeks to deliver on the policy objectives established by the NSDP:

- ECO 2.2 to ensure safe water services for all
- ENV 4.2 to protect community water sources
- ENV 4.7 to build community natural resource management capacity
- SOC 3.2 to reduce communicable diseases
- SOC 6.5 to strengthen local authorities to enable decentralised service delivery
- SOC 6.6 to strengthen physical planning to meets the need of a growing population to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets for water (GoV, 2016). [25]

Subnational levels

The *Public Health Act (1994)* assigns responsibility to the Provincial (Municipal) Councils to ensure (enforce) sufficient and safe water for all (clauses 42, 43 & 44) and gives them the authority to pass by-laws (clause 116). The *Decentralization Act (1994)* also empowers the Provincial Council to pass by-laws for constructing, maintaining and managing water supply (clause 20). The *Water Supply (Amendment) Act (2016)* establishes Provincial Water Resources Advisory Committees to advise the provincial government, and the *Decentralization Act* empowers such committees to draft bylaws for the consideration of the Provincial Council.

The Legislative Review of the *Public Health Act* conducted by the Vanuatu Law Reform Commission (VLC) stressed that "the best interventions should come from the community or province" and identified the importance of *kastom* in defining practice at the community level, recommending that changes to public health by-laws reflect customary rules on hygiene and sanitation and the ability to pay fines using customary equivalents (mats, livestock, food stuffs, community work etc.) (VLC, 2013:§B). The review also stated that "**Despite many attempts it is clear that the ministry (health) policy of decentralization has not really happened**" and – following results of a SANMA Provincial Government pilot program in Sarede, South Santo – recommended that that Provincial Health Mangers work in conjunction with Area council Secretaries. This preceded similar recommendations from scholars (e.g. Kohlitz, 2018).

Following the VLC reviews of the *Water Supply Act (2016)* and the *Water Resource Management Act (2016),* the subsequent amendments improved the scope for more effective decentralisation of rural water service delivery by giving greater attention to subnational (provincial and community) actors by more clearly defining roles and responsibilities. Although area councils are not mentioned in the amended *Water Resource Management Act*, they play "a huge role" when it comes to implementing activities at the community-level (e.g., NDWR-2).

The NIP provides detail on decentralisation and rural water service delivery (see Figure 7), assigning specific functions to provincial government and area councils to support communities' engagement in the NIP/CAP process to improve rural WASH outcomes. However, it was widely noted that area councils are frequently overlooked, and even the DoWR do not communicate with Area Administrators as much as they should (workshop, Nov. 24).

Customs did during the COVID-19 pandemic when they made AAs the "eyes and ears for Customs" and gave them

appointment letters to make their roles and responsibilities clear (NDLG-M).

WASH policy, plans, and targets – put into practice

WASH policy, plans and targets are encapsulated in the legislative and policy framework for the sector summarised above (pp. 15-18). In gloss, the key policies and plans are:

- *National Sustainable Development Plan 2016-2030 (NSDP)*
- *Vanuatu National Water Policy 2017-2030*
- *Vanuatu National Water Strategy 2018-2030*
- *The National Implementation Plan (NIP)*
- *Capital Assistance Programme (CAP)*
- *The Water Resource Management Act (2002)*
- *The Water Resources Management (Amendment) Act No. 32 of 2016*
- *The Public Health Act (1994)*
- *The Public Health (amendment) Act No. 11 of 2018*
- The Water Supply (Amendment) Act No. 31 of 2016
- *Vanuatu National Drinking Water Quality Standards 2016*
- *The Decentralization Act (1994).*

The apex policy for rural water service delivery is the Vanuatu National Water Policy 2017–2030 and the Vanuatu National Water Strategy 2018–2030, which seek to deliver the NSDP policy objectives listed above (ECO 2.2, ENV 4.2, ENV 4.7, SOC 3.2, SOC 6.5 and SOC 6.6).

The *Water Policy* established seven priority areas to strengthen the accountability of the institutions necessary to secure a safe, sufficient, accessible, reliable and sustainable water for all.[26]

As is common throughout much of the world, water and sanitation come under different line-ministries and policies. The MoH is responsible for household water treatment and storage, sanitation and hygiene, as well as WASH in health clinics. The National Sanitation and Hygiene Policy (MoH, 2017) outlines key areas for improving sanitation and hygiene services. The policy is supported by the Ministry's Sanitation and Hygiene Guidelines, now in their second edition (MoH, 2023b). The Policy emphasises the importance of coordination across various institutions, including subnational and national authorities, as well as the need for robust policy enforcement. The Policy notes that linkages between water safety and sanitation and hygiene practices, advocating that provinces develop combined WASH bylaws and Area councils' rules for water, sanitation, and hygiene infrastructure and services (MoH, 2017: 20). The amendment made to the *Public Health Act* in 2018 included standards for sanitary systems and devices.

Regardless, there remains a major sanitation gap in rural Vanuatu with many communities having reasonable access to water (90% basic) but very poor sanitation services with **less than half the population having access to basic sanitation** (MoH, 2023b). Aware of the MoH's limited financial resources and poor national sanitation coverage, the DoWR included sanitation into DWSSP to try and improve coverage:

> *"… Our contribution [to improving sanitation and hygiene] is to include it in our DWSSP training. That is why there is a section on how to construct VIP toilets and this is funded by MFAT. Hence, each community that we run DWSSP training with will always go through the demonstration of constructing a toilet. Another level where we contributed is to have communities establish a target to build toilets as their low and no cost options in DWSSP. Then, the CDO can follow-up on that during the time he returns to monitor. So, this is what we were trying to do to address the issues of sanitation because it is currently not being well addressed (NDWR-2).*

One respondent felt that integrating water and sanitation was especially challenging "… because they both have separate policies" (PWS-F).

There is an important – but widely under acknowledged – link between improved water access and improved sanitation. Findings from our Solomon Islands and Fiji research that suggest that **communities with reliable and sufficient water access tended to have better sanitation services** was supported by our visits to "strong water committees" in Vanuatu, where respondents detailed how once they had reliable water access, households steadily began building improved sanitation infrastructure, e.g. Lingarak (MA-V-M10), Wala-Rano (MA-V-M2), Latano (PA-V-M2).

Policies are implemented

In practice, as with many PICs, there are **significant challenges with turning policy, plans, and targets into reality.** For example, the objective mentioned in the above quote about CDOs doing "follow-up" to monitor DWSSP no/low-cost WASH improvements is hindered, in practice, by limited finances (see further MEL element)

The first 5-year review of the NSDP (DSPPAC, 2023b) reported mixed progress across all three key pillars, with some indicators showing positive progress and others having minimal or even no progress (DSPPAC, 2023b).

Of relevance to decentralisation and rural water service delivery, the review reported the following:

- Five of the six provinces had up to date 5-year rolling plans
- As of mid-2023, 50% of provinces had submitted five-year plans to DLA
- Strict financial procedures delay acquiring funds and service delivery
- Political interference (DSPPAC, 2023a).

Numerous challenges were identified at the provincial level:

- Planning alignment (different cycles of planning in provinces not aligned to NPF)
- Budget constraints/financial capacity limitations to deliver services (esp. on outer islands far from the provincial centres)
- Data gaps/ weak reporting
- Lack of institutional support
- Need for greater development partner support and coordination at Provincial level (DSPPAC, 2023a; GoV, 2023b, 2023c).

In terms of SOC 6.5.1 – Change in annual budget going to Provinces, Municipalities towards operations/programs (Devolution of funding authority) [target - 10% increase by 2030] – there has been some progress, including:

- Increase in Councilor Salaries
- Provision for Constituency Allowances for all Provincial Councilors
- Increase in Area council Budgets (GoV, 2023b).

Due to some of the key challenges and unsatisfactory progress identified by the first review of the NSDP, following the 2023 *National Planning Summit* a new framework was developed and a **NSDP "Acceleration Matrix (2023-2026)"** agreed upon, which promotes a "one plan-one budget" approach for all plans that "stem from the one NSDP" (DSPPAC, 2024:2). This was hinged on a desire for subnational levels to receive greater funds and financial autonomy.

The **lack fiscal decentralisation and limited delegation** was noted in both the earlier and current *National Water Policy* and *Strategy* 2018-2030. The Policy notes that

> *"In spite of the political sentiment accorded to decentralisation, there has been very limited delegation of funds and functionaries to the provinces or municipalities. Almost all of the functionaries and funds deployed at the provincial level are managed by central departments. In spite of this, neither the central or provincial government exert any significant influence at the community level, where the Chiefs of custom and the leaders of the church tend to define community rules and practices (GoV, 2017: 7).*

Amongst respondents there were mixed views about the degree and effectiveness of translating **policies into practice.** One Area Administrator stated that while there is "lots of talk about decentralisation […] Implementation has not really happened yet. Right now, not everything is working very well" (AA-F).

Numerous respondents underscored that for more effective decentralisation to progress, greater financial devolution was need to the Provincial government. The same Area Administrator stated that in the future

> *"… whatever funds are provided to address water situations should no longer pass through the Director of the water department but through the Secretary General of the Province" (AA-F).*

Disaster recovery activities often interrupt the implementation of programs:

> *"… this year alone we had twin cyclones and our community in Laravat has finally had their request approved and they went through DWSSP, but they have been waiting for the past 2 to 3 years now (AA-F).*

Plans and Strategies

The previous *National Water Strategy (2008-18)* (DGMWR, 2008) emphasised transitioning the Department of Geology, Mines and Water Resources (DGMWR) from a service provider to a facilitator of integrated water resource management (IWRM), and placed a strong emphasis on **decentralising water resource management to the provincial level**, stating that responsibility for rural water supply operations will be transferred to communities with technical support from the provincial government (DGMWR, 2008: 5, 12-15). This strategy also sought to strengthen water quality standards, monitoring, and water safety planning for risk management.

The current *National Water Strategy (2017-2030)* and companion *Vanuatu National Water Policy (2018-2030)* both reiterate the importance of decentralisation but acknowledge that in practice there was "limited appetite for the decentralization of funds or functionaries" and suggested, as an alternative, the "potential to strengthen a regulatory model of decentralization" (DoWR, 2018:8). This entails strengthening the role of the **provinces in the passing of water resources and drinking water management by-laws** that supporting the role of **Area councils** to pass rules that ensure compliance.

Actions prioritised under the *Water Strategy* to strengthen the licensing of compliance by the provincial governments include:

- The central development of model water by-laws for the consideration of the Provincial and Municipal Councils
- Support to Provincial Water Resources Advisory Committees to amend the model water by-laws to reflect the local context for consideration by the Provincial and Municipal Councils.
- The introduction of a requirement that only Area councils with infrastructure zoning rules will be eligible to receive public water supply projects within their jurisdiction (DoWR, 2018:8).

Additionally, the *National Water Policy* and *Strategy* introduces a market-oriented approach to water services, advocating for private sector involvement to improve service delivery and infrastructure through market mechanisms, and integrates climate change resilience into water planning more extensively, reflecting the increased urgency of disaster risk management in Vanuatu (DoWR, 2018:4,5,9).

Other Plans and Guidance

There is a suite of other Plans that are similarly aligned to the NSDP and intersect with water resources.

The *Vanuatu National Environment Protection Implementation Plan 2016-2030* links existing environment related policies to provide a roadmap for Vanuatu's long-term environmental actions.[27]

The Ministry of Health's *Sanitation and Hygiene Guidelines* (MoH, 2023b) provide comprehensive guidance on sanitation and hygiene practices, particularly in rural contexts. The guidelines target government officers, NGOs, and sanitation workers involved in sanitation and hygiene activities and aim to standardise sanitation efforts across the country, ensuring safety, environmental protection, and inclusiveness. The *Decentralization Act* is mentioned as part of the regulatory framework that enables provincial authorities to oversee sanitation service delivery, and Provincial and Municipal Councils are given a role to play in enforcing sanitation standards, particularly through monitoring and compliance activities (MoH, 2023b). We did not explore the implementation of sanitation policy.

A key challenge raised by several respondents was that the **workplan for area councils does not fall in line with the workplan of DoWR**: Workplans for area councils are dictated at the provincial level only and does not align with the Department's workplan at the national level, which can cause clashes between the workplan from the national government and the provincial government (PWS-1). To redress this, the DoWR submit plans to the province (Secretary General) to avoid clashes.

Draft policies and regulations

Unlike both Solomon Islands and Fiji – and despite the frequent shifts in government over the last few decades – Vanuatu has enacted a large suite of novel WASH-related policies, regulations, strategies and plans over the last eight years, with very few draft WASH-related policies or regulations awaiting approval.

The Ministry of Education are reportedly "polishing their WASH in schools" policy (NDWR-4).

A review of the *Water Resources Management Act (2016)* and associated updates to the *National Water Policy* has recently commenced, and among other things is designed to give more attention to groundwater and the productive sector, The proposed National Disaster Management Office Act will clarify the DoWR's role as WASH cluster lead:

> *"Now, with the government agenda to increase production in the economy, we have to extend the parameters of our laws to include water access for farming or livestock. So, this is one of the reviews or amendment that will be taking place. Also, we have other policies that will come into play such as the NDMO Act which legalises cluster organisations. DoWR is the WASH cluster lead, and this is currently not reflected anywhere (NDWR-4).*

Targets

Water (and sanitation) targets are clearly laid-out in the NSDP, which are linked to the SDGs:

- SOC 6.6: Strengthen physical planning to meet the need of a growing population to achieve the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) targets for water (GoV, 2016). [28]

Other water-related targets of note are included in the **NEPIP**, which identifies three targets under NSDP policy objective 2.3 (Table 6, below):

Policy Objective	**Targets**	**Proposed activities**	**Indicators**
PO 2.3: *Protect vulnerable forests, watersheds, catchments and freshwater resources, including community water sources*	2.3.1: Six Water Protection Zones declared by 2020	Declare Water Protection Zones in accordance with the *Water Resources Management Act* [CAP 281]	Number of declared Water Protection Zones
	2.3.2: Six Watershed Management Plans by 2025	a) Collect information about catchments b) Identify why particular catchments are vulnerable c) Develop appropriate management plans	Number of management plans for vulnerable watershed/catchments
	2.3.3: 100% of community water supply systems with Drinking Water Safety and Security Plans by 2030	Work with communities to develop Drinking Water Safety and Security Plans (DWSSP)	Number of DWSSP developed for community water supply systems

Role definitions - include progressing decentralisation

The cross-cutting nature of WASH demands the involvement of various line ministries and departments. Unlike Solomon Islands and Fiji, however, **there is less departmental bricolage in Vanuatu**, with the DoWR responsible for drinking water and the MoH responsible for sanitation and hygiene.

There is a **sectoral role delineation policy for healthcare** in Vanuatu – *Role Delineation Policy* (RDP) – initially developed in 2004, that has undergone several updates, including a review as part of the *Health Sector Strategy (2017-2020).* There is no official role delineation policy for the water sector, but there is a ***Standard Operating Procedures*** (SOPs) that provide a bridging relation between the DoWR and MoH to effectively coordinate WASH activities during a disaster (DoWR, 2020). The SOP also provides guidelines on the operational linkages between WASH cluster lead agencies and co-lead agencies, including cluster members, and detailed roles, responsibilities and functions for the DoWR and MoH in terms of preparedness, response and recovery.

As noted above, the DoWR are awaiting the NDMO Act to provide regulatory support for DoWRS role as Cluster lead.

The latest MoH RDP (MoH, 2018) outlines the minimum package of services that should be delivered across various levels of healthcare facilities in Vanuatu, aiming to ensure equitable access to quality healthcare by defining the roles and responsibilities of different health facilities, including aid posts, health centres, and hospitals. The RDP is used in the preparation of operational *National and Provincial Health Service Plans* to set priorities delivery of services and service improvement within provinces and nationally for the period 2017 – 2030, in line with the NSDP.

A review of the Vanuatu Australia Health Partnership found that, despite the RDP, **commitments to decentralisation are not reflected in government budget allocations**, leaving provinces unable to deliver even

minimum service delivery standards, especially in rural areas (SHS, 2023:21).

It was clear from respondents that role definitions – at least in practice – **are not as clear and widely comprehended as they could be**, e.g. CDOs and AAs role in monitoring DWSSP and the WASH situation more broadly.

Mechanisms for Consumer Feedback and Complaints

Accountability is critical to supporting the functional links between the different actors involved in service provision and is instrumental to improving service delivery effectiveness (UNDP Water Governance Facility / UNICEF, 2015).

There is no single contact point or for communities to contact the department to raise complaints or seek advice or assistance (e.g., phone number, email). There is a policy process for raising DWSSP related issues through the AAs and CDOs. In practice, people contact the department (mainly) after systems fail.

A Provincial CDO stated:

> *"I think they don't ask for help because they do not know the channel or the process for seeking assistance" (CDO-M1).*

DoWR have a Facebook page,[29] mostly used to share news on events that have occurred, such as workshops, trainings, major events and water cut notices.

The *Vanuatu National Water Policy 2018-2030*, in an effort to improve "quality of service", suggests "potentially engaging a **Call Centre** to facilitate the two-way flow of information on the status of water systems with Rural Water Committees" (GoV, 2017: 4). This has not yet developed. Fiji has a very well established and utilised Service Centre model (see WAF, 2021).

Traditional and community leaders represented

The integration of traditional and formal governance structures, along with efforts to strengthen the capacity of subnational governments, remains crucial for the effective administration and development of Vanuatu's diverse communities.

Customary and community leaders are integral to social order and well-being in Vanuatu, with chiefs, church leaders and other community leaders and institutions (such as village councils and village level committees) providing leadership and facilitating many of the services typically associated with the state in more developed, industrial contexts (e.g., Boege et al., 2009; Brown, 2007, 2008). *Jif*s are no longer just an informal leader for his family and community but also "an icon of local tradition and identity" (White and Lindstrom 1997:1).

Traditional structures [such as chiefly systems] are central to supporting social order and cohesion, through dispute resolution process and other mechanisms, but are also **known to support hierarchical structures that have marginalised women and perpetuated exclusion of certain groups** and in many contexts do not have the capacity to take on much of a role regarding development (Welle, 2008:18). The centrality of chiefs [*Jif*s] in Vanuatu and their role in decentralisation was emphasised by the manager of decentralisation in the DLA, in 2018, when he emphasised that all line Ministries are part of the decentralisation process, including the Malvatumauri National Council of Chiefs and their structures that go right down to Area Council of Chiefs (in Ligo, 2018).

Various other policies specifically mention chiefs. *The Decentralization Act* stipulates that Local Government Councils should be composed of elected and appointed members, including chiefs, women, youth, and church representatives (§3.7.1). The MoH (2017) policy on sanitation and hygiene recognises that while legislation empowers Provincial and Municipal Councils to enforce sanitation standards, "**custom chiefs and church leaders tend to define the rules and exert far greater influence over sanitation and hygiene practices at the community level" (MoH, 2017: 11)**.

This widespread recognition of the importance of *Jif*s, especially their role as "peace makers", is evident in the Provincial model bylaws, such as the *SHEFA Provincial Government Council Water Safety and Security By-Law No. of 2022* (SPGC, 2022), which states that *Jif*s are responsible for conflict resolution:

> *"For dispute resolutions, the chiefs are responsible for the resolution of disputes and promoting changes as is also stated in the Water Resources Management Act. If disputes disrupt water access, then the chief will execute rules of law conveyed in the Water Resource Management ACT [CAP281] and other relevant laws" (SPGC WSS By-Law of 2022).*

The *National Water Policy 2018-2030* states that "**enforceability of Area council Rules will require Chiefs and Secretaries to combine both legal and social norms**

that enshrine water safety and security for all" (GoV, 2017: 9).

The area-level Technical Advisory Council (TAC) includes various community representatives, including chiefs, church leaders, women, youth, and business representatives and people with a disability (AA-M).

It was noted by a few respondents that whilst the *Water Resource Management Act* gives authority to the water committee (WC), this **sometimes clashes with the governing system in contexts where chiefs and/or the village council have the authority** (e.g. MPO-M). This tension was also raised at the validation workshop by several participants (workshop, Nov. 24). It was suggested that "maybe it's a matter of better incorporating these two bodies [chiefs and WCs] together" (workshop, Nov. 24).

There is a critical need to advance the implementation of WASH-related bylaws and rules and provide more guidance for subnational actors (Area Administrators, Council's, water committees), whilst also respecting and being flexible enough to accommodate customary norms and process in place of state jurisprudence where appropriate and locally desired.

Local and Intermediate Institutional Levels Adapt and Apply Local Bylaws and Ordinances

The *Decentralization Act* empowers Provincial Councils to pass by-laws for constructing, maintaining and managing water supply), and the *Water Resources Management Act (2016)* established the PWRAC to advise provinces and draft bylaws for consideration by the Provincial Council. The Bylaws should clearly assign and define the consequences for water safety and security failures (GoV 2018:7). Provincial bylaws have been passed and gazetted for SHEFA, SANMA and MALAMPA, but nationally there is a **substantial implementation lag.**

Nevertheless, as provincial governments play a negligible role in service provision in practice, with almost all provincial funds and functionaries managed by central departments (DoWR, 2018c:8).

The *National Water Policy 2018-2030* also states that **area councils** should develop "Rules for WASH infrastructure and services" (GoV 2017:9) and both the *National Water Policy* and *Strategy* state that **area councils** should develop "**local rules that ensure compliance**" (GoV, 2017:7, 9; DoWR, 2018c:9). The rationale of establishing area level rules is to translate **legal norms** (Provincial and Municipal bylaws) into **social norms** (GoV, 2017: 9).

