# Objecting to Objectivity: Reflecting on Evaluation in Vanuatu

*Martha Geary Nichol[1] and John Overton[2]*

## Abstract

Evaluation is intended as an objective activity to assess and learn from development interventions. In practice it is donor driven to meet donor needs and is predicated on donor conceptions of knowledge, evidence and meaning. Rejecting the notion of objectivity and viewing evaluation as a reflection of Western epistemologies, this paper draws from observations of two evaluation exercises and several interviews in Vanuatu to highlight a significant shortcoming of current practice: the failure to recognise contextual factors of *kastom*, place and language. It questions the fundamental approaches to evaluation in different cultural settings and concludes with a call to focus on relationships as a first step toward more inclusive evaluation.

---

[1]  Corresponding author: Postgraduate, School of Geography, Environment and Earth Sciences, Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand, email: mattiegn@gmail.com

[2]  Professor, School of Geography, Environment and Earth Sciences, Victoria University of Wellington,  New Zealand

## Observing Evaluations

After volunteering for just a year at a multi-funded youth centre and sexual health clinic in Vanuatu, the first author became familiar with visits from reviewers, evaluators and donors. Their appearances were so frequent that their origin, purpose and relationship to the centre and clinic were often forgotten. Evaluations and reviews took time and required staff members to drop the tasks at hand to respond to questions. While most of these visits faded quickly from memory in a blur of questions and presentations, two stood out in their markedly different approaches and levels of success.

The first evaluation team was made up of a group of Western expatriates based in Port Vila. They seemed to follow a textbook-informed approach. In the centre's main hall, they explained who they were and their reason for being there to all of the centre's employees: comprising clinic and management staff as well as tutors, all ranging in age and gender from teenage boys to *mamas* (women) over forty. The team arranged for the meeting to take place at a time when all staff members were at the centre. Unfortunately this also meant that the tutors had to leave their classes unattended. Following their introduction, the evaluation team divided staff members into small groups so that questions could be asked in a more private setting.

While the team used as much Bislama (Vanuatu's national tongue) as possible, their strong accents and heavy code-switching with English meant they were not very well understood. They often reverted completely to English when they saw that no one understood them, which further confused staff. However, their poor command of Bislama was not the only barrier to their communication. When the evaluators spoke, the young males stared at the ground and the *mamas* not wanting to fall behind on their handicraft classes were silent, apart from their clicking fingers which continued to crochet. After no one volunteered responses, one evaluator went around the circle asking questions directly to each person. This resulted in many "I don't know" answers and continuous staring at the ground. The evaluator was obviously frustrated by this and did not seem to understand that in such situations avoiding eye contact is not uncommon in parts of Vanuatu.

One of the questions enquired into the number of youth from the previous year who had returned. The evaluator then approached each person in the circle for a response. Seeing that she would have to answer, a *mama* asked for the purpose

of the question to be explained. The first author replied that the evaluator might wish to understand how well the centre retained youth, how the centre made sure that the youth wanted to return the next year. The *mama* looked somewhat annoyed and she responded that they weren't like 'white' people; they moved around and often went back to their home islands. She didn't feel that the question was appropriate.

This first team marks a stark contrast to the approach of a second evaluation. The evaluator was an Australian man who visited the centre together with a Ni-Vanuatu woman who was familiar to staff members as she worked for the same organisation in another island. The man arrived at the centre soaked in sweat and, after greeting everyone, sat down to fan himself, exclaiming in a friendly manner, "I'm so hot!". This seemingly unprofessional gesture succeeded in breaking the ice with the staff who laughed at this man in his pressed shirt fanning himself in the Vanuatu heat.

His style was far less formal. He sat and relaxed with the staff in the working area while his colleague arranged interviews through the centre's manager. He then made time to talk to staff members, either individually or in groups, in their own space and as they preferred. Surprisingly, some staff members requested interviews with him and he accommodated them by making the time to see each person on her/his own terms. While he did not speak any Bislama he conducted all interviews with the Ni-Vanuatu woman. He joked with the staff in English and through his light-hearted manner many aspects of his conversation and personality were understood despite the language barrier. After the interviews, he stayed around to watch the hip-hop group as they had wanted to show him some of their new moves. When the group did not start on time he sat around patiently under the trees waiting for them.

The two evaluations above sought to examine and report broadly on the same things, but they were profoundly different in practice and, in the way they were perceived critically, and engaged with locally. We propose that the second one gained a better and deeper understanding of how the project really worked. How is it then, we ask, that appropriate knowledge for effective evaluations might be uncovered less through 'scientific', rigorous and objective methods and more through understanding and engaging with locally-specific 'ways of knowing' (epistemologies) and ways of relating to one another?

## Ownership in Evaluation

Ownership is recognised as crucial to successful development (IMF, 2001; Killick, 2003; Leandro et al., 1999; World Bank, 1998) and is the main principle of the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness (OECD, 2005). However, the definition of ownership in aid is unclear. As Buiter (2007) points out, it can mean anything from a country having designed and drafted its own programmes, to a country being informed of programmes drawn up by another party. Even the 'owner' whom the term refers to is debatable and raises questions over legitimate representation (Buiter, 2007) and power dynamics. In practice, the concept varies and its meaning is often tailored to suit the needs of the user.

Given the shifting nature of the term according to parties involved, time and space, ownership should be viewed as broad and relative. "It really only makes sense when seen in the context of what happened before, and thus ownership can be seen as moving away from the imposition of the content and process … by outsiders." (EURODAD, 2001, p.3) While this statement refers to structural adjustment programmes, it is also appropriate in trying to understand ownership in other areas of aid management, including evaluation.

Like the concept of ownership, evaluation has often been emphasised through a results management agenda such as in the Paris Declaration principle of "measuring for results" (OECD, 2005). In this context, 'results' become the driving principle: pre-determined project targets and objectives against which progress can be measured. Evidence of progress can then be analysed through auditing procedures and used to satisfy requirements for demonstrating accountability. The use of evaluations to inform decision-making for both recipients and donors is critical (OECD, 2010, p. 22).

Evaluation is intended as an objective assessment to understand the extent to which activities meet their objectives. In reality the practice is largely moulded to donor needs, showing a bias towards systems and approaches developed in the West, disregarding local knowledge and failing to capture complex relationships, cultural subtleties and contextual factors (Wallace, Bornstein, & Chapman, 2006). The heavy reliance on donor systems is due partly to donors' reluctance to hand over ownership to recipient systems as they prefer to practise "risk avoidance" rather than "risk management" (OECD, 2011, p. 52). However, there is little evidence that donors are more likely to use country systems even if

they are of sound quality (OECD, 2011, p. 41). Consequently country ownership of evaluation remains low and evaluation, including utilisation of findings and recommendations, is weak (Segone, 2009, pp. 23-24).

Evaluation procedures are underpinned by particular epistemologies. In evaluation, epistemology is revealed in the concepts, tools and methodologies used by those employed to undertake evaluation. In most instances, evaluation is seen as a rational and scientific exercise: it seeks evidence by gathering data, preferably quantitative data, which is then subject to analysis, comparison and judgement. This positivist epistemology relies on universal techniques and approaches that claim replicability and verifiability. Objectivity is a desirable, indeed necessary, characteristic: evidence should not be tainted by the subjective biases and worldviews of evaluators or swayed by the prejudices of informants. Such knowledge is deemed to be rigorous, reliable and understandable across the realms of academia and policy making. It contrasts markedly with 'indigenous epistemologies' in places such as Solomon Islands (Gegeo 1998, Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo, 2001) which see the world of development and relationships very differently. Gegeo (1998) argues that people make sense of foreign concepts, such as 'development' and 'business' through the lens of their own ontologies, values, social relationships and histories. Knowledge, then, is subjective - socially and culturally constructed - and 'reality' is diverse and often contested.