These are primarily focused on integrated **water resource management rules** (see Table 2), and in practice area councils are yet to activity harness the policy opportunities available to them.

Table 3: Provincial Council Authority and levels of responsibility

Central	• DoWR to develop model water by-laws for Provincial and Municipal Councils • DoWR to develop, issue, regulate and update national water standards (i.e. drinking water quality; drilling; design & construction; tariff standards) • DoWR to develop national policies & strategies for water with the NWRAC
Provincial	• Decentralization of functions & capacity to the Provincial Water Resources Advisory Committee to undertake their role • Support Provincial Water Resources Advisory Committees to develop water by-laws and Water Master Plans for consideration by the Provincial Councils
Municipal	• Extend support to Municipalities to incorporate water management supply and demand considerations into urban zoning plans • Extend support to Municipal Councils to amend & issue model water by-laws • Assist Municipalities to strengthen their planning approval process for development works with respect to potable water requirements • Assist municipalities to strengthen building permit monitoring particularly in respect to the quality of plumbing materials and workmanship • Assist municipalities to issue trade licenses to certified plumbers and builders
Area	• Require Area councils to develop & apply infrastructure zoning rules prior to the approval of public water supply projects within their jurisdiction. • Strengthen customary decision making and arbitration practices in developing integrated water resource management rules by Area councils • Work with Area councils to raise public awareness on the chronic implications of unsafe drinking water on the intellectual and physical development of children

(source: DoWR, 2018c: 8)

Given the lack of fiscal decentralisation and growing – but in practice limited – delegation provided to subnational levels, the *Water Policy* suggests the strengthening policy on licensing of compliance by the **provincial government** is part of a solution (GoV, 2017). This includes introducing a requirement that only **area councils with infrastructure zoning rules are eligible to receive public water supply schemes** within their jurisdiction.

The status of infrastructure zoning rules could not be clearly ascertained.

WCs and their rules or bylaws are legally recognised and supported by the State

In terms of rules and social norms, it is the 'community' and WC that are ultimately determinate to water service delivery outcomes. Advancing the professionalisation of the sector in the PIC includes providing CWM with the legal tools and enforcement support necessary to effectively manage rural water supply systems.

Under the amended *Water Resources Management Act (2016)* one of the key functions of a WC is "to make rules to regulate water resource management issues in the community (§20G 1.c). There is a whole sub-section on WC rules:

§20H Rural Water Committee rules

(1) A Rural Water Committee may make rules regulating water sources within the relevant community.

(2) Without limiting subsection (1), the Rural Water Committee may make rules on the following matters:

(a) the use of water sources; and

(b) setting fees to be paid for the use of water sources as approved by the Director.

(3) Water resources must be used in accordance with the rules made under this section.

In 2024, the DoWR produced a document entitled *Community Water Supply Rules Samples* (DoWR, 2024) to provide communities with further guidance on potential rules. The *Water Resource Management Act (2016)* w enables the gazetting of the *Provincial Water Safety and Security Bylaws*, and these rules can then be legally enforced (see above).

The steps for WCs to register their **bylaws or rules** through the *Provincial Water Safety and Security Bylaws*, process, are as follow:

1. File request letter attached with appropriate signatories and supporting documents from the area councils
   - (i) Upload request letters to NIP CAP database
   - (ii) Tabulate all requests
   - (iii) File hard copies
2. Registration at Provincial Level fulfilling the following criteria:
   - (i) 40% women rep in committee
   - (ii) Approved DWSSP
   - (iii) Conducted community development training and basic plumbers training
3. Enter registration information into DoWR IMS
   - (i) Scan (if needed) and upload onto the database
   - (ii) If both trainings are undertaken facilitate to legalize WC
4. Assist water committees to create rules (DoWR, 2023).

It was noted that regarding bylaws:

> *"… it only stops at the provincial level then it skips the area council and the wards and went straight down to the water committee. There are no functions for the area council (NDWR-2).*

Area councils were considered an under-utilised resource, but there are concerns about overloading the councils. Another respondent suggested that having area council rules – rather than community level rules – may be more effective as "they have law enforcers (police) and therefore the message will be clear" (NDLG-M). It was also suggested that area council rules should include provisions for holding WCs accountable (workshop, Nov. 24).

Whilst not formally registered through the proposed process, there is one **legally recognised** water committee in the country – the Walarano water committee (north-east Malekula) – which has had its bylaws/rules recognised and enforced by the courts (see Case study, below). The outcome of the court case ostensibly gave the Walarano WC bylaws legal recognition, enforcing the fine and demonstrating the **merit of attaining state recognition**.

Following the outcome of the legal case, people in the community now dutifully follow the WC rules. Other people have been fined and punished (e.g. locking tap stands when not paying the monthly water fee) (MA-V-M1, MA-V-M2). There are numerous examples of other solar-borehole pump systems not proving to be sustainable (e.g. in Central Malekula, in Malo Island, SANMA Province). (PWS-M2).

Case-study Walarano WC

The DoWR in MALAMPA Province assisted – with the support of development partners (MFAT and UNICEF) – in the establishment of a new water supply system in Walarano, Malekula: a borehole with a solar powered pump transporting groundwater to four large reservoir tanks (2 Wala, 2 Rano), which is then gravity-fed to shared standpipes.

The community had struggled with poor water services for years.

The community established a water committee, and they underwent the standard Water Committee Training. The WC consists of 8 men and 6 women, and there are designated plumbers for most 'sectors' (zones/groups) in the community. Both the Rano and Wala Councils of Chiefs submitted a "Letter of confirmation" to the DoWR in support of the water committee. After establishment, in consultation with the community the WC developed some bylaws, which came into effect in March 2019. The bylaws include a list of guidance and regulations, including:

- Establishment of water committee
- Administration (election, term, duties and powers, meetings)
- Water chargers (and disconnections for non-payment)
- Connections (application for new taps, costs, responsibility)
- Disciplinary Action (suspension, termination)
- General laws (list specific offences and punishment)
- Bank Accounts and expenditure.

According to several respondents, it was the bylaws and legal registration of the WC that has "saved" the water system, e.g., "It was the bylaws that saved our water system – if there were no bylaws, the water system would have already broken down" (MA-V-F1, MA-V-M2).

The WC have used the bylaws on several occasions. In the first case, a person (of high stature) was fined for damaging the community water system pipes while they were burning their garden. The WC issued a VUV10,000 fine, as stipulated in the bylaws, but the individual refused to pay. In defiance, he tried to set-up their own "rival" water committee and took the matter to court. However, due to the existence of the bylaws, the registration of the WC in the DoWR system, the support of the PWS and the fact that it had followed all the criteria under the legislation (*Water Resource Management Act*), the individual was forced to pay the VUV10,000 vatu fine (PWS-M2; MA-V-F1).

Water committee registration

WC registration and legally recognised bylaws are, in the eyes of most respondents, deemed the best way forward to improving water system sustainability by empowering water committees. This is echoed by experiences elsewhere in the world and is a key step towards professionalising rural water service delivery (see Lockwood and Smits, 2011).

Currently, the government can transfer water assets to WCs but cannot enter enforceable agreements on service quality and inclusiveness because they are not legal entities. **Since they cannot own assets, incur expenses, or be held accountable for service failures, liability for water assets remains unclear.** This limits the willingness of WCs to save water tariff revenues to invest in the replacement and expansion of water facilities. Hence, the *National Water Policy* and *Strategy* prioritise the registration of water committees as legal entities with the ability to own water assets and the associated liabilities (DoWR, 2018c; GoV, 2017).

Actions prioritised under the Policy to strengthen the **registration of rural water committees** include:

- Support from the government and NGOs to be directed to assist existing and new Rural Water Committees to register as legal not-for-profit entities and comply with requirements under any of the relevant Acts
- Prioritise government and NGO support towards communities that are already legally registered entities and willing to comply with the roles required of the Rural Water Committees (GoV, 2017:5).

As of mid-late 2024, **a list of WCs that have met the criteria are sitting with the Director of DoWR but are not considered a legal entity until they have been gazetted by the Minister.** Currently, the Minister is waiting for a consolidated list to gazette them in one sitting - it is a "long and tedious process", as one senior DoWR staff member stated (workshop, Nov. 24).

Another means of attaining legal recognition is thorough the *Co-operative Societies Act (1982)* and associated amendments and registering a WC as a water cooperative (see below).

Several respondents noted that a key challenge to registering WCs was limited financial and human resources:

> *"… the registration of the WCs is a very slow process [and in SHEFA Province] we were never able to meet the targets for the WCs to become a "legal entity". Theoretically, this could have paved the way for further financial support, e.g. cooperatives. It would also give them legal responsibility, enforcement, monitoring and evaluation [powers]. The delay in registration, although provincially there is a great willingness, is due to the lack of resources, i.e., enough manpower and budget (TA-1).*

The dynamic character of WC membership was highlighted as **specific challenge to registration** as it is the composition of the WC that is registered, not the entity per se. It was noted at the workshop that the PWRAC and NWRAC are formally recognised committees – not the membership – and perhaps future amendments of the *Water Resources Management Act (2016)* [which is currently under review] could re-word the relevant subsection to register the WC in a way that membership composition does not impact its formalisation. Moreover, an amended Act could make WCs responsible for informing the area council of changes to WC membership (workshop, Nov. 24). This would require consultations with DLA.

Internal Control Mechanism (e.g., Review, Audits)

Policy reviews evaluate the content and relevance of a policy to ensure it remains effective, up-to-date, and aligned with the organisation's goals and objectives. NDSP has recently completed its first 5-year review (see above).

Policy audits seek to evaluate the implementation and effectiveness of policies, ensuring compliance and identifying areas for improvement.

We could not find evidence of specific policy audits in the WASH space, but that does not mean they have not been undertaken. There is benchmarking and monitoring of NSDP implementation and impact (see above and MEL element).

Vanuatu has undertaken several key strategic reviews of relevance to rural water service delivery, including:

- *Water Resource Management Act (2002)*
- *Public Health Act (1994)*
- *Water Supply Act (1985).*

These legislative reviews were undertaken by the Vanuatu Law Reform Commission (VLC, 2014). A call for the review of the *Water Resource Management Act* and updates to the *National Water Policy* is currently active.[30]

Design Standards are Appropriate, Effective, Adequately Resourced, and Implemented

In 2001, the then Department of Rural Water Supply (RWS) issued the first "Vanuatu Rural Water Supply Technical Standards Manual". It is unclear how many updates there have been but the latest appears to be a 2019 version entitled "Design and Construction Standards for Rural Water Supply in Vanuatu" (DoWR, 2019).

The Standards provide updated design and construction standards and, among other things, seek to address the vulnerability of water supply systems to climate change, citing unpredictable rainfall, droughts, and floods. It categorises water supply technologies into high, medium, and low resilience to climate change. Piped water systems are identified as highly vulnerable to climate change impacts, while boreholes are noted to be more resilient but at risk of saline intrusion due to rising sea levels.

The Standards ensure that water is available for essential needs such as drinking, food preparation, and hygiene, and that water meets the National Drinking Water Quality Standards. For rainwater harvesting systems, the minimum supply is set at 5 litres per person per day, which is aligned with WHO drinking water standards. Rainwater harvesting (RWH) guidance includes first-flush system (DoWR, 2019:21) – something missing from Solomon Islands Standards (Love et al., 2024).

The designed lifecycle of systems are 15 years; 5-years less than Solomon Islands.

There are several further Guides being prepared which will be attachments and amendments to the Standards and gazetted in due course. These are:

- **Direct gravity-fed (DGF):** Design & Construction Guide (Including Technical Specifications, Construction drawings & Payment measurements)

- **Indirect gravity-fed (IDGF):** Design & Construction Guide (Including Technical Specifications, Construction drawings & Payment measurements)
- **Rainwater harvesting (RWH):** Design & Construction Guide (Including Technical Specifications, Construction drawings & Payment measurements).

The gazettement of these to the Standards will enhance compliance and system sustainability.

Standards are adequately resourced and implemented

This could not be decisively ascertained. The only data on hand to assess the **implementation and enforcement** of Standards is direct observation of first-flush systems in Malekula and Santo. These first-flush systems were installed as part of "train the trainers" capacity building with DoWR and UNICEF, with many if the systems located in schools. Two of the systems inspected were inoperable (the screw cap was at ground level and unremovable). Over half of the 12 RWH first-flush systems inspected in Malekula (Oct. 2023) and Santo (Feb/March 2024) were full of water and had not been emptied.

Staff are aware of policies, plans, regulations

We did not specifically 'test' respondents' knowledge of policies, plans, regulations etc., but did analyse the data with an eye to knowledge gaps and awareness. **Respondents appeared to have a good grasp of policies, plans and regulations that relate to water. However, there was some variation in responses and gaps with regard to the training packages** (e.g., some respondents were not aware that financial management training was now incorporated in the Water Management Training).

It was suggested that there needed to be a workshop where all AAs and CDOs can better learn about bylaws.

Budgeting, Finance, and Resources

Adequate budgeting, finance, and material resources (e.g., access to transport, materials, and human resources) are essential components to furthering decentralisation within the rural water services sector. In the IRC's nine 'WASH building blocks", finance deals with everything from the "cost of service delivery, the sources of funding, the roles of different actors in providing finance, effective mechanisms for long-term financial procurement and channels for getting money to where it is needed" (Huston and Moriarty, 2018:21).

This element is strongly linked with human resources and capacity development.

Budget and funding – hardware and software

Adequate Funding

One of the most important requirements for progressing decentralisation is: i) ensuring that there is adequate financial planning, forecasting, budgeting, and sourcing of funds; ii) the application of full life cycle costing for service delivery; and iii) consideration, when devising budgets, for disaggregating budgets between both hardware (i.e. infrastructure) and software (i.e. costs of community mobilisation/training and management) (Lockwood & Smits, 2011:25; see World Bank, 2017).

Under-resourced decentralisation is a common challenge that has delimited rural water supply decentralisation in many contexts, e.g. Malawi (Lockwood & Kang, 2012), Ethiopia (UNDP, 2006: 102) and Myanmar (Kimbugwe et al., 2022).

It has been recommended (e.g. UNICEF, 2016:20) that national governments set allocations for water [and sanitation] as a percentage of GDP: **this is not yet the case in Vanuatu.**[31]

Since 2016, WASH budgets in the Pacific Islands appear to have increased in real terms in some countries (e.g., Vanuatu, Kiribati), declined in others (e.g., the Solomon Islands, Tuvalu, Fiji), and remained steady in a few (e.g., Samoa) (UNICEF, 2023:18).

Vanuatu's budget for WASH is dominated by external assistance, with the national government – despite labelling it a "priority" – provide very little direct support (NDWR-2). The primary sector funding for implementation comes from MFAT through the "Water Sector Partnership" (Phase 1) (see Faerua et al., 2022). In November 2023, the Government of Vanuatu received funds for Phase II of this Water Partnership, with a total committed from the New Zealand Government of VT185 million to support Phase II (Toara, 2023).

Reporting on WASH expenditure from governments in the Pacific Islands is highly inconsistent. Moreover, some countries such as Vanuatu aggregate water and sanitation budget lines. Average annual budget allocation for WASH (2016-2020) in Vanuatu was USD$5.80 per capita [Compare: Solomon Islands (USD$1.3) and Fiji (USD$127.90)] (UNICEF, 2023:21).

Total expenditure on WASH in Vanuatu has increased since 2019, to nearly USD$5 million in 2021 (see Figure 10).[32]

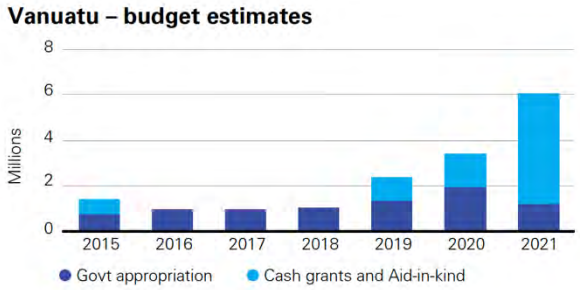


Figure 9: Vanuatu budget estimates (USD $)

(Source: UNICEF, 2023: 18-20)

The UN-Water GLAAS reports for 2016/2017 and 2022 suggest that Vanuatu struggled with insufficient government expenditure to meet WASH sector needs, but there was evidence of progress in increasing government funding and improvement in reporting non-ODA sources (WHO, 2017, 2022).

The bulk of DoWR budget is spent on salaries - "it consumes a huge part of the budget" (NDWR-2). Over the period 2008-2014, 88% of the budget was spent on salary, but by 2019 it had decreased to 57% (Sammy, 2019)

Funding continues to rely heavily on donor support, with limited devolution to subnational levels, constraining effectiveness and (potentially) the equitable distribution of resources to rural and vulnerable communities.

It has been suggested that approximately VUV 2 billion (USD$13 million) is required every year to implement the NIP, yet in 2017 – for example – only VUV107 million [USD$907,445] was budgeted by the government for water [urban and rural] (Sammy, 2019).

More recent government and donor support include a new water service delivery system in and around Saratamata, East Ambae (VUV23M) and Stone Hill, Santo (VUV16M) (Willie, 2024). The government have also sourced funds from the Green Climate Fund (GCF) for numerous funds and, more recently still, UNDP for the pilot implementation of Ecological Purification systems (PWS-M1).

Budget disaggregation

Best practice includes not only funding certainty but also whole-of-life costing for service delivery and disaggregating budgets between **hardware** (e.g., water system construction) and **software** (e.g., community engagement training, monitoring/follow-up).

Currently, there is **no budget disaggregation** between hardware and software. This is a significant gap. Many countries are now quarantining a percentage of their budgets for software.[33] This is critical to improving the longevity of water systems and improving WASH coverage as per the government's stated targets.

Funding managed and dispersed to Provincial levels

A lack of adequate and effective fiscal devolution to the provinces has been an ongoing issue since Independence. The Vanuatu National Audit Office and Auditor-General's reports frequently point to issues related to the lack of transparency in funds flow, and mismanagement at both the central and provincial levels (e.g., Office of the Auditor General, 2017).

Brown (2011), undertaking an analysis government auditing based on interviews, observation and analysis of Auditor-General reports from 1981 to the late 2000s, found that while theoretically aligned with a Westminster model of governance, the state and its agents faced numerous **financial accountability challenges** which delimited the **flow of funds to provinces**.

Financial devolution has improved, marginally. In 2018, the then Minister for Internal Affairs confirmed that the national parliament had passed a budget of Vt100 million to support provincial and area council development goals, including the establishment of full-time permanent posts for Area Administrators in all Area Councils across the six provinces (Ligo, 2018).

The 2018 *Annual Development Review* (GoV, 2018) progress in the devolution of funds to provinces (increase in Government Revenue Transfers to provinces) but that "determination only affects personal emoluments" and not the operations/programs and noted that "some DGs and Directors are yet to authorise funding authority at the provincial level" (GoV, 2018: 46).

Financial Services Bureaus (FSBs) had been established in all provinces by 2018 (GoV, 2018: 46).[34] The FSBs helped to sustain improvements in financial management at the central level and also had a positive impact on service delivery, they were underused by line ministries and there remained an "unwillingness for greater delegation by the headquarters of line ministries" (Warner, Gouy, and Samson, 2017: 29).

More recently, the 5-year review of the NSDP –reporting on the NSDP indicator for SOC 6.5.1 (devolution of funding authority) found:

- Increase in Councilor Salaries
- Provision for Constituency Allowances for all Provincial Councilors
- Increase in Area council Budgets (GoV, 2023b).

Respondents reported that there has been an increase in area council budgets. Each area council receives **3 million vatu (USD 30,000) annually;** out of that, half (VUV1.5M) goes towards AA salary and the other half for plans/projects, including "follow-up" if needed (NDWR-2). Moreover, each Provincial Water Supervisor (PWS) is now able to access funds directly through the FBS up to VUV100,000 (workshop, Nov. 24).

Despite this, many staff highlighted challenges accessing funds to visit communities. This especially impacts CDOs and AAs who are tasked, in the Policy, with follow-up/monitoring. In practice, if they do undertake visits, they typically have to find transport (e.g. "go with a project") or self-fund visits, with reimbursement difficult and uncertain (e.g. AA-2, PWS-M1, CDO-M2, PWS-M2, PWS-M3, NDWR-2, WRM-M).

However, there is some funds in the Water Sector Partnership Phase II program for subnational follow-up in Phase 2:

> *It is impossible for CDOs to travel to communities to conduct monitoring because there's not enough money to support them to travel to remote areas, even for just a quick follow-up. Therefore, this year for phase 2, we have made sure that there is money for CDO activities. It is true that government support to the province is limited, but project support to the provinces is not (NDWR-2).*

Whether this is sustained, and/or the money made available and used as planned, is not currently known (but as of late 2024, it had not yet been accessed by CDOs (workshop, Nov. 24).

Provincial - community financial support systems

In the past, there was little to no support to communities from provincial or area administration levels. The Provincial DoWR has some access to small funds. In example: The Laravat community (west Malekula) and WC self-funded the bulk of their own water system – with a dam located 12km away – and the MALAMPA PWS was able to provide some pipe to complete the system.