This paper suggests that effective evaluation practices need not only to recognise these epistemological questions, but also to adapt both evaluation methodologies and methods accordingly. We argue that social constructivist and indigenous epistemologies are critical if evaluations are both to have and give meaning to people in Pacific Island settings, though we also recognise that evaluations also need to engage with forms of positivism, in that factual evidence is needed and has value. In terms of methodology (or the 'theory of method'), therefore, we contend that a syncretic approach is needed, drawing on and reconciling both quantitative and qualitative research to generate knowledge and meanings to inform evaluation of development activities. This then leads to, and must inform, the choice of appropriate methods. As we will see below, we suggest a range of methods but particularly those which are grounded in *kastom*, place and language. Methods such as *storian*, the involvement of local researchers and evaluators and concern for the location of evaluation, are all ways to enhance the effectiveness of evaluation and its social and cultural appropriateness in places such as Vanuatu.

Considering that Western positivist epistemology usually provides the foundation for evaluation, this paper challenges the notion of objectivity in the practice of evaluation. We argue that the pretence of objectivity equates to the use of donor methods to meet donor needs. Donor dominance in evaluation undermines the global ownership focus and infringes on the effectiveness of the practice. With evaluations largely directed toward donor accountability and learning rather than addressing local information needs (Segone, 2009) and drawing on ways local people give meaning to their world, evaluations are unsuccessful in meeting their purpose of informing decision-making. Instead, if we see greater awareness of the links between appropriate epistemologies, methodologies and methods of evaluation, we might see evaluation becoming a tool for enhancing local ownership of development – and its overall effectiveness – rather than simply reinforcing donor discourses and control.

**Aid Trends in Vanuatu**

Vanuatu relies heavily on aid. In 2016 it received $US128.6 million in official development assistance, equivalent to 16.5% of its gross national income (World Bank, 2017). It is the third largest aid recipient in Oceania (next to Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands). With such a heavy reliance on aid, Vanuatu is naturally subject to global aid trends and practices, including the neoliberal structural adjustment programmes and the results-management agenda.

External interventions in Vanuatu have been criticised in the past for their lack of ownership and failure to recognise contextual factors. For example, Vanuatu's Comprehensive Reform Programme of 1997, instituted following pressure from the Asian Development Bank and other donors and aimed at reforming the country's public sector (Nari 2000), was criticised for the lack of consultation surrounding its development and subsequently the absence of local ownership of its policies (Gay, 2004, 2014). The programme failed to recognise contextual factors such as *kastom* and land ownership (Gay, 2014). Land reforms aimed at expanding the economy were seen to undermine the relationships that Ni-Vanuatu have with their land (Daley, 2010).

The results management agenda has been picked up in Vanuatu. The Government of Vanuatu has acknowledged the role of strong monitoring and evaluation for decision-making and evidence-based policy through the establishment of a monitoring and evaluation unit in the Department of Strategic Policy, Planning

and Aid Coordination (DSPPAC) and the development of a monitoring and evaluation policy. The unit collates data collected by individual ministries and is responsible for the planning, monitoring and evaluation of the economic and development agenda of the Government (Pacific Institute of Public Policy, 2009). Such a unit has the potential to strengthen national demand for monitoring and evaluation by setting culturally sensitive standards and providing a space for greater dialogue on evaluation between multiple stakeholders (Segone, 2009, p. 28). Despite the active step forward in taking ownership of the evaluation of government activities, evaluation is still largely a new practice to Vanuatu and continues to be driven by donors (Pacific Institute of Public Policy, 2009, p. 18).

**Research**

This paper presents local perspectives of evaluations in Vanuatu's two largest towns of Port Vila and Luganville where the majority of development projects are based. Semi-structured interviews were undertaken in April and May 2013 with 10 non-governmental organisations (NGO) and eight government staff members working in the monitoring and evaluation departments.

Participants were identified through personal networks or by emailing contact addresses on NGO and government websites, with the intention of interviewing a broad range of participants. While the interviews produced rich data and clear themes emerged, the research was limited by time and availability of participants, and consequently several proposed interviews were not able to be conducted. Time constraints also excluded other service providers such as churches from the scope of the study.

Participants were asked to talk about their experiences and views on monitoring and evaluation practices in development projects. Interviewing solely NGO and government department staff was an opportunity to emphasise the local point-of-view of the practice. During the data collection process, reflexivity was constantly exercised including reflecting on positionality – how the researcher's actions, history and identity affected the research. The first author, who conducted the interviews, is a young female of British and Māori descent who grew up in New Zealand and spent time living in Italy and Vanuatu. Her positionality and awareness of how she was perceived in Vanuatu informed her approach, including building rapport with participants through making connections and respecting the appropriate protocols for organising interviews.