Area council's, with their recent budget increase, are now in a position to provide some modest support to communities, with each Area council currently receiving 3 million vatu (approx. USD 30,000) annually, with half for salaries, half for plans/projects, including follow-up if needed (NDWR-2).

Review/audit processes

Financial review and audit processes are governed by a mix of constitutional mandates, legal frameworks, and institutional oversight mechanisms, which apply to both national and subnational levels.

At the national level, the Vanuatu National Office of the Auditor General (hereafter OAG), established under Chapter 8 of the Constitution of Vanuatu (Articles 25-27), is responsible for auditing all government accounts, including ministries, departments, and statutory bodies. According to the *Public Finance and Economic Management Act (PFEM Act),* the OAG is mandated to review financial statements and ensure compliance with established financial management procedures. The Auditor General reports to Parliament, thus ensuring transparency and accountability in the management of public funds. The audit reports are publicly available.

There are numerous available departmental audits under the Ministry of Lands, Environment, Mines & Water Resources but none of the DoWR to date.[35]

Financial information

There is limited publicly available financial information in Vanuatu, e.g. no "Citizens' Guide to the Budget" which simplifies national budget information to enhance transparency, accountability, and public understanding. There is very little specific information on WASH sector financial matters. This is not unusual in the region.

To our knowledge there has been no feasibility study conducted on how different financing mechanisms – taxes, tariffs, and transfers– might be used to support rural water service delivery (see UNICEF, 2016:19-20).

Legal and institutional frameworks for financial transactions

There are a host of laws, regulations, and oversight mechanisms to ensure sound financial management. The most salient are the *Public Finance and Economic Management [CAP. 244]* (*PFEM Act*) (2019), and the *Public Finance Economic Management Regulation Order (No 88 of 2021)*, which strengthen transparency, accountability and financial management efficiency. The *PFEM Act* and associated *Regulation Order* outlines procedures for financial activities such as procurement and expenditure, and mandates the use of standard tendering processes, as well as imposing conditions for contract awards.

The *Regulation Order* introduces stricter rules for travel-related "imprests", requiring detailed travel itineraries and expense forecasts for approval, with measures to ensure any unspent funds are returned to the government. This order is part of a broader effort by the Vanuatu government to improve its public financial management system, aligned with their *Public Financial Management (PFM) Improvement Roadmap (2022–2026) (GoV, 2023a)*.[36]

Financing institutions and decentralisation

The central government have generally provided only targeted but relatively meagre consolidated funds to subnational units, with the bulk of funds for salaries and very little funds for implementation purposes. However, decentralisation is/can be also supported through project development partner funding (NDWR-2). MFAT, UNICEF, DFAT and other partners undertake some dedicated activities at the subnational level, **but more is required**.

FSBs have reportedly provided improved confidence for development partners and private sector investors to engage at the subnational level (Barbara, 2022; Warner, Gouy, and Samson, 2017).

It is noteworthy that, in 2019, it was reported that money spent on water in Vanuatu is **not** channelled through the DoWR (Sammy, 2019).

Staff and community water managers have access equipment and resources

Staff equipment

We did not have the opportunity to undertake a detailed assessment of material resource access. CDOs lack access to basic plumbing tools and GPS systems (workshop, Nov. 24). Vehicles were scarce and generally in poor condition (due to the harsh environment and poor road infrastructure.) Staff have relatively new laptops. The DoWR are currently constructing new Provincial offices in various Provinces, which include satellite communication capability – a critical asset in dealing with disaster response and recovery (NDWR-M2).

Water Committees are not provided with tools by the DoWR.

Procurement

Lockwood and Smits (2011) argue that supply chain management should exist at the sector level, requires standardisation (to reduce market fragmentation), and underscore that spare parts must be accessible and economically viable (2011:127; cf. Harvey and Reed, 2004).

The *National Water Strategy* highlights the importance having essential spare parts available at the Provincial level (DoWR, 2018c), as did water sector professionals during the EWB-NZ (2022) consultations for *Remote Support for Rural Water Committees* (EWB-NZ, 2022).

Respondents during the EWB-NZ consultations had the following suggestions to improve access:

- Improve relationships between suppliers and water communities
- Provide details to VWCs on all local suppliers, for example as part of a VWC booklet or guide [DoWR, Area council, implementing agencies]
- Provide a standard list of replacement materials for community to know what to purchase
    - Create an inventory of common supplies/spare parts needed by rural water systems to share with provincial hardware stores (EWB-NZ, 2022: table 1).

Respondents in some Provinces noted that there are often not enough supplies in the local hardware stores, spare parts for older systems are increasingly hard to find, and some available plumbing parts are of very poor quality (e.g., PWS-2; DWTO-1; MPO-1).

It was suggested that a **standardised Bill of Quantity (BOQ) should be provided as part of the plumber's training** (PWS-2).

UNICEF have recently supported a WASH supply and demand study in Vanuatu which includes mapping current WASH supply chains and understanding vendor perceptions and bottlenecks associated with WASH products and services.[37]

Some very proactive water committees – such as Lingarak (Central Malekula) – source, adapt and sell their own materials (taps, standpipes, showers) (MA-V-M10, MA-V-M11).

Community contributions and cost-sharing

It is widely acknowledged that there is a desperate need for sustained financing for rural water supply systems; there must be a way to recover costs for operation and maintenance following system handover to a community (e.g. Cross et al., 2013; Chowns, 2015; Lockwood and Smits, 2011; Moriarty et al., 2013; UNICEF and WHO, 2011; World Bank, 2017; WHO, 1991, 2017).

The *National Water Policy* notes:

> *In both rural and urban areas, a weak commercial orientation, poor O&M and low service quality is rewarded with new assets contributing to a* ***build-neglect-rebuild*** *cycle of management (GoV, 2017: 3).*

It has been estimated that "**communities financed repairs in less than a third of the schemes**", with the practice of the government subsidising repairs undermining "the delegation of the ownership of assets and the associated liabilities to communities" (DoWR, 2018c: 15).

There are broadly two kinds of community contributions: those that go **towards water system construction** (e.g., monetary, in-kind [labour, sand/gravel]) and those that come after (**post-construction** operation and maintenance cost retrieval, e.g. water fee/tariff).

Cost-sharing

There is **no compulsory community contribution** required when requesting a water supply scheme, but there is generally some in-kind labour contribution. However, this is changing with the DoWR experimenting with several cost sharing approaches.

Many DoWR staff argue that communities should make some financial contributing towards construction costs, arguing that this may improve "ownership" (NDWR-3; WRM-M). This is a common approach in some contexts: it was previously used in Fiji, where communities had to pay 1/3 of total construction costs, but was rescinded after the Constitution was revised and access to water was included a "human right").

The DoWR have begun instigating several novel approaches to cost sharing. Through the Global Green Growth Institute (GGI) and National Green Energy Fund, the DoWR are using VUV21 million for three water scheme projects, with each community repaying VUV500,000 over five years (PWS-M2).

asse

However, it was stressed on numerous occasions that what works well in one community does not necessarily work well in another: "Different systems, different communities" (AA-2); "no one model can work given the diversity in Vanuatu" (workshop, Nov. 24)

Water fee

Post-construction, ongoing operation and maintenance costs are derived – in theory – from community contributions: a regular water fee and fundraising.

The amended *Water Resources Management Act (2016)* added a whole section on finances, stating that WCs can set "fees to be paid for the use of water sources as approved by the Director" (§20H.2.b).

The necessity to strengthen financial management and accountability is acknowledged and addressed in Part 4 of the revised *Rural Water Management Training Manual* training package (DoWR, 2023):

- 4.1 Budget (includes a subsection on the life-cycle cost of water system)
- 4.2 Water fee (rationale)
- 4.3 How to set a water fee
- 4.4 WC Rules and water fee (examples of rules)
- 4.5 How to collect and record water fee
- 4.6 Looking after money (bank account, no bank, mobile banking)
- 4.7 Recording money
- 4.8 Reporting on finances (DoWR, 2023).

In 2024, the DoWR released the *Community Water Supply Rules Samples* document, which includes a section on recommended fee retrieval (DoWR, 2024: 11.3.i- vi).[38]

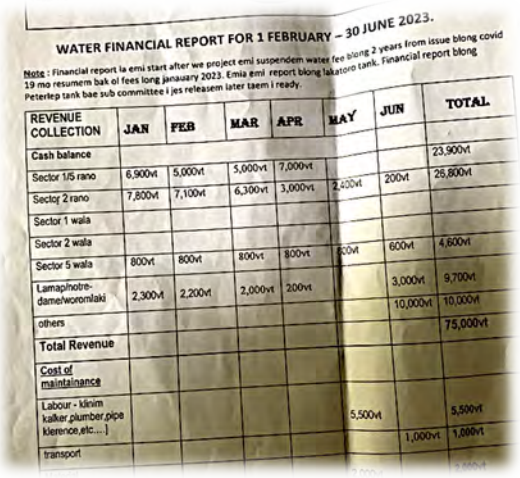
Regardless, several respondents felt that there was a need for more attention, clarity, and regulation around community contributions (e.g. AA-2). Despite the guidance provided by the DoWR, in practice implementation of **water fees** and **regular fundraising** is weak and regular household contributions and systematic fundraising are far from the norm in practice. For example, speaking of WCs in PENAMA Province:

> *Communities do not have the idea that raising funds will help sustain their water systems. Even if there is little money, they go ahead and use that money for purposes other than maintaining the water system […]. That is why when you walk around the community, you find leaking pipes, pipes tied up with rubber (PWS-M3).*

Some respondents felt that poor community contributions were due to a lack of finances. However, research questions these assumptions, with the poorest community in one comprehensive study having a diligent water fee regime and (comparatively) the best water service access, suggesting that there are more determinate variables informing a community's willingness to pay (Love et al., 2020). A ni-Vanuatu respondent noted:

> *"People say they do not the money, but at the end of the day you will see them at the nakamal and spending 200vt on kava […]. The Government makes it very clear during handovers that this system is now the communities' responsibility (DWTO-M).*

There is arguably room to better highlight the importance of cost-recovery and community contributions. Despite weak adherence, nationally, there are some exemplar cases where communities do regularly contribute to water fees.



WATER FINANCIAL REPORT FOR 1 FEBRUARY – 30 JUNE 2023.

Note : Financial report la emi start after we project emi suspendem water fee blong 2 years from issue blong covid 19 mo resumem bak ol fees long janauary 2023. Emia emi report blong lakatoro tank. Financial report blong Petertep tank bae sub committee i jes releasem later taem i ready.

REVENUE COLLECTION	JAN	FEB	MAR	APR	MAY	JUN	TOTAL
Cash balance							23,900vt
Sector 1/5 rano	6,900vt	5,000vt	5,000vt	7,000vt			26,800vt
Sector 2 rano	7,800vt	7,100vt	6,300vt	3,000vt	2,400vt	200vt	
Sector 1 wala							
Sector 2 wala							
Sector 5 wala	800vt	800vt	800vt	800vt	600vt	600vt	4,600vt
Lamap/notre-dame/woromlaki	2,300vt	2,200vt	2,000vt	200vt		3,000vt	9,700vt
others						10,000vt	10,000vt
Total Revenue							75,000vt
Cost of maintainance							
Labour - klinim kalker,plumber,pipe klerence,etc…)					5,500vt		5,500vt
transport						1,000vt	1,000vt

Case-study: Water fees

Lingarak (Malekula) (est. 2003)

- Water fee: VUV200 per person, per month (18-40yo) (started at 50, then 100)
- Also conduct regular fundraising
- Collect 26,000 a month from fee (VUV312,000 annually)
- Treasure sits in WC office twice a month (pl. come and pay)
- WC started selling tap stands and showers (VUV700) in 2022
- Disconnected(lock) taps if water fee is not paid
- Money is used to pay WC to undertake system inspection (every 3 months) and undertake repairs
- Many households have constructed flush sanitation systems (only WC can connect)
- WC fix / replace washes and taps – second time ask HH to pay
- WC have over 1 million vatu in bank account
- Financial reports given to community every month.

Latano (Pentecost) (est. 2017)

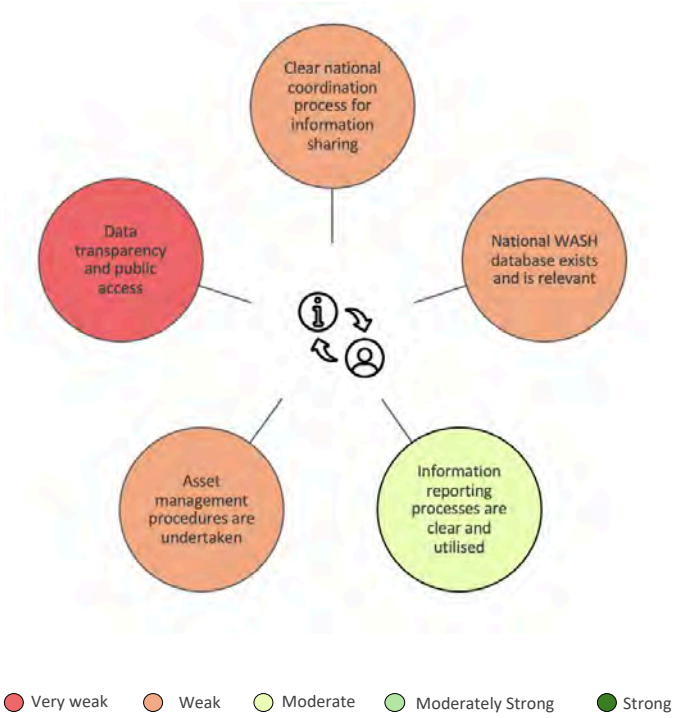
- Water fee: VUV300 per household, per month (started at 100)
- 99 HHs, 356,400 annually
- Cash poor households can contribute chickens, mats etc.
- Only WC plumbers can make new connections/undertake repairs
- Pay VUV1000 for a day to clean dam, inspect line, make repairs etc. Also pay WC treasure to collect and record water fee
- WC bank account has VUV 86,000
- Many households have constructed flush sanitation systems (only WC can connect)
- Financial reports given to community every month.

Walarano (Malekula) (est. 2018)

- Water fee: VUV200 per household, per month
- Raised VUV64,220
- Only WC plumbers can make new connections/undertake repairs
- Many households have constructed flush sanitation systems (only WC can connect)
- WC reps in different village sectors collect fee
- Financial reports given to community every month.

Information and Knowledge Sharing

Information and knowledge sharing is a critical element for advancing the rural WASH decentralisation agenda. Without robust data management practices, from collection through to storage, access and dissemination, decentralisation policies, plans and practices cannot progress. A culture of learning and adaptive management is required and this hinges on good information and knowledge sharing. This element is closely linked to both the "harmonisation and coordination" and "monitoring, evaluation and learning" elements.



Clear process for information sharing

The cross-sectoral nature of WASH makes collecting and coordinating information a complex and resource-heavy task.

The role of information management in the DoWR is to:

- Ensure all DoWR databases are functioning
- Check quality of submitted data (edit where necessary)
- Ensure all websites / dashboards are up to date and accessible
- Create back-ups and archives of all database and work files
- Produce ready to use data into awareness materials (Bulu, 2019).

The DoWR *Standard Operating Procedures* emphasises the importance of information and knowledge sharing as a fundamental component of preparedness and response efforts, critical to enhancing coordination amongst stakeholders (DoWR, 2020).

The DoWR Information Management Officer (IMO) is tasked with maintaining data accuracy, producing reports, and ensuring that "contact lists of in-country WASH Cluster partners are made available" and "WASH Situation Reports are regularly" produced (DoWR, 2020: 22).

At the **subnational level**, AAs, CDOs and CLOs are critical to bridging the communication gap between communities and government agencies. The NIP/CAP process clearly state the processes required, which includes "channelling communication" through the community, the area council and Province so that everyone is "aware" and "given approval"; however, in practice this does not always occur (e.g., WRM-M).

Information is shared between, and beyond, government departments. The DoWR and MoH are working together to share water quality monitoring data and there are discussions with MoET to coordinate data sharing across all three Ministries in the future through a data sharing agreement. The DoWR share data with research organisations (e.g., IWC, ISF) and NGOs.

It was noted that there are, and should be, limits to data sharing. Sharing data, it was noted, can lead to misinterpretation and unintended consequences, e.g. the public release of poor water quality data could have negative commercial implications for a tourist business (NWDR-M2). There was a reluctance to share some raw data with other departments for this reason. **This concern could be redressed with a departmental data sharing policy.**[39]

National WASH database

The DoWR information management system was launched in 2019, developed with assistance from web and system developers in the United Kingdom. The data was initially located in the Cloud (outside of the governments network) but was transitioned into a centralised government database in 2023. There are four main databases:

- Water committees
- Water Quality
- DWSSP
- Water Resource Inventory.

Community profiling data is not held by the DoWR.

The Water Resources Inventory (WRI) database was established with the assistance of UNICEF and UTS-ISF. The WRI includes "information regarding all water sources that we use, starting from rainwater tanks to handpumps to boreholes and rivers" (NDWR-M1). The data is supposed to be collected every four years. Tim Foster (ISF) has recently analysed the data.

The department are working on sharing links to that data via the website, but currently only the Information Management Officer (IMO) oversees disseminating information upon permission (NDWR-1).

Bylaws are not currently recorded in the database and there is very little other software focused information captured.

Data security and back-up

The Vanuatu government's Information and Communication Technology (ICT) systems were hit by a ransomware attack on November 6, 2022, crippling the government's ability to function. The Network Access Storage server and "WIMS centralised database system" which connects all "our databases, including Water Quality Data, Water Committee information, DWSSP Reports, WASH Data, WRI Data, and more" was "wiped clean" (NDWR-1).

The cyber-attack took down government websites, email systems, and essential services such as emergency response lines, forcing officials to resort to manual operations, including the use of pen and paper in hospitals (Voloder, 2022). The attack disrupted critical services for weeks, including taxation, immigration, police, and healthcare systems, which had to suspend surgeries due to the lack of access to patient records (Island Business, 2022).

The Vanuatu government refused to pay the hackers ransom, and external cybersecurity experts from Australia were brought in to assist in rebuilding the systems. By early December, about 70% of the affected services had been restored, but the full recovery process took several months, with significant disruption to public services and legal proceedings (as some court data was also lost) (ICS STRIVE, 2023; RNZ, 2023).

This incident highlights the vulnerabilities faced by small island states with limited resources to manage cybersecurity threats. **The DoWR lost significant amounts of data during the cyber-attack.**

> *"Unfortunately, when the system got hacked, we lost everything and that includes personal data as well. As soon as the system was back online, we could not manage to retrieve all the data because we have no backup […] the way forward is to create an offsite backup (NDWR-1).*

It was reported that there remains inadequate data back-up. All WASH data is currently submitted to the NDMOs 5Ws database.[40]The DoWR stores Initial Rapid Assessment and Detailed Assessment Data in JotForm, an online data collection platform. The DoWR have access to the data submitted in the NDMO 5Ws Excel sheets (NDWR-1).

Due to the cyber-attack, the associated data loss and back log of data to be added, information is not up to date nor easily accessible.

Information reporting process/mechanisms

The processes/mechanisms for collecting and updating data and reporting were identified as "weak" and/or "challenging", primarily due to resource and capacity limitations, and **data collection was reported as ad hoc** by numerous respondents.

There are multiple forms to be completed by different people. For example, the "water quality form needs to be filled-out by the water quality team. The water committee data filled-out by the CDOs and, for DWSSP and other projects, it is the Project Unit and the PWS responsibility" (NDWR-M2). To update the system, the form that was filled-in must be transposed to a computer form (excel/database) and then it's appropriate dashboard. It is reportedly the person who filled-in the form responsibility to update the database, but people often fail to do this, resulting in the IMO having to follow-up. This is one of the reasons proffered for why up-to-date data is not available.

In late 2023/early 2024, there were 70-80 DWSSP reports needing to be entered into the reporting system. There are plans to move the DWSSP reporting templates to electronic forms, via tablets and phones, which would address this data-entry lag for DWSSP (NDWR-M1). The PWS and CDOs having the most reporting responsibilities (DoWR, 2023).

The department are seeking to improve and expand reporting and information management processes. A senior DoWR staff member stated:

> *"Reporting is one of the main challenges that we are trying to address in the department, but you can only do so much. However, if you do not report, the donors will not know what we have been doing. They know how much funds have been provided so we report and submit. That is one thing that is a challenge for us. What we have to do is work with what resources we have so that we a held accountable. We want to involve every staff in the department to participate in reporting. Basically, we tell you what to do and you tell us what you did. At the moment, only the PWSs are reporting. We want each and every staff member to report as well, and then compile all the reports into one from each province (NDWR-2).*

The same DoWR respondent noted that one of the benefits of this approach is that it takes some of the pressures of the PWS. There are specific targets for reporting, e.g. the PWS are to hold quarterly meetings and report on outputs.

The Business Plan for 2024 – which includes a summary report of the discussions held at the annual DoWR retreat – had the following to say about reporting:

> *"During the past years, it has been brought to the attention of the administration, the current trend of poor reporting for quarterly, by-annual and annual reports. The retreat concluded that a* ***reporting template should be crafted to capture the needs of all departmental stakeholders*** *(DoWR, 2023:§2.2).*

The report further noted that staff must compile "travelling reports" when going outside "his or her normal place of work" (DoWR, 2022:§2).

SDPs must provide a report following DWSSP implementation, but there is no reporting required following water committee or plumbers training implementation.

The department have recently started using a commercial project information management system. However, the Database Officer position remains vacant, which is the position that is responsible for updating the DoWR database (NDWR-1; see further Human resources element).

To what degree NGOs contribute information to the DoWR was not systematically captured, but there were reports of NGOs not informing all relevant stakeholders, especially area councils (workshop, Nov. 24). Area councils are tasked with capturing activities, including NGO projects, in their community profiling (see below).

Subnational and community level

There are established processes for reporting and information sharing at the community and area/provincial level. However, there are also significant challenges in implementation, consistency, inspection, and monitoring.

The main subnational level data collection and reporting process are:

- Community profiling [Area council]
- Provincial Water Resources Advisory Committee (PWRAC)
- Provincial Technical Advisory Committee (PTAC)
- Area Technical Advisory Committee (ATAC).

A **community profiling** activity is now undertaken in each Area council across the country; this is a relatively recent initiative. Data is collected manually and should happen every 3-5 years. The information is used to assist with the priority ranking at the heart of the NIP/CAP process. When a community submit a request through the NIP/CAP process, the community profile is submitted to the PWRAC and used as part of the risk/priority ranking (e.g., AA-2, MPO-1)

Provincial Water Resources Advisory Committees were established through the amended *Water Resource Management Act (2016).* The Chairperson of PWRAC is the Secretary General of the province, with DoWR playing a secretarial role. Especially in terms of the NIP and CAP, the PWS works closely with the PWRAC "for the approval of projects before they are sent to Vila and the NWRAC (e.g. MPO-M). Membership of the PWRAC consists of 5 members, with the chairperson of the committee being the Secretary General and a DoWR staff member the Secretary of the Committee (other members are drawn from other government departments, such as education and health). The PWRAC meet at least four times a year (NDWR-2).

There is also a Provincial Technical Advisory Committee (PTAC) and an Area Technical Advisory Committee (ATAC); however, we could not clearly ascertain what their exact reporting requirements are and if/where WASH service delivery fits within their reporting.

Despite recommendations in the NIP/CAP and *Water Policy* (e.g. GoV, 2017:9), **area councils are regularly "skipped" and communication/reporting – in practice – goes straight form the WC to the Provincial level** (workshop, Nov. 24). At the community level, water committees do not currently have any mandated reporting requirements to the government but are encouraged in the WC training to have a minutes and account book, and the community DWSSP is meant to be updated over time (MPO-M).

Asset management procedures

Asset management – through asset registers and other information and reporting procedures – are required for accountability, forward planning, capacity development and appropriate resource allocation.

The *Water Policy (2018-2030)* endeavours to improve the accountability for compliance to "quality of service" standards by seeking to vest "public water asset ownership with a legal entity" through formally registering water committees once they meet the established criteria (GoV, 2017:5). When water system assets are transferred to communities, they are effectively removed from the public asset register and assigned a value of zero. Although the DoWR has developed a water inventory that uses GPS references to capture all drinking water assets, there is no system for updating the O&M status of these assets (GoV, 2017: 4).

A respondent explained the rationale behind using an **asset management approach within DWSSP**:

> *"The technical and management trainings are merely skills trainings to equip the water committee to be able to operate their system and run their safety plan. The safety plan is a result of how well people manage their assets. If they manage the assets well, you will find that they have safe water and a reliable source. That is why we want to incorporate asset management into DWSSP. You cannot achieve water safety if you do not know how to manage your assets. For example, why do we maintenance or schedule times to clean the tank? It is part of asset management (MPO-1).*

The overall Ministry Asset Inventory sits with the Land Asset Officer. DoWR have a standalone Microsoft (Excel) Asset Inventory. Initially, the inventory primarily recorded departmental information and communication information devices, such as computers, tablets, camera's, GPS etc. (NDWR-1). However, it was later decided to register and keep track of all DoWR assets in-house. This was done by a short-term contracted Database Officer in 2023 for all provinces but TORBA. A PWS noted that the "only thing not on the register" was the toolbox provided by the Vanuatu Skills Partnership (PWS-M3).

Major challenges to maintaining an active and up-to-date asset register were cited as: a) staff constraints (vacant database office position); and b) new procurement materials not being entered into the register by Provincial staff with "many items [in the past] went missing due to a lack of proper recording tools to capture all the assets details" (NDWR-1).

Recommendations to improve asset management included:

- Dedicated staff to update the database
- Strengthen the procurement process so the asset information's can be captured before deployment
- Utilise a Web Dashboard or Intranet page with all assets and links to responsible officers (NDWR-1).

Data transparency and public access to information

Other than the census data there is, to our knowledge, currently little WASH information easily available to the public (e.g. no community, district, provincial or divisional WASH data online). There is a desire to have greater public access to various DoWR information from the website – including legislation, policies and select database information (e.g., NDWR-1, NDWR-3), but this is not yet operational.

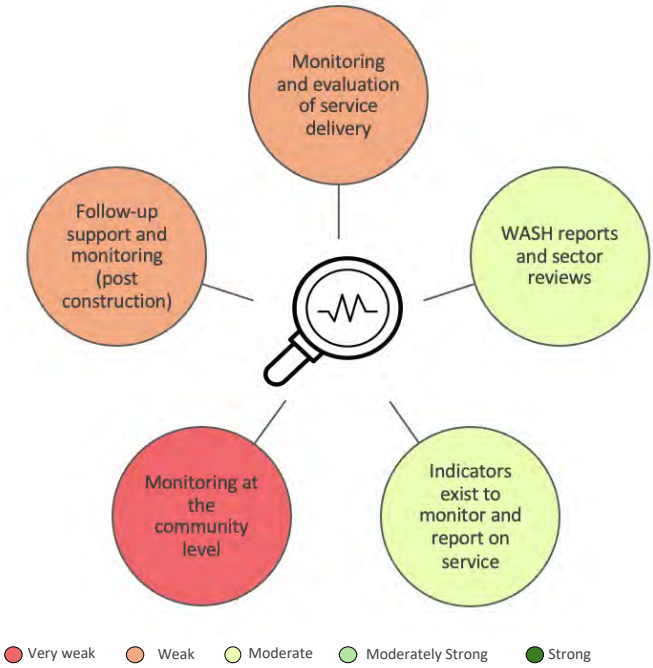
The DoWR sub-site under the MLNR online governmental portal is **not working properly**: there are four links (M&E Unit, Technical Services Unit, Projects and Operation Unit, and NIP) with only the NIP working, which takes you to a two-page pdf of the NIP/CAP process. When working, the website has "…forms, DWSSP templates, reports, water works pamphlets, and anything that can be uploaded that the public can access" (NDWR-1).

There are plans to establish the DoWR website separate from the Ministry, for ease of site management.

Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL)

WASH improvement and effective rural water sector management requires ongoing learning and adaptation – this is doubly so when undergoing decentralisation – and is impossible without good data. However, monitoring in the sector is about much more than simply reporting on a set of indicators and is not the same as project-based monitoring and evaluation; there must be a systematic way of collecting and analysing data and using it to inform action and decision making at multiple levels (national, provincial and community) (see Huston and Moriarty, 2018:23).

This element is closely linked to both the "information and knowledge sharing" and "harmonisation and coordination" and includes the all-important CWM+ "follow-up / backstopping" component, deemed a critical transitionary step towards a service delivery approach in the rural PIC context



Monitoring and evaluation are undertaken

At both national and provincial levels, the government seek to monitor and evaluate policies and approaches through alignment to the **NSDP**, which serves as the framework from which ministries prioritise activities and strategic priorities. **In short, monitoring and evaluation (M&E) is undertaken, but it is constrained by limited resource and capacity.** This delimits the ability to adapt and apply learnings from the M&E activities in a comprehensive and timely manner, dulling momentum, sustainability and progress.

The NDSP has a companion *Monitoring and Evaluation Framework for the NSDP* produced by the Department of Strategic Policy, Planning and Aid Coordination (DSPPAC), with assistance from the ADB and the UNDP (DSPPAC, 2017). The Framework serves as the guide for implementing, monitoring and reporting on each of the NSDP policy objectives (DSPPAC, 2017)

The M&E framework was designed as a "continuous process of planning, monitoring (collecting data) and evaluation (analysing data)", culminating in *Annual Development Reports* (ADRs) which consist of a matrix filled out by Line Ministries (2009-2018 are available on the government website). The focus of these reports is the status of the 15 Goals, evaluated through reference to the Policy Objectives, which are evaluated against the status of the indicators. The ADR focused on:

- Summarising results against targets (qualitative and/or quantitative)
- Providing analysis for achievement of targets
- Providing indications of actual or potential roadblocks (DSPPAC, 2017:7).

The last publicly available ADR reported **no data** for indicator ECO 2.2.1 and 2 – proportion of population with reliable access to safe drinking water and improved sanitation facilities – and noted that some indicators are activity rather than outcome based (e.g. SOC6.6.1).

After 2018, Vanuatu shifted to a five-year review system (VNSO, 2021). The 2019-2020 *NSDP Baseline Survey* is an expanded Household Income and Expenditure Survey that collects data critical for informing national economic, social and environmental policy. The data was joined with 2020 *National Population and Housing Census* data to provide estimates of key indicators at the Area council level (VNSO, 2021).

This change in M&E aligns with the *National Planning Framework* and the *NSDP Monitoring and Evaluation (M&E) Policy*, which mandated comprehensive reviews every five years, rather than producing detailed annual reports.

The M&E Unit is a core part of the DoWR, with the most national staff. It includes a water quality officer, WASH sector coordinator, two senior hydrology officers, a compliance officer, advocacy and public relations officer,

a senior information management officer, and a database officer (the last position has been vacant for some time).

A senior DoWR respondent stated:

> *Monitoring happens in every single unit. However, in the M&E Unit, monitoring is undertaken on a weekly and a quarterly basis. We have coastal monitoring, and water quality monitoring for water supply service providers […]. We also do project monitoring and inspections. We have standards to monitor against. For example, if the team collects a water sample from Beverly Hills and the results came out negative, they will advise the supplier to improve the water quality (NDWR-1).*

At the **subnational level,** provincial water officers have workplans that require quarterly monitoring of water systems - primarily urban systems. CDOs are tasked with monitoring low and no cost improvements following DWSSP implementation (before capital improvements). As noted, in practice this has historically been restricted due to resource constraints.

Monitoring of contractors was cited as particularly challenging. One respondent stated:

> *Basically, CDOs should attend the workshops to monitor the contractors. When they do not participate, this sometimes results in two-day workshops instead of the mandated five days. AAs and ASs also need to be involved in monitoring (WRM-1).*

It was noted that when CDOs have undertaken monitoring, key WC members are sometimes not present (PWS-3). This is a communication issue, but not easily rectified as there are many communities with poor or no network coverage. Area council representatives are meant to be the focal point in these cases.

The quality (and format) of reporting is sometimes an issue and SDPs have been terminated due to incomplete reports (NDWR-4).

Disasters frequently play havoc with DoWR work plans, with staff and resources moved to recovery mode following disasters (such as TCs Kevin, Judy, Lola, Pam etc.,). This further impinges the ability of CDOs to undertake monitoring. However, this is being slowly tackled through the development of water technician capacity at the area council level (see further Human resources element below).

It was suggested by several respondents that two CDOs were needed (especially in the larger provinces), and that AAs need to be fully equipped with laptops (PWS-5).

WASH reports and sector reviews

Monitoring, evaluation, and learning (MEL) is closely aligned with regulation [and accountability] in that it can supply actors with the relevant information required to determine whether policies, procedures and services are being delivered as planned (Lockwood and Smits 2011: 99-100). In Vanuatu, all the key WASH sector policies and plans mention the need for regular reports and reviews.

WASH situation reports

WASH Situation Reports

Various reports provide comprehensive insights into the status and progress of the WASH sector. Some notable reports include:

- **UNICEF and WHO Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) Reports:** These reports provide detailed statistics and analysis on water and sanitation coverage in Vanuatu, tracking progress towards the SDGs) and highlight areas needing improvement (WHO & UNICEF, 2021)
- **Vanuatu Bureau of Statistics (VBoS) Reports:** The VNSO publishes reports on national health and demographic surveys, including agriculture, which contain data sections on access to clean water, sanitation, and hygiene practices (e.g., VBoS, 2013, 2016, 2020)
- **Department of Water Resources:** The *National Water Policy 2017–2030* includes three annexes that provide a relatively comprehensive summary of key WASH data (current at the time of publication in 2017) (Gov, 2017)
- **Pacific Water and Wastewater Association.** Has produced various publications that include reports on WASH in Vanuatu, with a focus on infrastructure and service delivery (e.g., Hamel & Bani, 2019; Manuel, 2019)
- **Multiple Indicator Cluster Survey (MICS):** The MICS are a globally recognised household survey program developed by UNICEF in the mid-1990s that gathers data on various indicators essential for monitoring the health, education, and overall well-being of children and women, especially in low- and middle-income countries. MICS surveys, implemented by Vanuatu Bureau of Statistics, have been conducted in Vanuatu in 2007-2008 and in 2023-2024 (VBoS, 2024)[41]

Sector reviews

Sector reviews and evaluations are conducted periodically to assess the effectiveness and impact of WASH initiatives. These evaluations often involve multiple stakeholders and provide evidence-based recommendations for improvement. UNICEF regularly support reviews of the WASH sector.

Recent sector reviews include:

- **IWC/UNICEF:** WASH capacity and training needs assessment for Vanuatu (Wegener et al., 2019)
- **Review of opportunities for the Pacific WASH sector 2021:** Regional review of the Pacific WASH sector (ADB, 2021)
- **Pacific Regional Infrastructure Facility (PRIF) Sector Review 2021:** Provided a comprehensive analysis of infrastructure development in the WASH sector across the Pacific, including Vanuatu, and emphasised the need for greater investment in resilient infrastructure to withstand climate change impacts (Overbeek, Cox & Pereira-Hill, 2022)

There have been **no WASH joint sector reports conducted in Vanuatu.**

Appropriate indicators for monitoring and reporting

Appropriate indicators for monitoring and reporting service delivery are required for successful and sustainable WASH implementation. The government monitors and reports on WASH indicators in alignment with the SDGs, through the NSDP and using the national NPF (GoV, 2017; DSPPAC, 2018).

The first 5-year NSDP review report found that:

- The NDSP M&E framework contains a vast array of indicators (196) and targets (205)
  - Some of which are **output** indicators that should be in Corporate Plans, and the M&E Framework should only contain **outcome** indicators
- Some indicators are overly ambitious
- Some department policies/programs do not have indicators/targets under certain Policy Objectives (DSPPAC, 2023a).

At the provincial level, the same review found:

- Gov staff were not familiar with NPF
- Staff are not getting enough assistance with aligning Provincial priorities with NSDP Goals and Policy Objectives
  - Alignment to NSDP in the provinces is done through incorporating an agencies priority into Provincial Plans
- There are no processes to link ADR findings (learnings) to provincial plans (DSPPAC, 2023a).

The monitoring of national progress on SDG6 targets relies mainly on estimates derived from Census data [and the recent MICS data] (e.g. VBoS, 2020, 2024). While providing a baseline for tracking progress, it does not offer real-time insights into current conditions or recent developments in the WASH sector.

The water ladder allows countries to broadly monitor their progress and compare the success of water-focused interventions between time and place. But they are limited. There is an overemphasis on infrastructure (piped water), difficulty in low resource contexts to measure all three criteria (accessible on premise, available when needed, and free of contamination), and a lack of recognition of non-faecal sources of infection (e.g., water-based helminths or aquatic vector larvae) (see Bain et al., 2014; Howard et al., 2020; Shaheed et al., 2014).

Software and hardware

There is an effort by the DoWR to capture both hardware (e.g. assets and other data recorded in the WRI) and some software (e.g. water committee registration).

Water committee membership is inherently dynamic (more so today in Vanuatu with the Seasonal Workers Program, see Love et al., 2022). There is no guidance in the training or policies about what to do when WC membership changes. It was suggested that:

> *"[WC membership changes] should be included [in training/policies] so that it is their role to inform the AA and call a meeting to replace a WC member so that it will keep their water committee functioning (CDO-2).*

There is limited other structured reporting on water committee activities. The DoWR and UNICEF developed a *DWSSP follow-up form* and *Water Committee Functionality Checklist,* but these do not appear to be in wide use. Earlier research recommended that the forms could be improved by: incorporating a more of a focus on lower and no-cost options into the monitoring (which focused primarily on externally funding activities);

applying age-disaggregation and "other" responsibilities of WC members in the data set (see Love et al., 2022). The date of the most recent WC meeting could also be included as a proxy indicator.

If the CDOs or AAs undertook semi-regular monitoring (e.g., bi-annually), small/changes additions to the indicators could be used as a proxy measure for water committee activeness. This could be enhanced with telephone monitoring where practical. Note that the lack of a designated budget allocation for staff communication expenses, specifically for purchasing mobile phone credits, poses a significant constraint on the implementation of ICT-assisted **monitoring opportunities**.

This omission **impacts operational efficiency** by failing to account for necessary recurrent expenditures in the overall budget planning and allocation process.

Community-level monitoring - infrastructure and management

Water Committees

Policies, Acts and guidance clearly stipulate that water committees are responsible for the ongoing maintenance and operation of water system infrastructure.[42] The Water Committee Training manual includes guidance on making a maintenance timetable and stipulates that the WC are also responsible for **monitoring** "water safety" (DoWR, 2023: 71-2).

However, the degree to which WCs undertake regular monitoring of water systems is impossible to qualify. The 'strong' water committees visited during fieldwork – and nominated by the relevant PWS (e.g., Katbol, Lingarak, Latano) – all undertook regular monitoring of their water system, from source to taps, generally on a three-month basis, or earlier if needed.

Follow-up monitoring and support for water committees:

According to the NIP, follow-up monitoring and support for rural water service delivery is to be provided by the Provincial government, with the support of area/ward council. Together, they are to take responsibility for managing and monitoring delivery of improvements (according to the DWSSP), using as much local skills and materials as possible (DoWR, 2018a: 16, see also Figure 7, above).

Provincial governments are responsible for progress and completion reporting to the DoWR, and the DoWR are required to carry-out construction inspections during the project, as required by the construction standards (DoWR, 2018a:16). Water technicians are responsible for **compliance checks of contractors** work when they undertake water system construction:

> *"We carry out compliance checks by ticking off a checklist. If we find a fault in the construction, we will request them to come back and fix it and after a week we would go back to check on it again (DWTO-1).*

An **Area Administrator** explained what, in the "ideal", an AAs role could/should entail:

> *"…those of us who are Area Administrators should follow-up on them [water committees/ DWSSP team] and must have reports on time. And when we do other work in the community, we must consider their water system. We can follow-up with them. It's very important, from the time we make the community profile, I also talk about the water condition in the community. We have contacts for the water committee, we can call and ask about their water condition and their plans. If there's no monitoring, it won't be good (AA-2).*

A Provincial Water Supervisor discussed the role of area councils in monitoring DWSSP:

> *"Funds for monitoring are a challenge. Hence, we are trying to outsource monitoring to the Area council. But the problem is, for that to work, we need to run a **DWSSP monitoring training** with Area Administrators / Secretaries for each Area. [The benefit of this approach] is that it would make logistics less stressful for us [as they are more locally situated] (PWS-3).*

The only mandated follow-up monitoring is for DWSSP and to be undertaken by CDOs during the 6-12 month low / no-cost activities before the capital improvements commence.

> *"We only do monitoring for low/no cost options. This is just to prove that the community is committed to the project. Which is okay, but it is not enough (MPO-1).*

In practice, however, follow-up monitoring during the no / low-cost period has been challenging due to financial constraints.

> *It is the job of the CDOs and the AAs [to do follow-up]; however, there is not enough funds to support that program […]. I do not often go to the communities. At least once every 2 to 3 months. Only when there is a project can I go (CDO-2).*

Funding shortfalls have impinged on the ability to provide the ongoing follow-up as stipulated in the NIP. Some monitoring was reported, but more respondents than not reported that they were constrained in their ability to conduct follow-up. However, for the Phase II of the MFAT/ Water Sector Partnership, DoWR have "made sure that there is money for CDO activities. It is true that government support to the province is limited, but project support to the provinces is not'' (NDWR-2). There is VUV50,000 budgeted for each of the 60 projects a year to support CDOs to undertake DWSSP monitoring.