Interview techniques employed borrowed heavily from *storian*, Vanuatu's form of *talanoa* (Warrick, 2009). Like *talanoa*, *storian* involves and translates to swapping stories, talking and yarning (Crowley, 1995, p. 235; as cited in Warrick, 2009, p. 83). Its central feature of "building rapport with participants" (Warrick, 2009, p. 83) stresses the importance of being physically present (Halapua, 2000). In order to employ a *storian* approach, interviews were either conducted in Bislama or techniques were borrowed from the story-telling nature of Bislama for interviews conducted in English. In the majority of cases, data was documented through voice recordings and then transcribed verbatim and coded and grouped into themes manually. Translations of quotes used in this paper were reviewed by a Ni-Vanuatu translator.

**Findings**

Evaluation was viewed by participants as externally-driven and dominated by overseas evaluators checking appropriate spending of funds or proving the value for such spending. Similar to the critique of Vanuatu's Comprehensive Reform Programme, context-specific factors, despite their importance for ownership, were not seen to be prioritised. The participants saw evaluation as a practice undertaken in an objective, one-size-fits-all manner, but through this perspective failed to recognise three important contextual features: *kastom*, place and language.

*Kastom*

*Kastom* is a concept closely tied to Ni-Vanuatu identity. There is a lack of clarification around its definition (Tonkinson, 1982). For example, Bolton (2003) found that many people do not distinguish between custom, culture and tradition, but *kastom* is often used as an umbrella term representing all three. Former President of the *Malvatumauri* (Vanuatu's National Council of Chiefs), Chief Willie Bongmatur, wrote that only Melanesians can know for themselves the "meaning and significance of the terms culture, custom, and tradition and the importance of these concepts within national and village life" (Bongmatur, 1994, p. 85). Therefore, in this paper, the understanding of *kastom* will be kept broad and will represent custom, culture and tradition. The Bislama word is used to keep its definition dictated by Ni-Vanuatu.

Better inclusion of *kastom* in evaluations was seen as imperative. Contrary to the "objective" Western approach, understanding and including *kastom* is necessary

for successful execution of evaluation. *Kastom* influences epistemologies which in turn advise data collection methods and indeed, the appropriate data to be collected. For example, *kastom* can guide communication techniques ensuring appropriate methods are employed and effective collection of information is achieved. Hence, *kastom* is key to the collection of worthwhile, reflective data to inform local decision making.

Approaches need to be better tailored by local *kastom*, which can vary from island to islands and village to village:

> O even for M&E from we Vanuatu hemi kat wan diverse culture, yu no save apply wan standard o wan size fits all I stap long Torres kasem. Mo aelen tu oli difren. Wanem mi tokabaot long Santo, sem message ia we yu komunicate long Santo yu no tink se bambae I kam gud blong talem yu mas jenjim langwis blong yu blong sutem man we I andastand we I tekem. (Participant A – Government Employee, personal communication, 2013)

> [Or even for monitoring and evaluation, because Vanuatu has a diverse culture, you cannot apply one standard or one-size-fits-all from the Torres down. All the islands are different too. What I talk about in Santo, this same message that you communicate in Santo you don't think that it can be told like that, you need to change the language to suit the person you are speaking to so he understands.]

Furthermore, an understanding of *kastom*, by recognising and valuing local assets and capabilities, can help provide evaluations with richer data and deeper understanding. For example, participant D highlighted the custom of oral communication in Vanuatu:"…verbal communication in Vanuatu is still very strong. Amazing people remember the things they've done the last 12 months very well so they verbally communicate it." (Participant D – Government Employee, personal communication, 2013)

### *Place*

Vanuatu is characterised by considerable cultural diversity within its nearly seventy inhabited islands and this is reflected in a wide range of customary land tenure systems, encompassing both patrilineal and matrilineal systems and varying mixes of communal, kin and individual rights (Rodman, 1995). Yet common throughout is the very strong link between land and identity (Regenvanu, 1980). "*Wetem kraon nao hemi save talemaot hem mo wetem kraon hemi save holem taet ol kastom tambu paoa blong hem*" (It is with land that he defines his identity and it is with land that he maintains his spiritual strength) (Regenvanu, 1980, p. 66).

A person's sense of being is related to her or his customary home and the social relationships there. 'Land' encompasses not just the physical earth and biota but the cultural and social values embedded in it. Thus, being at home on one's land is important for a sense of identity and being able to communicate with outsiders with confidence.

When working within communities where land and identity are strong and interconnected, development professionals must recognise and respect the environment, history, protocols and power structures that exist in that place. Yet the practicalities of evaluation exercises often mean that they do not travel to villages that may be only accessible by dirt roads or sea and arduous to get to following frequent, heavy rains. This parallels Robert Chambers' (1983) observations regarding 'rural development tourism' and the ways the most marginalised are not visited and rendered invisible in the course of development practice.

On the other hand, when the views of a community are sought away from their homes, the resultant evaluations can be compromised. For example, an air-conditioned office in a town close to the airport may suit the needs and budgets of evaluation teams, but it is 'out of place' for communities. Away from their land and their cultural hearth, community members may lose identity and *mana* (spiritual authority and power) and the confidence to express and assert their views. They can become relegated even more to passive and faceless 'interviewees' or 'focus group discussants', particularly when consultants from outside seek views on local conditions and impacts of development interventions. Thus, taking account of people's physical location and acknowledging their relationship with their land means meeting them on their terms and on their own ground, respecting local *kastom*, relationships and ways of interacting, and acknowledging the unique identities and knowledge systems of that place.

### Language

*Kastom* and identity is heavily embedded in and practised through Vanuatu's languages: "Ol kastom blong Vanuatu ikat stamba blong olgeta hemi langwis" [It can be said that language is one of the bases of custom in Vanuatu] (Ligo, 1980, p. 58). While Bislama is the national language, and English and French are official languages, Ni-Vanuatu have another 106 indigenous languages (Lynch & Crowley, 2001) in which the varying numbers of speakers' identity and kastom, are expressed.

The dominance of English as the primary language for evaluation design and delivery ignores the linguistic reality that English isn't the *lingua franca*. English may not be spoken by many or may be the second, third or fourth language for others. Even for those who speak English proficiently, the pressure to use the language formally in the context of an evaluation can be intimidating and limiting. The heavy reliance on English for evaluations thus restricts involvement of individuals and communities being evaluated, often making interviewees unwilling or unable to express themselves. Needless to say, the use of English does not encourage a *storian* approach.

A further concern is the difficulty for interviewees to fully understand the purpose and origin of the evaluator when this information is presented in English. It is understandably difficult for interviewees to express themselves freely when they do not know who is interviewing them. This sentiment was captured in one participant's words:

> Hemia lo saed lo research olsem o hemia we oli kam review ia ol man blong review ia olsem se I gud blo wan we hemi review hemi toktok bislama hemi mas traem I andastandam langwis blong ples long hia because samtaems sam infomesin we I save gud be oli no save hao blong oli kivim stret tingting ia long wan man we I shud be. I mekem se sam taem oli fraed from oli no save toktok English, o oli fraed long man we I kam ia. (Participant B – NGO Employee, personal communication, 2013)

> [That's with regard to research, like, when they come and review here, all the people who do reviews, like it would be good if [the] one who reviews speaks Bislama. He must try to understand the language of this place, because sometimes some information which can be good they don't know how to give their straight thoughts to this man. It makes it that sometimes they are afraid because they cannot speak English, or they are afraid of this man who has come.]

The dominance of English in evaluation limits ownership of the practice by promoting the use of a foreign language (in many cases) and restricting participation of those involved locally.

### *Local participation*

In order to promote the better inclusion of *kastom, place and* language, the participation of local people in the running of evaluations is critical. It is inconceivable that an external evaluator could understand the intricacies and differences between the *kastom* of different communities in Vanuatu. Local people, drawing from their own epistemologies, can tailor evaluations to better suit the needs of local people.