It was stressed by numerous respondents that follow-up monitoring was required beyond DWSSP and the CAP. Reflecting on the DWSSP+ formative and action research conducted by IWC/GU, DoWR and Red Cross Vanuatu in 2022 – which included a targeted follow-up activity with WCs and the DWSSP team – a PWS stated:

> *… the research clarified some of our weaknesses. It also pointed-out some of our roles. For instance, regular visits to the communities to help strengthen water committees. The research results made me realise that regular visits are important. Although we sometime have a budget for follow-up, we rarely did it because we thought 'they already have a water committee, let them handle things on their own now'. However, that shouldn't be the case. We have to visit them to help them out. Keep them motivated and assist if they need technical assistance. For example, there are a lot of communities that have a long system or pipeline and when there is air in the pipes, there will be less pressure. This is because we have found that the committees do not know how to fix the issue. They start to remove joints and pipes to let the air out. Unfortunately, the issue still persists if the storage tank is empty. So, these are some of the things that we discover when we work more closely with the water committees [through follow-up] (PWS-1)*

Governance was cited as an issue impinging on DWSSP low / no-cost improvements, astutely noted as a "risk" not captured in DWSSP – and ongoing monitoring and follow-up suggested as a solution:

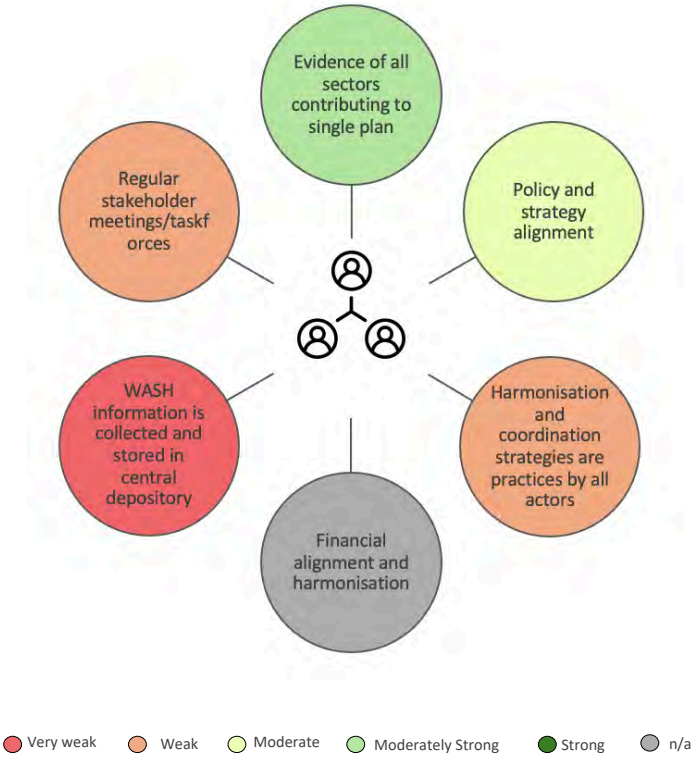
> *Governance should be one thing that we need to look at more … [poor governance] … might be one of the reasons why the community keeps falling apart. Maybe it's not that the community is not committed, but because the governance capacity is a barrier we have to look into as well.* ***When we do DWSSP, we look at risk but not the risk posed by poor governance.*** *We should also be looking at governance. So, going back to making* ***DWSSP an ongoing cycle*** *in the community, visiting more, can help (MPO-1).*

The interest – at least among some AAs – to more systematically monitor water services is promising but requires a well-defined structure, non-burdensome reporting templates, and resources, for it to be realised.

It was noted by a senior DoWR respondent that "**Area councils [increasingly] shoulder the whole of government**" and while they are the obvious entry point in the devolution chain, it ultimately "depends on whether or not they have the capacity" (NDWR-2).

Harmonisation and Coordination

Effective water service decentralisation requires strong coordination mechanisms and structures. To achieve multi actor and multi-level coordination requires good policy and clearly defined roles, relationships, and responsibilities, supported by good communication and coordination platforms (hence, is closely linked to "information and knowledge sharing"). Coordination can be assisted through working groups, technical meetings and joint sector review processes that increase interaction amongst stakeholders and ensure that sector actors understand their roles and are working together effectively (Huston and Moriarty, 2018:19). This element also includes donor alignment and harmonisation (see OECD, 2006).



Evidence of sector contributions to a national plan

The NSDP – or "Peoples Plan" – was developed via an extensive and inclusive process initiated in response to the limitations of the previous Priority Action Agenda, which had focused predominantly on economic management. The NSDP represents a shift to a more holistic approach to national development, integrating social, environmental, and economic pillars**. The Plan was developed through a comprehensive three-year consultation program that reached across the entire country**, engaging with nearly 1,500 citizens in diverse groups, as well as representatives from government, private sectors, civil society, and traditional leaders.

The Department of Strategic Policy, Planning, and Aid Coordination was key in leading this initiative, ensuring alignment between national policies and international commitments.

Vanuatu has strong integrated policy and guidance around climate change and disaster preparedness and response, reflected in various DoWR guidance materials and approaches (e.g. DWSSP, WC Training package).

Policy and strategy alignment and harmonisation (support decentralisation)

The *National Water Policy* and *Strategy* are in close harmonisation and feed into the NSDP. Key legislation such as the *Water Resource Management Act (2016)*, as well as the NIP/CAP process, all align with and support the current *Policy* and *Strategy* goals, which seek to leverage subnational structures and further the decentralisation of rural service delivery.

There is room for greater support and guidance regarding WASH markets and how best to progress professionalisation and private sector engagement in rural water service delivery.

Harmonisation and coordination strategies and policy(s) are practiced

The DoWR has the "responsibility to coordinate everything" – central to this is the **WASH Sector Coordinator** role in the DoWR (NDWR-2).

The WASH Sector Coordination role and DoWR annual workplan includes quarterly WASH sector meetings, with a new initiative introduced in 2024 to conduct some **meetings at the area council level**. Given that WASH activities are concentrated at this level, it is applicable to bring key stakeholders – such as area administrators, health workers, and water committee chairs – together, to ensure the program aligns with local priorities. In this light, meetings were planned for area councils in Santo,

Malekula, and Pentecost, with full participation from Area Administrators (NDWR-4).

Additionally, the workplan outlines the coordination of **WASH Technician training** at the **area level** in Malekula, Ambrym-Paama, and TAFEA, along with supporting area councils in Santo and PENAMA Province. The ultimate aim of the Water Technician training (Plumbing Certificate II) is to support the establishment of private enterprise that can operate as SDPs for the DoWR (see further Human resources element). The plan also includes the installation of six portable desalination and NOMAD units, one in each province, subject to funding approval [the status of implementation could not be verified].

Wegener et al., (2019) reported that, historically, there had been limited coordination between the DoWR, MoET and MoH to implement WASH programs at both national and provincial levels, and that the WinS Program was attempting to address this with a consolidated WinS strategy. This appears to have been largely resolved.

Nearly two decades ago, Cox et al., (2007) wrote that "[p]ressure from donors to produce comprehensive development strategies has produced documents with limited ownership" and policy initiatives tended to be inconsistent and short-lived (2007: iii).

This is much less the case today. When the government began reforming the water sector and establishing the DoWR, they learned from the experiences of other countries in the region (e.g. not having too many ministries responsible for rural water).

One respondent stated:

> *“In Vanuatu, sector harmonisation is now well established […] there is good coordination, facilitated by the standards in place. For example, we have water supply standards, sanitation and hygiene standards, standards for people with disability, and standards for WASH in schools. These standards are legislated and any organisation that wants to run a WASH project in Vanuatu, they have to comply to these standards. Failure to comply will lead to termination of the project by the Director of the DoWR. This is an approach that allows for the productive engagement of partners with the Government. Moreover, the NIP and CAP process further strengthens coordination within the WASH sector because. Before it existed, NGOs just went ahead and carried-out any projects in the community. These kinds of practices have now been largely eliminated (NDWR-4).*

Nevertheless, there are challenges to successfully implementing the Paris Declaration principles—ownership, alignment, and harmonisation—in Vanuatu. In 2018, the (then) Minister for Internal Affairs assured “Provincial Secretaries and Planners that he will ensure [that there is] no more duplication of projects undertaken by the government agencies and the NGOs” (Ligo, 2018) (see further below).

A recent study (Rosier, 2024) found that the key challenges of aid coordination and effectiveness in Vanuatu included:

- overambitious government strategies to maximize donor funding (which often prioritise donor agendas over local needs)
- donors imposing their own priorities and modalities, leading to limited alignment with national policies and inadequate consultation with civil society and remote communities
- geopolitical competition, particularly involving China and traditional donors, disrupts harmonization efforts (Rosier, 2024).

These issues are exacerbated by limited state capacities and inadequate resources to effectively implement and monitor aid projects. The study also highlighted the significant disconnect between short-term humanitarian aid and long-term development assistance, suggesting the separation of these frameworks leads to inefficiencies and missed opportunities for collaboration, particularly in addressing recurrent natural disasters (Rosier, 2024).

A framework for sector collaboration is in place, at the subnational level with the PWAC and ATAC meetings, and clear guidance that the Provincial government – with the support of area/ward council – is to assume responsibility for managing and monitoring water service delivery according to project plans (e.g., DWSSP NIP / CAP asset improvements), using as much local skill and material as possible. Provincial governments are responsible for progress and completion reporting to DoWR (GoV, 2018). **The effectiveness of this process ultimately hinges on the performance of provincial and area-level coordinators., which in turn is dependent on resources and capacity.**

Provincial-level coordinators, such as AAs and the PWS, play a crucial role in identifying relevant stakeholders and facilitating their engagement in addressing water management issues. An Area Administrator highlighted that it is the role of the provinces and Area Administrators to coordinate development in the communities under their remit and ensure that development activities align with work plans:

> *Wherever the water department operates in the community, it should bear in mind that this community is under this area administration. What they're doing, we need to know; what we' are doing, they need to know.* ***Coordination is very important.*** *That is why we should know what is happening out there. So, whatever funds that will be provided to address any water situations will no longer pass through the Director of the water department but through the Secretary General of the Province.* ***The SG will approve every plan. It means that whatever plan the water department has should be approved by the SG if it aligns with the area administration's work plan.*** *When reporting comes out, I verify and confirm from the budget approved by the SG. The SG ensures that the approved budget concerning a particular project in a particular community aligns with the area administration's work plan [based on the community profiling and priority]. This means that although the sectoral department is here, I will contact them about water issues, and if there's an issue with water that the department needs to address, they will need to make the budget, planning, and everything else. And they should look at the area administration's business plan (AA-2).*

A Secretary-General from another province discussed how important it was to work closely with the DoWR and MoH, and highlighted that PWRAC and NWRAC process was facilitating good coordination and service delivery outcomes through the NIP and CAP – delimiting political interference – and that the NSDP had provided a clear roadmap to follow:

> *Things are starting to get clearer, and we are trying to align our plans to our strategic goals. At first, when we did not follow a strategic plan, we found that we are just working out of order. Now that there is a plan, we can work to meet our targets for 2030 (PSG-1).*

They also noted that they are sometimes over-stretched and focused on other things, and it is good when active PWS "come by and set me straight again on part of the policy I might have missed" (PSG-1).

Despite efforts to improve coordination, challenges persist. **Work plans for area councils are developed and disseminated exclusively at the provincial level, which often results in misalignment with the DoWR national-level work plans.** This misalignment creates administrative inefficiencies and operational complications. To mitigate these issues, it has been emphasised that "any departmental plans must be submitted to the provincial headquarters (ASG) for thorough review and consideration prior to implementation, to prevent overlaps or conflicts in scheduled activities" (PWS-1).

It is imperative to establish mechanisms for improved harmonisation and integration of work plans across governance levels to ensure consistency, avoid duplication, and enhance operational efficiency

Service Delivery Partners (SDP) / Non-government Organisations (NGOs)

The NGO sector has not always been in step with the governments development priorities, approaches and preferences, and there has (and remains) alignment and harmonisation challenges. This has been most obvious in regard to disaster management.

The response to TC Pam in 2015 revealed considerable misalignment between the immediate actions of international donors and the longer-term resilience goals of communities. A lack of harmonisation led to inefficiencies, including duplication of efforts and an inability to meet the most urgent local needs (Nalau et al., 2017).

Additionally, the centralised NDMO, which is tasked with coordinating disaster responses, struggled to effectively integrate external actors into its framework, leaving critical gaps in resource allocation and operational coherence (Le Dé et al., 2018). Consequently, disaster response in Vanuatu has often been hindered by a lack of transparency and accountability among stakeholders, further complicating efforts to create a unified and effective strategy (Hallwright & Handmer, 2019).

Some aid initiatives fail to account for the cultural and institutional nuances of Vanuatu. Aid agencies often implement their own frameworks, disregarding the perspectives of local communities and national policies. Recently, Vanuatu's Ministry of Justice and Community Services began working on a national policy to ban

LGBTQIA+ advocacy, citing alignment with Christian principles, Melanesian values, and constitutional preambles (RNZ, 2024; Islands Business, 2024). While consensual same-sex activity remains legal, the proposed policy has raised concerns about potential restrictions on freedom of expression and association for LGBTQIA+ individuals and organizations (EqualDex, 2024; RNZ, 2024).

Studies have shown that local disaster risk reduction (DRR) efforts, while well-intentioned, are sometimes undermined by poorly coordinated external interventions that prioritise donor-driven agendas over local priorities (Rosier, 2024), limiting the sustainability of recovery and development efforts (Jackson et al., 2017). The integration of **disaster management with climate change adaptation** has been reported as fragmented, with overlapping mandates among organisations resulting in confusion and ineffective resource use (Hallwright & Handmer, 2021).

To improve coordination and ensure donor and NGO priorities are aligned to NSDP policy objectives and service delivery activities, it has been suggested that VANGO (Vanuatu Association of Non-Government Organisations) should **provide a more active coordinating role between government and NGOs** (DSPPAC, 2023a).

Coordination issues were highlighted by several respondents. One noted:

> *…most of the time they [NGOs] go straight to communities [by passing provincial and area administration structures]… but we try and encourage them to pass through the provincial council and inform us of what they are doing and where they will be working so that we do not duplicate projects, and when the government want to carry out a project we can send them to another area that does not have that project implemented yet (PSG-1).*

Several stated that they thought that NGOs did not understand the governance structure properly (CDO-1; AA-2).

There were numerous positives cited about NGOs, including their attendance and responsiveness at sector meetings (national level), their role in progressing WASH coverage, and ability to undertake DWSSP and other training packages when DoWR cannot (e.g. due to disaster response activities or broader resource and capacity constraints) (PWS-M1; NDWR-2; NDWR-3).

In additional to UNICEF and MFAT, EWB-Vanuatu provides proximal coordination and capacity support, proving to be a catalyst for supporting momentum and harmonisation in the WASH sector.

Financial alignment and harmonisation (support decentralisation)

It was not possible to undertake a proper forensic analysis of the sector's financial alignment and harmonisation. However, it is evident that there are some challenges – including the ability to manage funding and engage in projects from so many different agencies/organisations.

There are ongoing limitations to financial devolution to the provinces. Area council's also have some (limited) funds they can access to assist communities, if it is a priority in the community profile and part of the PTAC/PWRAC process (AA-2), demonstrating some improvement in financial alignment.

It was highlighted in the 5-year NSDP review that there is a need for proper reporting of donor assistance across all sectors and recommended to "consider reviewing *PFEM Act* and *Decentralization Act* to allow more funding to be made at the provincial level (DSPPAC, 2023a).

WASH information accessible to all actors

Access to up-to-date and comprehensive data is essential to sector coordination and harmonisation, as recognised in key policies and plans. As identified in the Information and knowledge sharing element, this is a work in progress, delimited by resource and capacity constraints. Government WASH data is generally available from the DoWR on reasonable request. How, and to what degree, WASH data from in-country CSOs is shared with DoWR could not be definitively ascertained.

The data generated by the Water for Women research project by UTS-ISF on self-supply is feeding directly into the water quality database and dashboard, which is the first-time data on water quality for self-supply has been included in national water coverage estimates for Vanuatu (WfW, 2024).

Regular stakeholder meetings, taskforce working groups and others

There are numerous WASH-related sector stakeholder working groups and associated meetings.

National WASH Cluster: includes an Inter-Cluster (Chair: NDMO Director) and eight technical clusters (Education, Emergency Telecommunications, Food Security and Agriculture, Gender and Protection, Health and Nutrition, Logistics, and the WASH cluster [are responsible for coordinating within and between sectors]. The DoWR chairs the WASH Cluster, and works closely with the MoH, as well as the MoET and Gender and Protection to some extent.

The **National Water Resource Advisory Committee (NWRAC)** and **Provincial Water Resource Advisory Committees (PWRACs**) were established through the amended *Water Resource Management Act*. They are meant to meet quarterly. The NWRAC, established under Section 15, key role is to guide the Director of the Department of Water Resources (DoWR) in developing and implementing national water policies and strategies. The committee comprises representatives from various ministries, departments, non-governmental organisations, and community stakeholders (GoV, 2017:9).

The NWRAC reportedly has not meet as frequently as stipulated in the legislation (workshop, Nov. 24).

There is also a WASH Forum Group that has recently been established, but they only meet to submit and present reports – it has been suggested that this groups scope be extended and strengthened (HM fieldnotes, World Vision Vanuatu learning event, 14–15 Nov. 24)

At the **subnational level**, PWRACs are tasked with coordinating water resource management activities within their respective provinces. Their responsibilities include preparing provincial water by-laws, facilitating the implementation of national water policies at the local level (NIP/CAP community prioritisation), and ensuring that community needs and concerns are addressed in water management plans. The Chairperson of PWRAC is the Secretary General of the province and DoWR plays a secretarial role whereby if there is an issue that needs to be addressed, it passes through PWRAC. Especially in terms of the NIP/CAP, the PWS works closely with the PWRAC "for the approval of projects before they are sent to Vila and the NWAC (e.g., MPO-M).

It was suggested that the **WASH Cluster agenda be introduced to the PWRAC**, so that:

> *"… we do not have 2 separate meetings quarterly which makes a total of 8 meetings but instead have 4 meetings because at the this are just the same people. Despite it being 2 separate committee, it is just the same people. Therefore, instead of just talking about water resource in PWRAC, we can have an agenda for WASH in there as well (NDWR-2).*

It was further suggested that "the role or the function of this water committee needs to be linked with the area council." (NDLG-1). Arguing that that "we have just been creating more and more committees in communities", the rationale is that…

> *"… if we there is an authority such as an area council water authority, then through this governance, things will have more weight. How it is structured now is loose. They should establish an area council water committee, and the area council WC will work with the 'community' Water Committee and this ACWC oversees all water committees in its area council. So, they are like a regulator who looks at the functions of water committees in these communities (NDLG-1).*

Other meetings of relevance include:

- **Sector stakeholder meetings:** EWB, UNICEF and DoWR hold (semi)regular meetings
- **National Health Promoting Schools Committee:** Composed of representatives from the MoET, MoH, UNICEF and various NGOs
- **WinS Steering Committee meetings (**bi-annual) chaired by MoET [current status not confirmed] Wegener, et. al. 2019).

More informally, coordination is ensured through formal and informal means, e.g. the PWS do presentations to the provincial TAC and hold meetings with Area Administrator's concerning the NIP and CAP process (e.g. PWS-M2).

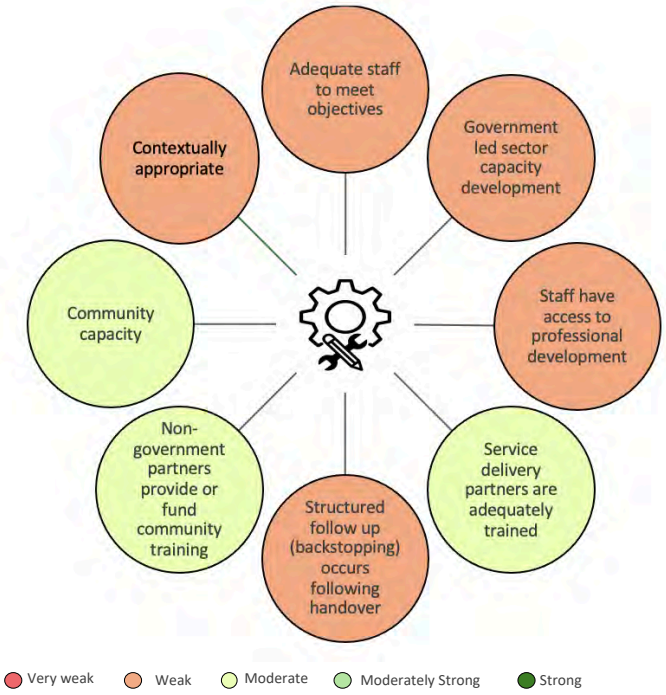
Disasters often disrupts the quarterly PWRAC and NWRAC meetings (NDWR-3).

There are few to no sector specific MOUs that we are aware of.

Human Resources and Capacity Development

A critical component of the enabling environment to support effective decentralisation is ensuring that there is adequate human and institutional capacity and competency. Public and private institutions at all levels must have the capacity to carry out their roles and responsibilities. As captured by Lockwood and Smits (2011), many local governments require capacity support as they decentralise; without it, decentralisation efforts tend to stall and falter. Institutions need both sufficient material and human resources to efficiently decentralise (see budgeting, finance, and resources for material resources).

This element also includes capacity development at the community-level – ensuring that WC training (and/or other sector specific training) is contextually appropriate, undertaken as stipulated in national strategic plans/policy, and effective.



Adequate staffing numbers

There are a number of critical staffing vacancies and gaps at the DoWR: there are 62 positions in DoWR, of which 55 were filled (in early-mid 2024) (NDWR-2).

In 2021/22 there were numerous staffing vacancies across three of the four department units, but many of these have since been filled and one new position added (Table 4). The new position is a **Community Development Officer (national)** whose role is to look after training manuals, including DWSSP, plumbing, community development, and water committee training (WRM-M). There are also plans to re-fill the DWSSP Coordinator role. Both positions remain vacant (as of October 2024).

There has been some staff turnover at national and subnational levels, and it was suggested that awareness/induction training was required (workshop, Nov. 24).