A local person, with her/his knowledge of the context, may be received better within the community due to her/his ability to guide the evaluation according to *kastom* and conduct it in the right language in the right place. One participant further highlighted a local person's ability to make others feel more comfortable by having a similar appearance:

> … culture blong yumi hemi very important so mi mas helpem donor blong save about sensitivity blong culture blong yumi. Mekem se taem we mifala I ko long wan community olsem sam taem yu se people bambae save be open sapos oli luk appearance blong yu hemi klosap semak blong olgeta (Participant A – Government Employee, personal communication, 2013)

> [… culture is very important so I must help the donor know about the sensitivities of our culture. Therefore when we go to a community sometimes people will be open if they see your appearance is quite similar to theirs.]

Participants were very aware of donors' drive for objectivity and it was acknowledged that involving someone so close to the examined organisation ran the risk of a conflict of interest and therefore a loss of this required "objectivity" demanded by evaluation's definition. However the benefits of including someone with a local understanding outweighed the use of evaluators who "often lack skills and understanding of local context" (Wallace et al., 2006, p. 113). "I think it's better and then it's better because then they'll know the situation and I dunno whether the information given it's you know, not conflict of interest and everything but it's honestly reporting on what's on the ground." (Participant C – NGO Employee, personal communication, 2013)

**Discussion**

Participants highlighted the necessity for inclusion of contextual factors of *kastom*, place and language. This would allow for more reflective data to be collected which in turn would more accurately inform decision-making. The integration of these factors demands the greater inclusion of local people and local epistemologies, resulting in a movement away from the implementation of practices by outsiders (EURODAD 2001*)* and therefore increased ownership.

For contextual factors to play a greater part in evaluation, a movement away from traditionally Western approaches towards Ni-Vanuatu approaches is needed. This requires a change in epistemologies within the framework of evaluation: towards viewing the practice from a local standpoint, embracing *kastom*, place and language. Such a standpoint demands the inclusion of local people as facilitators and evaluators throughout the evaluation process.

In practice the extent to which the evaluation can embrace contextual factors varies according to context and the current relationship between donors and their Ni-Vanuatu counterparts. Ongoing negotiations and dialogue need to occur between donors, government and NGOs for relationships to be developed and maintained. Sound and respectful relationships, in which balances of power are examined and addressed, would allow for a better space for government and NGOs to impart their views. Such a call for a focus on relationships is not new (see Eyben, 2004, 2010; Mancuso Brehm, 2001). A participant in a Wallace et al. (2006) study argued "there needs to be a middle path between donors' interests and the NGOs' interests … Building relationships and not just systems is key" (2006, p. 116). This type of relationship building and the move to better address issues from a local approach will require flexibility on the part of donors. The development of local approaches will require trial and error. Unlike donor practices that have already had decades to develop, local approaches will require time for fine-tuning.

The focus on relationships rather than physical project outputs challenges the idea that evaluation is primarily a funding instrument. It suggests that evaluation should be flexible, personal and focused on long-term development outcomes. Instead, presently a significant proportion of donors' communication with participants is through donor visits for evaluation and reporting, resulting in a relationship centered on funding.

The strengthening of relationships, including negotiating intricate power relations, would not replicate a formal Western relationship recognised through a memorandum of understanding. Rather, it too would take the lead from the local context. *Kastom* outlines its own approaches to building and maintaining relationships incorporating different practices such as the sharing of food, the use of *storian* and the drinking of kava. These customary protocols regarding the establishment and maintenance of relationships are supported by vital elements of inter-personal communication – personality, humour, openness, respect – all of which build trust and shared understandings and experiences. It is logical that a relationship aiming to increase Ni-Vanuatu ownership is guided by *kastom*. Approaches such as *storian* may not necessarily provide a direct, prescribed outcome, but rather advocate participation and sharing centred around relationships (Warrick, 2009).

Seeking to approach evaluation through new epistemologies and strengthened relationships will be difficult. It requires taking risks and trying new approaches that will be unfamiliar and perhaps not recommended in Western methodologies. It takes time, for which government and NGOs (as well as donors) are already pressed to undertake current evaluation requirements. However, a relationship focus would not only benefit evaluation, it would spread its value over into other aspects of donors, government and NGOs' shared work.