Filling the DWSSP coordinator position was deemed a priority by many respondents. Currently, multiple people and units across DoWR have some role in overseeing DWSSP, resulting in poor coordination and sharing of information. The role of coordinating DWSSP was deemed such a mammoth task by one respondent that it needs a position of its own – not shared with the other CDO responsibilities:

> *… DWSSP has now become a core requirement within our institution or department, and it is in our Act and regulations and standards. But there is no one person to enforce it (WRM-M).*

Despite many of the positions being filled in the last 12 months challenges remain, especially with support for good **information management**. Currently, there is only a single Information Management Officer, with the database officer position vacant. Information management is critical to supporting policy and program implementation. DoWR have contracted a Database officer in the past (sometimes supported by UNICEF) and use contracted database assistants to update the DoWR databases sometimes. The IMO is stretched, managing the 4 databases, following-up and entering other staff's data and looking after the DoWR and Ministry website (NDWR-M1).

The lack of resources and capacity in information management is likely hampering the performance of the NIP and CAP – the foundation of the rural water policy in Vanuatu.

Table 4: DoWR Staffing status- changes in vacant/filled positions

DoWR Unit	**Position**	**2021/22**	**2023/24**	**Total Positions (x) = actual**
Technical Services Unit	Principal Engineer	vacant	filled	9 (8)
	Senior Engineer (x2)	vacant	filled (x 2 interns)	
	Drilling Supervisor	vacant	filled	
Monitoring & Evaluation Unit	Senior Officer (hydrology)	vacant	filled	10 (9)
	Senior Officer (IM)	vacant	filled	
	Water Quality Officer	vacant	filled	
	Water technician	vacant	filled	
	Database Officer	filled	vacant	
	Compliance Officer	vacant	filled	
Projects and Operation Unit	Project Planning & Coordination Officer	vacant	filled	11 (10)
	Project M&E Officer	vacant	vacant	
Administration Unit	Receptionist	vacant	vacant	3 (2)
Technical Services Unit position (new)	**Community Development Officer** (national)	n/a	vacant	

Source: DoWR Organisational charts (2022 & 2023) and interviews

Subnational level

At the subnational level there are also some staff shortages. In 2021/22, there were a total of eight vacant positions at DoWR (1 MALAMPA, 1 PENAMA, 2 TAFEA, 1 SANMA, 2 TORBA, 1 SHEFA). In 2023/24, and there was also a total of **eight** vacant positions, but they are not all the same as the earlier vacant roles (2 MALAMPA, 2 PENAMA, 1 TAFEA, 1 SANMA, 1 TORBA, 1 SHEFA).

It is not always resources or capacity that impact human resources; there was no CDO in Santo at the time of data collection as he had died unexpectedly and "we have to take some time not to recruit too soon as a sign of respect to him" (NDWR-2).

At the Provincial and Area council levels there were no reported gaps. Area administrators are employed by the Public Service Commission and the council elects and recruits the Area Secretaires (now also called Community Liaison Officers).

At the time of data collection, many AAs were still on temporary contracts but will be made permanent at some stage in the future. There was widespread support for having two CDOs, at least in the large provinces (MALAMPA, PENAMA, SANMA).

Government-led sector capacity development plan

The Department of Water Resources included a detailed **Capacity Development Plan, 2023-2024** in their Annual Business Plan for 2024 (DoWR, 2023), supported by the MFAT Water Sector Partnership (Phase II) program (see Table 5 below).

Capacity needs assessment

In 2019, the government received funds to undertake a Capacity and Training Needs Assessment and develop a *Human Resource Development Plan* and C*apacity Building Workplan* for the DoWR (supported by the MFAT). In collaboration with the Government, it was agreed to

undertake a more holistic approach for the assessment and look at all areas of WASH, such as WASH in Schools with the MoET as well as hygiene and sanitation and household water treatment with the MoH (Wegener et al., 2019).

Several gaps were identified in the assessment, especially relating to skills and knowledge capacity in the main organisation (Wegener et al., 2019). The most common gaps noted in the Assessment Report included a need for building greater capacity for Water Committees, managing finances, strengthening supply chains, and developing local technical skills for water safety and infrastructure maintenance. There was also a need for formal training in plumbing, water systems, and water source protection, including risk analysis and water quality guidelines. Enhanced collaboration between DoWR staff, Area Secretaries, and WCs was essential implementing successful DWSSPs and overseeing installations like desalination systems and solar pumps. Additionally, the review highlighted a critical need for skilled hydraulic engineers, as well as improved human resource management to address training, capacity building, and staffing at all levels (UNICEF (2019) et al., 2019).

To address these gaps, it was recommend that:

- Design custom made, practically based short courses that are delivered near to where participants work, followed by post training opportunities for feedback and reflection. Country and sector wide capacity gaps should be addressed through a **Training of Trainers** approach so that training may be delivered multiple times and in multiple locations
- Mentoring is the most effective way to build sustained capacity to address gaps with smaller numbers of key staff. However, this mentoring needs to be done well – i.e. by mentors with experience in transferring Vanuatu-appropriate skills and knowledge to ni-Vanuatu. Mentoring has the advantage of scaffolding learning over a longer period. Mentors could work with specific staff on a regular basis over a period of one year. Mentoring doesn't need to be every day but may be through regular visits of one week per month or two months for a year
- Accredited courses could be useful in some circumstances, although off the shelf accredited courses may not always be applicable to local conditions and creating new accredited courses may take time to develop and approve. Accredited courses could be most useful for some specialist skills or as part of Training of Trainers Program (Wegener, et al., 2019).

Some of these gaps and recommendations have since been acted upon.

Staff have access to professional development training opportunities

The *Water Policy* states that "Strengthening access to high quality personnel (i.e. engineers, plumbers, drillers), products (i.e. tanks, pipes, meters) and techniques (i.e. drilling rigs, HDPE welding)" (GoV, 2017:3) can be achieved through "extending support to vocational and professional training in water disciplines" (GoV, 2017: §2). The **Water Sector Partnership** (Phase II) includes a **dedicated budget line for "internal [departmental] training".**

In August 2020, the DoWR signed an MOU with the **Vanuatu Skills Partnership** with the shared goal of developing the human resources and infrastructure needed to strengthen the WASH sector [as well as communities and service delivery partners].

The authors of the *Vanuatu Water Sector Partnership Evaluation Report* emphasised the need for continued capacity building at the provincial level (Faerua et al., 2022). Engineers without Borders (EWB) provide some capacity development and knowledge transfer with DoWR staff.

The 2024 Annual Business Plan includes a detailed **Capacity Development Plan - 2023-2024**, to be supported by the MFAT Water Sector Partnership phase II program (DoWR, 2023). Topics for 2024, as presented in the DoWR annual business plan, are presented below in Table 5.

Table 5: DoWR Capacity Development Plan, 2024

Sections	Target Participants	Capacity development activity	Timing of delivery	Delivery
Provincial DoWR	**PWSs, CDOs & Water technicians**	Construction monitoring (Contract management)	2024	Short course & on-the-job training
		Facilitation skills to conduct Training (DWSSP ToT training)	2024	ToT training
		Logistics & procurement	2023 & 2024	Short course & mentoring
Project & Operation Unit	**P&O staff**	Financial management for non-finance manager	2023 & 2024	Short course (Face to Face)
		HY management (to manage contractors)	2023 & 2024	Short course (Face to Face)
M&E Unit	**M&E staff**	WASH in emergency training	2024	Short course (Face to Face)
		Legal training	2023 & 2024	Short course (Face to Face)
		Hydrographic survey internship	2023 & 2024	Online & internship
Technical Unit	**Engineers**	Complex water network (design & management – urban)	2024	Short course
	Drilling teams	Drilling technique O&M of drilling work	ongoing	On-the-job training & mentoring
Admin Unit	**Finance and Admin staff**	Financial management for project management	2023 & 2024	Short course & mentoring

(Source: DoWR 2023, table 4)

We could not undertake a comprehensive audit of the status of the above trainings. Nevertheless, examples from interviews include:

- Attending conferences (e.g., Water and WASH Futures, Brisbane, 2023)
- Project management (at USP, Vila) [Technical & M&E Unit]
- Water database training (UNDP/DoWR) [Area Administrators]
- Train the Trainers – How to create Area council Plans (DLA) [Area Administrators]
- Water treatment (trip to China) [Water Technician]
- National staff-led refresher workshops on basic computer skills and accessing the information system [Provincial staff].

Service delivery partners are adequately trained

Service delivery partners (SDPs) are a critical part of the water sector policy and strategy in Vanuatu, consisting mainly of non-government organisations (e.g., ADRA World Vision Vanuatu, Save the Children, Care International) and a few private sector contractors (e.g., Hexagon). There are other contractors who undertake water system construction (e.g. Vanuatu Agricultural Supplies).

The DoWR run "training of trainers" (ToT) programs to **certify contractors** and provide refreshers and updated training on new additions, e.g. **adding a financial management and watershed protection and management module to the rural water committee training.**

The DoWR have a MOU with the **Vanuatu Skills Partnership** (VSP) and the **Vanuatu Institute of Technology** (VIT), who have both become SDPs. A specific focus of these partnerships is to provide more advanced and recognised plumbing training to ni-Vanuatu, both for DoWR staff, the wider sector (e.g., ToT facilitator certificates for SDPs) as well as for individuals at the area

level (e.g. Certificate II Plumbing training for WASH technicians).

A comprehensive audit of training effectiveness was beyond this assessment's capacity and scope. Nevertheless, a key point of note was that there are **a limited number of people** ("one or two") **that have 'Training of Trainers' facilitator training that has been certified by the Vanuatu Qualifications Authority** (VQA) (NDWR-2; DoWR, 2023). This is a significant gap that is currently being addressed by the department.

SDPs provide or fund mandated community training

It is primarily SDPs who undertake the core community training activities mandated by the *Water Policy* and *Strategy* (e.g. DWSSP, community development/water committee training and basic plumber training).

The outsourcing of **community capacity development training** to SDPs by the DoWR has been going for over 6-years. Based on the *Policy* and the DoWR *Business Plan*, "contractors" (SDPs) are responsible for: DWSSP implementation, water system construction, and plumbers and financial management training.

Respondents were generally positive and supportive of the shift towards outsourcing, highlighting how it improved coverage:

> *…Before, we could only cover less than 20 communities a year. When we started to outsource DWSSP, we were able to cover 60 communities in a year (PWS-3).*

There are also challenges:

> *… Outsourcing has its strength but also disadvantages. For example, some of the contractors work under just one or two qualified trainers. Meaning there is only one or two people in the organisation that actually have the qualification through attending the VQA approved facilitator Training of Trainers (ToTs) course. This explains why sometimes, when we receive their reports, they are incomplete, with missing information, wrong calculations or inaccurate water quality results, because the person that did the DWSSP training with communities has not done the training (PWS-2).*

A summary overview of strengths is appended below (Table 6).

Table 6: Strengths and Challenges of Outsourcing

Strengths	Challenges
Increases DWSSP coverage - *Greater human resources* - *Quicker (business) - work to a timeframe* - *Speeds up the PWRAC process*	**Monitoring contractors** - *DoWR have limited time & resources to conduct monitoring* - *e.g. weather or contractors changing schedule impacts the DoWR's ability to visit & monitor*
Not distracted by other responsibilities - *e.g., DoWR staff have other responsibilities and are frequently forced into emergency response*	**Quality assurance** - *Only 1-2 people in a company are qualified trainers (compliance)* - *Incomplete reports* - *Not always following standards* - *Reporting errors (missing or wrong calculations)* - *Cutting training short* - *Implementation standards drop when contractors hold multiple contracts* - *When CDOs don't attend to monitor, training is sometimes shortened and not delivered properly* - *When training is reviewed & updated, contractors need to be re-trained*
	Logistics/communication - *Costly* - *No proper channel of communication*
	Community engagement/ownership - *Some communities less willing to provide in-kind labour as seen as commercial operation*

Source: Interviews (WRM-1, PWS-3, CDO-2, PWS-1, APWS-1, NDWR-1, PWS-2, AA-2).

In terms of outsourcing water supply system construction, challenges include contractors **not building to standards** (AA-2), running short of materials, and not meeting allocated timeframes (PWS-3).

Community capacity development

There are a range of capacity development packages designed for, and delivered at, the community level. There has been an evolution in training over the last decade and more, and the training packages are still undergoing changes, with new modules just recently developed e.g. the addition of financial management and water resource management modules into existing training packages. There are plans for the development of new trainings (e.g. EPS community training, groundwater management training). There is currently no specific community **rainwater harvesting management training**.

The key community level trainings are:

- Drinking Water Safety and Security Planning
- Rural Water Committee Training
- Basic Plumbers Training
- Water Technician Training [Plumber Certificate II] (delivered at the Provincial level and targeted at area council level).

Drinking Water Safety and Security Planning (DWSSP)

As note above (pp. 16) Vanuatu adopted and contextualised waters safety planning into the Vanuatu DWSSP in 2013. For the first three years only a small number of DWSSP were completed nationally, but since 2016 and the beginning of outsourcing the number has increased to more than 40 per year (Rand et al., 2022:678). As a result of research by Rand et al., (2022) and recommendations from academics (e.g. Kohlitz, 2018) and UNICEF (UNICEF 2020), DoWR has further adapted water safety planning to address climate change risks (2022:682).

Water Safety Planning is intensive: the DWSSP training is conducted over five days, led by a community facilitator and a technical person with a plumbing background. Similar to, but different from, the WHO approach (WHO/IWA, 2019), the DWSSP training consists of six key sections. Moreover, the DoWR have further adapted water safety planning to address climate change risks (Rand et al., 2022:682).

The DWSSP Guide states that the "heart of the [DWSSP team] team will likely be the community water committee (if it exists) but otherwise can be supported anyone who might be useful in developing and implementing DWSSP" (DoWR, n.d:9).

Research from Vanuatu [and Fiji] elucidate that ownership and collective action post-intervention (e.g., progressing action plans and no / low-cost improvements), is often far from optimal – less than ten percent of communities are active, according to some implementors (see Souter, et al., 2024; Love et al., 2022). Action research on DWSSP conducted in 2022 in SHEFA Province, Vanuatu found the following:

- All the implementors displayed a solid understanding of the content and process of DWSSP training
- The inclusion of climate change and disaster risk reduction in DWSSP is a constructive addition
- Various training challenges were raised (e.g., a lot of information, not enough time, capacity constraint) with the view that some of these challenges can be addressed through more regularly follow-up
- In terms of progressing Improvement Plans and taking active ownership, the success of DWSSP was seen by many as low
- Dependency on external support is high, whilst problem and solution ownership are low
- The low priority of water at the community level – relative to other issues and institutions (Church, village council, livelihoods, family, land and chiefly title disputes) – is recognised by many as a driver of low program success and sustainability
- DWSSP reporting is sometimes not meeting required standards
- Some of the Improvement Plans are overly ambitious and unrealistic
- There was a lack of focus on low and no-cost improvements in some plans
- The roles, responsibilities and practical differentiation between the WC and DWSSP team following the DWSSP training is not clearly articulated and potentially eroding collective action
- Follow-up was viewed as critical by all stakeholders (Love et al., 2022).

Water safety management is designed to be a continuous, iterative cycle that encompasses risk assessment, risk management, and ongoing monitoring to ensure the safety and sustainability of water supplies (WHO, 2004). But as previously noted, there is no follow-up monitoring beyond the no/low-cost improvement phase. One respondent noted that DWSSP had become too much of a

selection process, and is not being applied in an iterative and effective manner as a management approach:

> *DWSSP is primarily used today as a selection manual, which shouldn't be the case. It should be a manual that will be continuously used by the water committee after the project is implemented (PWS-1).*

Rural Water Committee Training

WCs are the bedrock of the CWM model promoted in the *National Water Policy* and *Strategy* and amended *Water Resources Management Act (2016)*. There have been several iterations of the water committee training manual over the years. Most recently, the ADB supported a review of both the water committee and plumbers training packages,[43] which resulted in an additional section on financial management being incorporated into the Rural Water Committee Training package and, even more recently, the development of a watershed protection and management module (PowerPoint).

There has been some trial roll-out of the updated manuals/approaches (e.g. Kramer did a trial in Malekula and Ambae in 2022; ADRA in SANMA). The water resources management module and Provincial water safety and security bylaws section was introduced on the last day of the ToT plumbers training in Mele, 2024. Recent conversations with DoWR suggest that there may be some more changes before a national roll-out can occur.

The Basic plumbing course is conducted over 5 days. Sanitation was in Plumber's training previously, but has been removed

Plumbers Certificate II training / WASH Technician Program

The WASH Technician training is delivered by the Vanuatu Institute of Technology and is designed to create human resources to assist the DOWR. The goal is to identify 5 people from each Area council (3 men, 2 women). The training program is three months (it is an intensive, cut down from a 6-month course) and has thus far been completed in Santo and Pentecost [43 participants] (workshop, Nov. 24). It will be rolled-out across other provinces, with support from the Green Climate Fund.

The WASH technician's role will include quick fix and needs assessment/monitoring following disaster, meaning the DoWR will not be "pausing our regular program all the time" and also takes the pressure off the AAs and ASs, providing broader WASH capacity where it is needed (NDWR-3; MPO-1; NDWR-2).

It was imperative to ensure that trainings are accredited and meet government standards and responsibilities.

> *We have so many projects but not enough contractors to carry-out implementation. The idea is to **capitalise on the decentralisation structure and train or build our own human resources** in a way that it will be recognised [by the VQA], because we have done so many plumbers' trainings, but they are not accredited. So, to make sure that these individuals are qualified to be contracted by the government, there must be accredited qualifications, and this is the level two Plumbers Certificate [Water technician training] (NDWR-3).*

A hope is that at least some of the people with the Plumbing Certificate II to establish companies in their respective Area councils.

> *At the moment they can be basic plumbers, but this training can help them elevate their skills and knowledge and can provide them with some opportunities; they can be private entities or start a business but at least there are resourceful people available in the community (MPO-1).*

In terms of **non-WASH networks and resources**, it was noted by several respondents that youth and church groups should be utilised more as WASH alias and enablers (NDWR-2, NWDWR-3).

The WASH Technician training approach is in an innovative and well-contextualised initiative that could potentially translate well to Solomon Islands and, perhaps, Fiji.

Vanuatu Hexagon Water Specialist are carrying out a new training called Water Quality Management training; it has been suggested that this can be an addition to the training package (HM fieldnotes, ToT workshop).

Recommendations on community capacity development from respondents

- Follow-up and/or 'refresher' trainings at the community-level was suggested by most respondents as necessary for trainings to be effective
- The Rural Water Committee training includes a section on operation and maintenance (O&M) – one respondent suggested that it should be included back into the plumbers training
- Review all training package before going out into the communities
- Feedback on the Basic Plumbers training, Water Resource Management and Provincial Bylaws training from Mele, April 2024, included:
  - the workshop was too short
  - need to do a practical
  - the addition of the financial component into the training manual was helpful (esp. as treasurers)
  - The science behind watershed protection and management was too complex – needs to be explained in a much simpler way, e.g., water filtration (HM Fieldnotes, Mele Plumbers workshop).

Structured follow-up (or "backstopping")

Research consistently demonstrates that WCs globally require ongoing support to ensure the delivery of safe and secure water services (Hutchings et al., 2015, 2017; Lockwood & Smits, 2011; Love et al., 2022; Souter et al., 2022; World Bank, 2017). Even with a strengthened local enabling environment—such as some certified plumbers with qualifications like Certificate II —external monitoring and support will remain essential for sustaining water infrastructure and safeguarding community well-being.

Follow-up support to WCs can take numerous forms: **direct** support from government, NGOs or SDPs ('backstopping', see Love et. al. 2021b) or **indirectly**, through informal social networks (see Love et al.,2023). Regardless of the approach, it is evident that communities will continue to encounter governance and technical challenges and require some form of ongoing support and monitoring. Such support must be practical and tailored to the specific context of each community and country context, aiming to strike a balance between fostering dependency (undesirable) and promoting self-reliance (desirable) (Souter et al., 2022).

As discussed under the MEL element, **monitoring is a form support**. According to the NIP, follow-up monitoring and support for rural water service delivery is to be provided by the Provincial government, with the support of the area council (DoWR, 2018a: 16). However, as elucidated above, this is focused primarily on DWSSP implementation and there is no structured monitoring beyond the low / no-cost monitoring period.

In 2021-2022 EWB/NZ undertook research and consultations with the DoWR, and other water sector actors, focused on "Remote Support Options for Sustainable Water Systems in Rural Vanuatu" (EWB/NZ, 2022). Ideas elicited from participants included:

- Strengthen DoWR resources with monitoring officers for each Area council
- Develop and share maintenance videos via Bluetooth or online
- Enhance supply chains with provincial hardware stores and supplier-community links
- Train plumbers as regional private operators for maintenance needs
- Create an Area Technical Advisory Board for remote maintenance support
- Improve training for Area Secretaries on WASH programs
- Establish better communication channels (e.g., Facebook, texts)
- Launch a YouTube channel for maintenance and training videos
- Conduct refresher training for communities on water management
- Increase awareness of DoWR services.
- Clarify community responsibilities after system installation
- Provide a standard list of replacement materials (EWB-NZ, 2022).

The focus remains primarily on '**hardware', with little consideration given to supporting 'software'.** Adequate funding for maintenance, enforceable rules, and high-level awareness of roles and responsibilities are the most critical requirements for the success of the CWM mode – **these are social, not technical issues.**

Research in Solomon Islands and Fiji has found 'software' factors, including a lack of community cooperation, poor WC management, and funds shortage for maintenance and repairs much more determinate in system breakdown and disruption than access to spare parts or technical knowledge capacity gaps (Love et al., 2020:78-79, 2021b).

Given the dynamic nature of WCs membership and effectiveness, there will remain a need for some ongoing governance and wider support (including training), until

(if) water committees become a thoroughly embedded and localised institution, and/or indigenous SDPs materialise at the local level.

Contextually appropriate & effective training pedagogy for communities

As noted above, there are a range of community engagement training packages, with DWSSP and WC training the foundation. Research from Fiji and Vanuatu demonstrates that ownership and collective action post-intervention (e.g., progressing action plans on their own), is far from optimal – less than ten percent of communities are active according to some implementors (Souter, et al., 2024; Love et al., 2022).

Follow-up and 'refresher' training were widely suggested as necessary for such interventions to be effective (see above).

The Water Committee Training is well contextualised, with a solid focus on water fees, bylaws, financial management and WC roles and responsibilities, and more. However, the one-off, intense trainings, combined with the "lecture" format and limited participation and application, delimits learning.

The use of videos using real examples of strong water committees, combined with a social marketing approach that targets emotions rather than an exclusive educational technical/instructional approach, has been used as a companion to standard water management training, including as a targeted "follow-up" activity in communities where their DWSSP action plans had stagnated, and the results are promising (Love et al., 2022).

Interestingly, in Fiji, the DWS are trailing an **incubation** model whereby they place Ecological Purification Systems in four or five villages within a single district/area, so WCs can "learn from each other" (see Love et al., 2024a). With Vanuatu trailing EPS, this approach is worth considering.

If the WASH Technicians, in practice, prove to bolster the enabling environment at the rural level in terms of operation and maintenance capacity, there needs to be a discussion around what, if any, role they may play in not only hardware but also software support.

The MoHMS in Fiji have also been piloting **cluster trainings** for DWSSP in a similar way, working in 3-5 villages in a single district/area and conducting the bulk of the DWSSP training over multiple days and visits in a single location (e.g. school), and then conducting individual village site visits and risk assessments on a separate day.

It was emphasised that it is critical to appreciate the different situations that exist in different communities, including internal community dynamics, e.g. land disputes, large volumes of RSE leavers etc. Community engagement processes must be able to be attuned to variation and adjust accordingly.

Localisation and adaption of training is always necessary; it is an ongoing process that requires companion monitoring, evaluation and learning. WC and DWSSP training must be adequately monitored and evaluated, with learnings incorporated into future revisions.

DISCUSSION

There remains debate about the net benefits that have derived from decentralisation (Faguet and Pöschl, 2015). What is certain is that decentralisation takes years or even decades to implement. Successful decentralisation requires both granting authority and providing adequate resources to lower levels of government. Based on the analyses in this report, Vanuatu corresponds with Lockwood and Smits (2011) "partial" and "inadequately resourced" decentralisation categories – a status common to many low to middle-income countries (including Fiji and Solomon Islands) – but also evidence of "phased" decentralisation; the decentralisation of rural water service delivery and moves towards greater professionalisation over the last decade are planned, structural reforms.

Vanuatu has benefited from the systematic review, consolidation and strengthening of regulatory and institutional framework: commencing with the VLC reviews in 2013, subsequent legislative amendments, development of the *National Water Policy* and *Strategy,* through to the NIP/CAP process. These reforms contributed to a more coherent governance framework that aligns rural water service delivery with both national development priorities and long-standing decentralisation goals.

Vanuatu has been attempting some regionally unique and innovative initiatives: loans and water cooperatives (partial cost-recovery), water technician training (enabling environment support at the area/ward level), outsourcing community engagement training (WC training, DWSSP) to SDPs; and registering WCS as legal entities.

These reforms and initiatives signal a shift from the sole reliance on the CWM model towards CWM+ and a transition towards the professionalisation of the sector.

On paper, Vanuatu has a systematic and coherent policy approach that acknowledges the limitations of the standard CWM approach. However, key challenges persist in ensuring that decentralisation translates into effective and sustainable rural water services. Limited financial and human resources are a key – but not the only – factor impeding progress. The total lack of planned follow-up monitoring / support to WCs beyond the 6-12 month low / no-cost improvement is substantive gap; especially given that the policy, personnel, and structures (village-area-province-national) are in place.

Provincial and area councils are responsible for facilitating and monitoring DWSSPs, but in practice this is restricted by resource constraints, disaster response, and (sometimes) political interference. The sector faces challenges in data management, coordination, and governance. Despite the establishment of the DoWR's WASH database, there are gaps in integrating NGO data and inconsistent asset tracking. This is fuelled by understaffing and suboptimal reporting systems. Efforts to digitise reporting and enhance cybersecurity are underway but (again) hampered by resource and capacity constraints.

Reforms such as formally recognising provincial and water committee bylaws and registering WCs as legal entities, aims to strengthen accountability. However, thus far, the process has been beset by delays and a lack consistent implementation. It is important to stress that Vanuatu is diverse, and this formalist/legal approach can create tensions in contexts where chiefs and/or village councils feel that they hold the authority.

The elements and sub-indicators used in this analysis are reflective of the PIC context. Due to a range of factors including demography, geography, and socio-economic particulars, the full professionalisation of rural water service delivery at scale is unlikely in the very near term; however, Vanuatu is making progress in moving towards a CWM+ approach (more on paper than practice at this stage). The selection of sub-indicators, and the data used to rate them, have remained largely focused on the CWM+ approach. It is hoped that this selection of indicators can help better identify and asses what the most appropriate "plus" factors look like in the context of Vanuatu.

In this final section of the report, we summarise the results and key findings from each element deemed essential to progressing rural water service delivery in the context of decentralisation. In terms of gloss rating, the highest scored element was "policy, legal and regulatory framework" (3.4 – "moderate") whilst the lowest scored elements were budgeting, finance and material resources, and information and knowledge sharing (both 2.0 – "weak"). All elements other than policy were rated "weak", and the overall mean was 2.5 ("weak").

The point of quantifying an indicator is so it can be measured, tracked, and compared over time. This report aims to assist development partners, stakeholders, and the Vanuatu government identify strengths, weaknesses and opportunities, and better prioritise resources and actions going forward.

Following the summary results section below is a short list of recommendations. The bulk of these recommendations were elicited during a stakeholder validation workshop in November 2024, with representatives from DoWR and MoET.

Summary Findings: Policies, Legal, and Regulatory Frameworks

Effective rural water service delivery requires tailored policies and robust legal and regulatory frameworks that leverage resources and governance structures across national and subnational levels. These policies must extend beyond theoretical frameworks and be effectively implemented in practice. This element was identified as "moderate" – the strongest of the six elements in Vanuatu (3.4).

Solid national and subnational policies guide rural water delivery, with the NSDP setting broad goals. The *National Water Policy* and *Strategy* emphasise decentralisation.

Provincial and area councils are responsible for facilitating and monitoring DWSSPs, but limited institutional support and resources continue to hinder service delivery. The NSDP's five-year review highlighted mixed progress on decentralisation, with provincial governments facing budget constraints, inconsistent planning, data gaps, and coordination challenges. While the review notes incremental increases in area council budgets and councillors' salaries, fiscal decentralisation remains inadequate, as central departments retain most resource control. The NSDP sets a target to increase annual provincial and municipal funding by 10% by 2030, but stakeholders perceive this as more rhetoric than action. Respondents called for greater financial autonomy at the subnational level to truly advance decentralisation efforts

AAs, AS/CLOs and area councils clearly represent a strong decentralised structure. The NIP/ CAP process stipulates AAs and CDOs are chiefly responsible for monitoring communities following a DWSSP intervention. However, in practice this is restricted by resource constraints such as transport costs and other factors (e.g. disaster recovery activities disrupting schedules).

Role definitions are not as clear or widely comprehended as they could be (e.g. AAs role to assist the DoWR needs be formalised with the DLA and through appointment letters to make AAs roles and responsibilities clearer).

The are provisions for Provincial Councils to enact WASH-related bylaws. that promote water safety and security. Provincial Water by-laws have begun to be passed, but take a long time to progress with many outstanding. The MoH's *Sanitation and Hygiene Policy* (2023) recommends consolidated provincial WASH bylaws to bridge institutional gaps in water safety, sanitation, and hygiene practices. It was noted by several DoWR respondents that integrating water and sanitation was challenging due to separate policies.

Water Committees are enabled to make bylaws and levy fees – once formally registered – with sample bylaws produced in mid-2024. However, the DoWR face challenges in registering WCs as legal entities in practice. This approach aims to enhance the accountability of rural water committees by granting them some legal and financial autonomy but can also animate tension in contexts where chiefs and/or village councils feel that they hold active community authority.

The Walarano case-study demonstrates that formally recognised WCs and bylaws are capable of enforcing community compliance and sustaining service delivery.

The DoWR acknowledge that professionalisation of the WASH sector at the area and community level is necessary to ensure sustainable service delivery.

The regulatory model focuses on empowering local governance without significant fiscal redistribution, with limited funding devolution and human resource gaps creating implementation delays and, in some cases, total implementation deficit.

- NSDP, the *National Water Policy* and companion Strategy provide clear decentralisation goals but face implementation challenges due to financial and human resource constraints
- Water Committees and bylaws, when legally recognised, can be successfully enforced (e.g. Walarano)
- There are mixed views about the challenge of integrating water and sanitation (due to separate policies)
- There is a missing link between area council and provincial administration
- There is no single institutional contact point for rural water related queries/issues
- Community-led WASH initiatives, such as DWSSP, promote local engagement but require ongoing monitoring and support
- There is a critical need to implement WASH-related bylaws and provide clearer guidance for subnational actors while remaining flexible to accommodate customary norms where appropriate
- Legislative reviews and updates continue, aiming to strengthen WASH service regulation and to better align with national productive sector goals.

Summary Findings: Budgeting, Finance, and Resources

A strong financial foundation is integral to the sustainable rural water service delivery. Funding for WASH has increased in Vanuatu since 2019 but remains insufficient to implement the governments National Water Policy and Strategy. At the subnational level, financial devolution and funds disbursement has improved, but again falls short of enabling provincial and area-level actors to fulfill the governments decentralisation service delivery agenda. Budgeting, finance, and material resources were rated as "weak" (2).

Ensuring adequate financial planning, forecasting, and budget allocations – covering both infrastructure (hardware) and the ongoing costs of community engagement, training, monitoring and management (software) – is crucial. Vanuatu has not yet adopted budget disaggregation, nor does the government allocate a portion of GDP to water and sanitation.

Total expenditure on WASH in Vanuatu has increased since 2019, to nearly USD$5 million in 2021 (USD$5.80 per capita). It has been estimated that VUV2 billion annually is required to meet the NIP targets.

Legal frameworks for financial management are relatively strong at the national level, with gains being made at the subnational level with the introduction of provincial FSBs improving financial management and accountability.

A lack of adequate and effective fiscal devolution to the provinces has been an ongoing issue since Independence, but there has been some progress. The introduction of FSBs has enhanced disbursement: PWS can access (limited) funds for capital assistance. Area councils also now have access to small discretionary funds to use for community development purposes (that align with community profiles).

Nevertheless, budget allocations are predominantly absorbed by staffing costs. Provincial DoWR staff and Area Administrators reported ongoing challenges in securing funds to visit communities, which is critical to conducting monitoring of DWSSP no/low-cost improvements by CDOs and AAs (as per the NIP). This limits the effectiveness of water safety planning interventions and reduces water system sustainability.

Supply chains for essential parts and resources are inconsistent, with shortages in local hardware stores, difficulty finding spare parts for older systems, and poor-quality plumbing supplies.

CDOs lack access to basic plumbing tools and GPS systems. Vehicles were scarce and generally in poor condition (due to the harsh environment and poor road infrastructure). Staff have relatively new laptops. Recent investments include new provincial offices equipped with satellite communications, enhancing disaster response capabilities.

Community contributions to support water system operation and maintenance – water fees, fundraising – are strongly encouraged in Policy and trainings, but inconsistently practiced. The DoWR have recently released a *Community Water Supply Rules Samples* document, which includes a section on recommended fee retrieval, but respondents noted a need for greater clarity and regulation to further strengthen community contributions.

Recent innovations include a loan-based scheme which allows communities to receive water systems under a loan agreement repaid over five years (drawing on the *Cooperatives Act*). This novel cost-recovery approach aligns with Vanuatu's long cooperative history but has met with mixed success so far. Regardless, it is a well-contextualised approach that is worthy of longitudinal scrutiny.

Expanding cost-recovery measures and better emphasising community contributions in the DWSSP training and monitoring phase, would be constructive.

- VUV 2 billion is estimated as the annual budget needed for the NIP, but in 2017 only VUV 107 million was apportioned
- Budget allocations for rural water services lack a clear distinction between hardware (infrastructure) and software (community engagement)
- Devolution of consolidated funds from national to subnational levels remains constrained, with the majority allocated to personnel expenses, limiting resources for essential monitoring and community support activities
- Community contributions for water services are encouraged but lack stable implementation, impacting water system sustainability and WASH outcomes
- Improved access to spare parts and equipment, including a standardised Bill of Quantities, would help support sustainable rural water infrastructure maintenance.

Summary Findings: Information and Knowledge Sharing

Information and knowledge sharing, comprehensive data management from collection through to storage, access, dissemination and consumption, is critical for effective rural water service delivery. Vanuatu has some good systems and reporting processes in place but struggles to harness their potential for applied learning and impact due to human and fiscal resource constraints. This element was rated as "weak" (2).

Due to the cross-sectoral nature of WASH, data collection and coordination are complex and resource-intensive. The DoWRs *Standard Operating Procedures* stress the importance of information sharing to enhance coordination among stakeholders, with the Information Management Officer tasked with maintaining data accuracy, managing WASH partner contacts, and producing reports. The WASH Sector Coordinator's role is similarly critical to information sharing, coordinating among WASH partners and projects, especially in disaster response.

Current efforts are focused on formalising and improving data-sharing practices across relevant departments, including DoWR, MoH, and MoET, specifically for water quality monitoring data. These discussions aim to establish a coordinated, cross-ministerial approach to data management, although sharing data raises concerns about potential negative consequences (e.g. commercial considerations if sensitive information, such as raw water quality data, is publicly disclosed).

The DoWR's WASH database, launched in 2019, consolidates data from four main areas: water committees, water quality, DWSSP, and the water resources inventory. Community profiling data is stored separately in provincial offices, while the WRI, developed in collaboration with UNICEF and UTS-ISF, includes extensive details on water sources like rainwater tanks, handpumps, boreholes, and rivers.

A 2022 ransomware attack on Vanuatu's ICT systems greatly disrupted government operations and weakened WASH sector data management, highlighting the need for robust data backup and cybersecurity.

Respondents described the current data collection processes as "weak" and "challenging," primarily due to limited resources and capacity. A data-management position remains vacant. The DoWR plans to transition DWSSP reporting to electronic forms on tablets or smartphones, aiming to reduce delays and improve accuracy. Consistent staff training and oversight remain essential for broader improvements.

NGOs collect rural WASH data, but it is not systematically shared and integrated into DoWR records. Area councils record NGO activities in community profiles.

Asset tracking across provinces is inconsistent, with missing or outdated records. Newly procured items often bypass the database, causing inefficiencies. Improved tracking requires dedicated staff and strengthened procurement processes

Public transparency remains limited, as WASH data is not readily available to the public through online platforms. Currently, the DoWR sub-site on the Ministry of Land and Natural Resources online portal is not fully operational. Plans are underway to establish a separate website managed directly by DoWR to streamline updates and accessibility.

- Reporting processes are hindered by ad hoc data collection and manual data entry, with digital solutions planned to streamline updates
- NGOs sometimes work in isolation without sharing information with relevant government ministries
- Security weaknesses, highlighted by the 2022 ransomware attack, reveal the need for stronger data backup and cybersecurity measures to protect government information
- Vacant roles, like the Database Officer, impact the effectiveness of DoWR's information management operations, delaying updates to essential databases
- Subnational information-sharing practices are uneven, limiting the accuracy and completeness of community-level data
- A formal data-sharing policy is arguably needed to manage the risks associated with sensitive information and ensure data is used responsibly and effectively across departments/sectors.

Summary Findings: Monitoring, Evaluation, and Learning (MEL)

The significance of MEL in fostering continual learning and adaptation, especially in the context of decentralisation, cannot be overstated. Key sector Policies and Plans mention the importance for monitoring and evaluation, but this does not translate into practice. Monitoring, evaluation, and learning was rated as "weak" (2.2), primarily due to CDOs and AAs not conducting DWSSP monitoring as stipulated (due to resource constraints), and the total absence of policy consideration for ongoing follow-up support (or backstopping) for WCs

The government monitors WASH progress using the NSDP's Monitoring and Evaluation Framework, tracking progress toward policy objectives. The 2019–2020 baseline survey, alongside census data, enables progress assessment but lacks real-time insights.

Monitoring WASH indicators is vital for aligning with SDGs and NSDP priorities, but the 2023 NSDP review highlighted challenges. These include overly ambitious indicators, limited provincial understanding of the planning framework, weak links between ADR findings and local plans, and a focus on outputs over outcomes.

The DoWR prioritises MEL through regular monitoring by its Monitoring & Evaluation Unit, overseeing water quality, compliance, advocacy, and hydrology. Provincial water officers monitor urban systems, while CDOs handle rural initiatives but often face financial constraints limiting field visits - Phase II of the Water Sector Partnership includes some limited funds to redress this.

Monitoring SDPs is challenging, with CDOs ideally participating in contractor-ran trainings to ensure quality oversight, but this is challenging in practice. Poor communication networks in rural areas further hinder coordination with water committees, SDPs and area councils.

The quality of reporting at the subnational level is mixed. Some provincial staff require further training in computer and data-entry skills.

Sector reviews assess WASH progress and provide recommendations, but fragmented reporting among stakeholder's hampers measuring collective impact and addressing challenges. Vanuatu has yet to conduct a Joint Sector Review.

The DoWR has advanced in cataloguing hardware and software data, including assets in the WRI and WC registration databases. However, reporting quality and format remain issues (with some SDPs terminated for incomplete reports). There is an over-emphasis on compliance and asset reporting (hardware) and a lack of attention to management (software). Further indicators should be developed and piloted (e.g. frequency of WC meetings, water fee and bylaw status etc.). This does not have to burdensome. Learning and adapting is the point of monitoring and evaluation - ongoing "lite" monitoring is required beyond the 6-12 month no/low-cost DWSSP improvement phase. "Weak governance" and community fracture was cited as a risk not addressed in the DWSSP

Provincial governments are, in principle, responsible for monitoring DWSSP and reporting progress to the DoWR, which also conducts site inspections during construction. Area councils are mandated in the NIP to assist with monitoring DWSSP (primary low/no-cost improvements), but in addition to resource constraints they require capacity development on DWSSP. More systematic and sustained monitoring is essential to support the transition from the CWM model to CWM+ and transition towards the steady professionalisation of the sector.

- Monitoring and evaluation is undertaken, but is constrained by limited resources and capacity
- There are no clear processes to link M&E findings (learnings) to provincial or area plans
- The NSDP's five-year review cycle lacks real-time insights, impacting timely adjustments
- Monitoring contractors and communities remains challenging, with issues in oversight and communication
- Some subnational staff require refreshers (and should be involved in co-design of any new reporting templates)
- DWSSP implementation and CWM responsibilities require consistent follow-up monitoring to maintain water system functionality and safety.

Summary Findings: Harmonisation and Coordination

Well-defined policies, roles, and relationships, as well as clear communication platforms, are critical to effective sector collaboration and operations. In Vanuatu, harmonisation and coordination were identified as the second strongest element overall (2.4, still "weak"), largely due to the strong consultations and adherence to the NSDP and the progress made towards advancing aspects of decentralisation. The weakest sub-indicator was access to WASH information.

The cross-cutting nature of WASH requires collaboration across ministries, departments, and national and subnational levels. Vanuatu experiences less departmental duplication than some neighbouring Melanesian countries, with the DoWR overseeing drinking water and the MoH managing household water treatment, sanitation, and hygiene.

The *National Water Policy* and related strategies feed directly into the NSDP, with key legislation, such as the *Water Resource Management Act* aligning with national policy goals. Provincial councils align their plans with the NSDP, ensuring that decentralised efforts work towards unified, strategic goals. The DLA and DSPPC play a key role in these efforts.

The NSDP review highlighted the need for transparent donor reporting, proposing reforms to the *PFEM Act* and *Decentralisation Act* to enhance provincial funding flows

Coordination at the subnational level is facilitated through PTAC, PWRAC and ATAC meetings, which include representatives from various government departments and other stakeholders. The involvement of these actors supports effective planning and ensures local government activities align with broader objectives. However, in practice, are councils are often by-passed.

The DoWR leads WASH sector coordination through national, provincial, and area council-level meetings, engaging stakeholders to align rural water policy locally. However, the NWRAC meets less frequently than mandated. These forums facilitate the implementation of sector-wide water supply policy and standards.

Despite improvements since TC Pam, Vanuatu's aid coordination still faces challenges: government strategies often prioritise donor agendas and there is weak policy alignment and limited civil society consultation. Geopolitical competition, particularly between China and traditional donors, further disrupts harmonisation.

Financial alignment remains complex, with limited fund devolution to provinces. While resources for community priorities are scarce, recent advancements have strengthened applied decentralisation efforts.

Effective coordination depends on data accessibility, but resource constraints and ad hoc reporting limit comprehensive access. While DoWR manages WASH data, CSO input and access remains limited. Recent external initiatives have strengthened national databases and water supply coverage estimates (e.g., WRI).

National coordination mechanisms support collaboration across the water sector. The National Cluster System, including the WASH Cluster, unites government and NGOs for WASH and disaster coordination, while PWRACs manage water resources at the provincial level.

Integrating the WASH Cluster agenda into PWRAC meetings was suggested to streamline coordination, reducing quarterly meetings from eight to four, supporting more efficient use of time and resources

Stronger alignment among provincial councils, area councils, and partners can enhance coordination, advancing Vanuatu's WASH sector objectives and supporting NSDP goals.

- Intersectoral and intrasectoral coordination among government, private sector, and CSOs promotes alignment with NSDP goals through well-defined policies and WASH standards
- Financial alignment challenges persist, underscoring the need for further reforms to decentralise funding flows and enhance subnational capacity
- Coordination meetings, such as PTACs and PWRACs, are vital for integrated planning but require resilience measures to ensure continuity during disasters
- Subnational actors highlighted challenges coordinating with NGOs
- It was suggested that the WASH Cluster agenda be integrated into PWRAC meetings
- The presence of NGOs and development partners enriches WASH sector capacity, though increased coordination is needed to prevent overlap and better align efforts with NSDP objectives.

Summary Findings: Human Resources and Capacity Development

Successful rural water service delivery is contingent upon adequate human resources and capacity development. In Vanuatu, this element was identified as "weak" (2.4) – primarily due to understaffing / vacant positions and subnational-level resource constraints limiting policy implementation.

Decentralisation depends on adequate capacity, but the DoWR faces staffing, training, and resource challenges. Of 62 positions, 55 are filled as of early 2024, yet key roles, including a DWSSP coordinator and database officer, remain vacant. Subnational staffing shortages persist, with eight unoccupied roles in 2021/22 and similar gaps in 2023/24. This hampers coordination and adherence to national policies, affecting NIP progress.

In 2019, the government secured funds for a Capacity Needs Assessment and Human Resource Development Plan for the DoWR. The 2024 Annual Business Plan includes a *Capacity Development Plan*, supported by the MFAT Water Sector Partnership.

Capacity building has advanced through initiatives such as the MOU with VSP for plumber and facilitator training, and project management courses at USP. The DoWR is also collaborating with VIT to address a shortage of certified trainers. Training in water treatment and database management, including at the subnational level, supports strategic goals. However, evaluations highlight gaps and the need for ongoing capacity building, particularly in provinces.

Outsourcing community training to NGOs and contractors has expanded water safety initiatives, increasing coverage from 20 to 60 communities annually. Strengths include increased human resources, speeding up the PWRAC process, and more consistent delivery without distractions (e.g., disasters). However, challenges include limited contractor monitoring, quality control issues (e.g., incomplete reports, errors, non-compliance), and high costs. Community engagement is also hindered when work is seen as commercial, reducing in-kind labour contributions.

This model supports DWSSP implementation, water committee training, and plumbing education but relies on a limited pool of certified trainers. Monitoring these activities is resource-intensive and constrained by logistics, affecting program quality.

Respondents noted that only 10% of communities sustained their DWSSP post-intervention, highlighting the need for follow-up or refresher training. Effective community water management requires ongoing external support to address technical and governance issues. Establishing rural plumbers' networks and empowering area councils as SPDs are promising innovations with potential lessons for other Pacific nations.

Training packages have evolved over the past decade, with recent additions like financial management, sample bylaws and water resource management modules. While these adaptations are constructive, they complicate outsourcing, requiring ongoing refresher training for implementors. Feedback from community participants at the April 2024 Mele training highlighted the need for longer workshops, more hands-on practice, and simpler explanations of scientific concepts like watershed protection. Adding a financial component was seen as beneficial, especially for treasurers.

More diverse training pedagogy, such as the use of videos (which DoWR and partners are exploring) that are both technical and governance focused would be a constructive tool to add to the community engagement training toolbox. Public media campaigns – such as the World Vision-Vanuatu and DoWR initiative – are productive. A balanced approach is required that fosters demand and self-reliance, while also providing the necessary oversight and support to sustain community water systems.

- Persistent staffing gaps in DoWR and subnational units hinder effective decentralisation and water service delivery
- Outsourcing to SDPs has expanded program reach but introduced quality control challenges that require enhanced monitoring
- DWSSP includes innovative climate resilience components, but community engagement post-training remains low, highlighting the need for follow-up
- The WASH Technician Program (Certificate II in Plumbing) is a novel initiative that promotes local economic resilience and may enhance decentralised technical support
- In area's lacking capacity and resources, structured follow-up for water committees is critical to ensure sustainable and safe water services, with additional resources needed for CDOS and area councils
- Training is well contextualized but follows a Western, classroom-based model. Integrating social marketing and peer learning could enhance community ownership and action on water safety plans.

Recommendations

The below recommendations were elicited during the November **stakeholder validation workshop**, where the key findings of the research were presented and discussed with representatives from the DoWR and MoET. The recommendations are few, far from comprehensive, and focus mainly on issues and actions that attracted the most attention and consensus. **Many more suggestive findings are found throughout this report.**

Information and knowledge sharing / capacity strengthening

- WC chairpersons to attend at least one area council meeting a year to discuss water-related issues
- Conduct a Training-of-Trainers with Area Secretaries/Community Liaison Officers (and area-level technicians where appropriate) so they can assist the DoWR deliver trainings and are better able to monitor communities DWSSP
- Include Village Health Workers in DWSSP trainings (where possible)
- Ensure that CDOs attend community trainings (especially DWSSP) so they can not only monitor community activities but also SDPs (training delivery contractors)
- Use more varied and contextually appropriate community engagement techniques, e.g. projectors and Bluetooth speakers to assist in the delivery of trainings (videos)
- Conduct public awareness campaigns on WASH to drive demand (currently underway in partnership with World Vision Vanuatu; however, less education / information and more social marketing / behaviour change approaches are required to maximise impact)
- Consolidate monitoring with active WC backstopping support (hardware and software) and ensure it is systematic and ongoing (e.g. not simply during the 6-12 month low / no-cost improvement period).

Recommendations concerning area councils require close consultation with the Department of Local Authorities.

Harmonisation and coordination

- Subsume Provincial WASH meetings and agenda with the quarterly PWRAC meetings (reduce duplication)
- Ensure that the NWRAC meets regularly
- Improve the linkages between communities, area councils, and province (stop "skipping the area council")
- Find a mechanism that aligns workplans for area councils with the DoWR national level workplans.

Miscellaneous

- Institute a budget line and funds for CDOs to undertake monitoring of DWSSP (beyond the Water Sector Partnership Phase II stage)
- Disaggregate between water and sanitation in government budget and fiscal reporting and, at the DoWR level, disaggregate budget allocations between hardware and software.

The ***Water Resources Management Act*** is currently being reviewed. The report authors suggest reviewers consider:

- The place of area councils and area councils' rules: Reflect on the recommendation (by a DLA respondent) that an Area Council Water Committee be formed to work with all WCs in an area ("like a regulator" to oversee performance and support bylaws and water fees)
- Explore the intersection between customary governance (*kastom*, *Jifs*, Church) and state jurisprudence in the context of water committee bylaws and registration
- The role that VANGO might play in providing a bridging and coordination function between government and NGOs (as suggested by DSPPAC)
- Re-examine current water committee registration process and practice to ensure a more expediated and realistic process (e.g. notifying area councils of WC membership changes).

Version note

This corrected and updated edition (September 2026, version 2) corrects typographical, formatting and referencing errors in the December 2024 edition. It also aligns respondent counts and related statements with the harmonised cross-country dataset prepared for Love et al. (in preparation), 'Decentralisation and the missing middle in rural water services in Fiji, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu' (Supplementary Data S5). No indicator ratings changed. Text statements on the monitoring, evaluation and learning rating (correctly 2.2, weak) and on which elements scored lowest have been corrected, and the overall mean is reported as 2.5 (weak). Interview counts have also been corrected. These changes do not alter the report's main findings or recommendations.

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Appendix

Table 7: Participants attributes

ID	Position	Age	Location	Gender	Date of interview	Interview type
PWS-M1	SHEFA Provincial Water Supervisor	46	Port Vila	M	25.09.23	In person
CDO-M1	SHEFA Community Development Officer	45-50	Port Vila	M	25.09.23	In person
NDWR-1	Information Management Officer	34	Port Vila	M	27.11.23	In person
WC-M1	(Former) Water Committee Chairman (Wenia)	60	Wenia, Epi Island	M	04.09.23	Phone
NDWR-2	Monitoring and Evaluation Officer/Acting Director	50-55	Port Vila, Efate	M	05.02.24	In person
NDWR-3	WASH Program Coordinator/Acting Manager	44	Port Vila, Efate	M	08.02.24	In person
PSG-F	Acting Secretary General	42	Port Vila, Efate	F	05.04.24	In person
NDLG-M	Decentralisation Reform Manager	50-55	Port Vila, Efate	M	11.04.24	In person
NDWR4	WASH program Coordinator/Acting Manager	44	Port Vila, Efate	M		In person
PWS-M2	MALAMPA Provincial Water Supervisor	38	Lakatoro, Malekula	M	02.10.23	In person
AA-F	Central Malekula Area Administrator	49	Lakatoro, Malekula	F	03.10.23	In person
DWTO-M	MALAMPA DoWR Technical Officer	35-40	Lakatoro, Malekula	M	02.10.23	In person
CDO-M2	MALAMPA Community Development Officer	42	Lakatoro, Malekula	M	02.10.23	In person
WC-F1	Secretary of WC	40-45	Walarano	F	07.05.24	Phone
WC-M2	Chairman of Water committee	60-65	Larvat	M	06.05.24	Phone
PWS-M3	PENAMA Provincial Water Supervisor	34	Ambae	M	10.07.23	Phone
PWS-M3	PENAMA Provincial Water Supervisor	34	Ambae	M	21.07.23	Phone
WC-M3	Plumber- Latano Water Committee	45-50	Pentecost	M	31.07.23	Phone
PWS-M3	PENAMA Provincial Water Supervisor	34	Ambae	M	06.05.24	Phone
PWS-F	SANMA Provincial Water Supervisor	35-40	Santo	F	05.08.23	Zoom call
APWS-M	SANMA (Acting) PWS Provincial Water Supervisor	49	Santo	M	06.10.23	In person

Table 8: Participants Attributes

ID	Position	Age	Location	Gender	Date of interview	Interview type
MPO-M	Manager Project and Operations	39	Santo	M	06.10.23	In person
WRM-M	Senior Officer-Water Resource Management Unit	45-50	Santo	M	06.10.23	In person
AA-M	West Malo Area Administrator	50-55	West Malo	M	11.10.23	In person
WC-M4	Banban WC Chairman	45-50	Banban (Santo)	M	10.10.23	In person

Table 9: Workshop participants

Name	Position	Organisation	Gender	Country
Gaston Theophile	Provincial Water Supervisor	DoWR	M	Vanuatu
Heather Molitambe	Co-investigator /country project manager	USP	F	Vanuatu
Collin Benjamin	Co-investigator	SINU	M	Solomon Islands
Sheilla Funubo	Co-investigator	SINU	F	Solomon Islands
Merilyn Vana	Senior Health Inspector	EHD/RWASH	F	Solomon Islands
Sarah Pene	Co-investigator /country project manager	USP	F	Fiji
Suliasi Batiwake	Co-investigator	IWC (formerly Fiji MHMMS)	M	Fiji
Tolu Muliana	Co-investigator	USP	M	Fiji
Peni Wanimala	Research Assistant	USP	M	Fiji
Mark Love	Principal Investigator	IWC	M	Australia
Sachita Shrestha	Project Officer/Co-investigator	IWC	F	Australia

End Notes

[1] Adapted from ODE (2015:1)

[2] Most studies of decentralisation and rural water service delivery have been undertaken in Asia, Latin America and Africa (see refs)

[3] As outlined in a *Memorandum* by the Secretary of sent to the British Resident Commissioners of the New Hebrides in 1937, 'indirect-rule' is a system whereby '[n]ative institutions are fostered so that the natives under traditional leaders, and in accordance with indigenous traditions, may to an increasing extent share in the management of their own affairs' (CO323/1525/7; see also: Kiwanuka 1970; Lange 2004; Morrell 1960:vii-viii).

[4] Key provisions included the formation of Local Government Councils, definitions of local government regions, councils, and administrative roles, powers and duties of councils and financial management and the establishment of local government funds.

[5] See: ABC (2022, 2023a, 2023b).

[6] In DoWR, this is evident in the Project Unit. For example, a Minister from a Province is supporting a water implementation in an (unnamed) island. Materials are sent off from the drilling team, and they start drilling. Suddenly, the Minister changes with a change in government and whatever work was carried out was cancelled and the work and materials diverted to the new Ministers Province (NDWR-M1).

[7] For examples, see: Babadzan 1988; Bolton 1999; Jolly 1992, 1994; Keesing 1989; Lindstrom 1982, 1997; Rodman 1987; Rousseau 2004, 2012; Tonkinson 1993.

[8] This marks both the *kastom*isation of the state and the extension of the state into 'traditional' [or 'non-state'] domains (Lindstrom 1997

[9] Article 47 states that if there is no rule of law applicable to a matter before it, a court shall determine the matter "according to substantial justice and whenever possible in conformity with custom"; article 51 states that "Parliament may provide for the manner of the ascertainment of relevant roles of custom; article 74 states that "The rules of custom shall form the basis of ownership and use of land in the Republic of Vanuatu" (*Constitution of the Republic of Vanuatu,* 1980). This gives *kastom* a formal place within the legal system and allowing it to be applied in various legal matters, particularly in relation to land, family, and community disputes.

[10] The *National Council of Chiefs Act* (No. 23 of 2006) was legislated after years of advocacy from the Malvatumauri (and others) to strengthen and further formalise the authority of *Jif*s, including the unlimited power to "resolve disputes according to local customs" (§13[1][a], 14[1]) and to make "by-laws" (§14[2-3], 15, 16). However, this and other formidable powers were removed even before the Bill went before Parliament (Forsyth, 2009), with the final Act ultimately concerned only with the organisation of various chiefly councils (National Council of Chiefs Act, 2006).

[11] Northeast and South Area Councils.

[12] There was, historically, some tension between missionaries and the colonial government regarding the establishment of village headman

[13] Formal it means that they have to present a financial report at the Annual General Meeting of the village. there are additional committees that are either temporary or do not have to report to the village council. Non-church examples include the 'Independence celebration committee' and 'Christmas celebration committee'. Church examples include 'Men's Fellowship', 'Share Group' and 'Prayer Warriors' (Love, 2016:32).

[14] "The Vanuatu CRP focused excessively on specific institutional reform and governance, assuming that markets were so effective that they would solve most other problems. Unhelpful and misleading comparisons with East Asia led to an attempt to liberalise trade on a standardised basis, instead of attending to Vanuatu's particular situation. Corporatisation and privatisation proceeded too quickly, depriving the government of revenue and leaving it vastly more indebted than before the programme began" (Gay, 2009:182).

[15] Although self-supply at a community scale is on the rise (e.g. Ambae)

[16] The methodology and validity of the data and findings is not known.

[17] According to the NSDP Baseline Survey 2019-2020, rural access to 'improved sources' was 84% rural, 97% urban (VBoS in GoV, 2023c).

[18] Namely *WASH Sector Strengthening* (2014-2017) and the *Vanuatu Water Sector Partnership* (2017-2021) (UNICEF and DoWR, supported by MFAT) (see Faerua et al., 2022). Other developments include a WASH capacity

and training needs assessment and a review of the Water Sector Partnership (MFAT, 2022).

[19] Other gaps identified in the review include a lack of proper definitions for river buffer zones in specifying what activities are permitted and what are not permitted

There was a gap between the national level and the rural community level, with limited provisions for community involvement in water resource management

[20] Members include World Vision, Oxfam, Save the Children Red Cross , UNICEF and more.

[21] This replaced both the 2018 National Planning Framework and the 2018 M&E Framework.

[22] UNELCO, a subsidiary of the French utility company Engie (formerly known as GDF Suez), has been operating in Vanuatu since 1939. Initially focused on electricity generation and distribution, UNELCO expanded its operations to include water supply management in the 1990s. In 1994, the Vanuatu government awarded UNELCO a concession to manage the urban water network in Port Vila, the capital city

[23] DoWR are currently exploring the idea of becoming a utility, much like WAF .

[24] Producing a Strong Water Committees video for the DoWR.

[25] The specific SDG 6 goals are: 6.1: Achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all by 2030 6.3: Improve water quality by halving untreated wastewater and increasing safe reuse globally by 2030 6.4: Increase water-use efficiency and ensure sustainable withdrawals to address water scarcity by 2030 6.5: Implement integrated water resources management at all levels by 2030 6.6: Protect and restore water-related eco-systems, including wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes by 2020 6.7A: Expand international cooperation in water related activities and programmes by 2030. 6.7B: Strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water management.

[26] 1) Water safety & security 2) Water supply markets 3) Water Services Compliance 4) Formalise water providers 5) Rights of the Pipes 6) Provincial council bylaws 7) Secure water future (GoV, 2017).

[27] The NEPIP examines and links the core businesses of the *Department of Environmental Protection and Conservation* under Multilateral Environmental Agreements, legislation, and corporate planning instruments such as the *Corporate Plan 2016–2018* and *Strategic Plan 2014–2024*; existing policies and programs such as the *National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan*, the *National Invasive Species Strategy and Action Plan 2014–2020*, and the *National Waste Management Strategy and Action Plans* (GoV, 2017).

[28] The specific SDG 6 goals are: 6.1: Achieve universal and equitable access to safe and affordable drinking water for all by 2030 6.3: Improve water quality by halving untreated wastewater and increasing safe reuse globally by 2030 6.4: Increase water-use efficiency and ensure sustainable withdrawals to address water scarcity by 2030 6.5: Implement integrated water resources management at all levels by 2030 6.6: Protect and restore water-related eco-systems, including wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes by 2020 6.7A: Expand international cooperation in water related activities and programmes by 2030. 6.7B: Strengthen the participation of local communities in improving water management.

[29] https://www.facebook.com/DoWRVanuatu

[30] SPC, RFQ 24-7062 Review of the Water Resources Management Act and of associated updates to the National Water Policy (Republic of Vanuatu).

[31] Between 2008 – 2013, the then DGMWR spent between 0.055% and 0.03.7% pf GDP on water (Sammy, 2019)

[32] In the breakdown of the 2021 financial statement for Ministry of Lands, Mines and Water Resources, VUV113,893,908 [USD$965,362] was expended for rural water supply activities and VT22,247,636 [USD$188,673] was dedicated to water resource management activities (MoFEM, 2021). This was a considerable increase on 2017 figures, which were VUV86,179,629 [USD$730.443] and VUV10,052,107 [USD$85, 200] respectively (MoFEM, 2021).

[33] For example, in Uganda, up to 12% of conditional grants (monies channelled from central to local governments) is dedicated to software activities only (Lockwood and Smits, 2011:114).

[34] The FSBs where initially established as part of a wider Australian Government supported Governance for Growth program in Vanuatu (2007-2016) designed to promote economic growth and improve service delivery through good governance, with a focus on public financial management (Warner, Gouy, and Samson, 2017).

[35] Ministry of Lands, Environment, Mines & Water Resources (https://nao.gov.vu/publication/reports),

[36] The PFM Roadmap focuses on improving various areas of financial management, such as budgeting, debt management, and the oversight of government enterprises, to ensure better service delivery and financial governance (Gov, 2023).

[37] UNICEF, LRPS-2024-9189294: Market study research to understand relevant market factors related to WASH products and services in Vanuatu (2024).

[38] Sample rates: i) Minimum charge of 100vt, max 1000vt, per month, per tap; ii) builders 500vt per day; Farmers – 200vt per month (irrigation); iv) Livestock, 200vt every month; v) Business (200vt per month); and vi) School and Health Facilities at discretion of WC (DoWR, 2024).

[39] Common practices include: removing or anonymising direct identifiers, spatial masking techniques, and limiting access to raw data by categorising data-sharing agreements into tiers, e.g., trusted research institutions, governmental organisations, or parties with signed non-disclosure agreements may access unfiltered data that could potentially identify communities or specific water sources, whilst for public use or sharing with those with no non-disclosure agreements, only provide aggregated or totally de-identified data.

[40] The NDMOs 5Ws - When, What, Where, Who and Whom – is a WASH response tracking database.

[41] In the latest survey, 5132 surveyed households were selected from 238 clusters, twenty clusters each in Torba, Sanma, Penama and Malampa, and 24 per cluster in Shefa and Tafea. Water quality was tested in 5 randomly selected households, from 3 different points – source, storage and households; . According to the results, water was most contaminated at the household level (VBoS, 2024)

[42] E.g., Gov, 2018: 17, §20F *Water Resource Management (Amendment) Act*; DoWR, 2023.

[43] The ADB project commenced around 3 years ago with a training of trainers (ToT), during which several WASH cluster organisations participated (DoWR, EWB, World Vision Vanuatu, UNICEF, Kramer Ausenco and USP). The workshop took 2 weeks to complete; one week focused on the plumbers' training and the other on WC management training.

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