**Evaluations in Retrospect**

Returning to the original story of the two evaluations at the start of this paper, the techniques and methods observed can now be examined in light of the research and subsequent discussion.

The first team seemed to follow pre-determined, deliberate procedures for appropriate engagement. They introduced themselves, stating the purpose of their evaluation, followed by interviews in small groups so that interviewees could supposedly feel comfortable speaking. Each person was addressed with each question individually, to ensure complete participation. "Rigorous procedures, design and methodology" (United Nations Development Programme, 2009, p. 8) were followed. However, interviewees seemed reluctant and uncomfortable in providing information, giving their insights and sharing their knowledge. The "rigorous procedures" had resulted in interviewed staff avoiding the evaluators' questions.

The evaluation group's "objective" process was based on Western models of participation and was unsuccessful in this Vanuatu context. Contextual factors were not taken into consideration. For example, the evaluators demonstrated their poor understanding of *kastom* through their confusion with the young male staff staring at the ground. Despite their use of Bislama, their poor command of it and reversion to English meant that staff did not feel comfortable to talk and express themselves. While the evaluation did take place on the centre's grounds, the evaluation group did not allow individuals to dictate the location of interviews. Furthermore, the timing of their evaluation did not fit with everyone's schedules and undermined the centre as some of the staff were forced to leave their classes unattended. Needless to say, in striving for an objective approach, relationships were not prioritised.

Without the comfort to speak frankly to the evaluators, the staff members were unable to dictate the terms of the evaluation. There was little local ownership and subsequently the information collected only offered a partial view of the centre's work.

The second evaluator on first impression appeared less methodical in his approach. He seemed almost unprofessional fanning himself and complaining about the heat. He stayed at the centre well beyond his set work hours to see the hip-hop group perform and appeared to be making friends with the staff. Overall, his approach appeared far from objective.

However, his methods were much more successful and in line with the local context. He used *storian* techniques and was guided by *kastom* through his Ni-Vanuatu colleague who accompanied and worked with him. While she guided and translated for him, he let interviewees set the time and place of interviews.

The evaluator emphasised the importance of relationships by acknowledging each person and giving her/him the opportunity to be met either independently or in groups. Despite the heat he still dressed formally to indicate his respect for the occasion.

The evaluator recognised his own place in the evaluation, challenging the notion of objectivity. He disclosed his positionalities, acknowledging and sharing who he was and incorporated this into his approach. He offered himself as a person, rather than solely an evaluator. In doing this he acknowledged and challenged power

relationships and aligned with Robert Chambers' (1997) call to destabilise the 'uppers-lowers' relationships that often develop when development professionals interact with local people. This was seen in the way he waited around to see the hip hop group and joked with the staff. His techniques succeeded in making himself less intimidating which allowed others to relax around him. Staff felt comfortable approaching him, had a thorough understanding of the purpose of his visit and could subsequently offer him a better reflection of the realities of the centre.

While his approach involved uncertainty, it allowed those interviewed to steer the conversation and determine what was of importance (O'Loughlin, personal communication, 2014). By sharing ownership of the evaluation he consequently obtained more reflective data. By ceding a certain degree of control, he was able to ensure a more effective evaluation.

**Conclusion**

This paper highlighted the interdependent nature of ownership and contextual factors. It stressed their necessity for increased effectiveness of evaluation. The findings were based on a small group of participants and although their comments were largely congruent, the sample size and selection process mean that this study needs to be considered alongside other research based in this region and field of study.

Accordingly the findings of this study would lend well to future research in this area. Given the identified link between contextual factors of *kastom*, place and language with ownership, future research could examine these factors to reflect on changes in ownership. For example, language is an easily identified indicator of ownership. Therefore, examining its use in evaluations would shed light on changes in ownership. For example, is Bislama the primary language for evaluations? Are local languages used? The presence of *kastom* could be seen in the methods used for evaluation. Are local techniques employed over popular Western participatory methods? In addition, it should be asked how Vanuatu's geography is taken into account as part of the practice. Do meetings and interactions occur 'in place'? Are rural communities consistently participating in evaluations and are their distinct identities and cultures being recognised? Have systems been set up to ensure this? The extent of the employment of these changes would demonstrate movement "away from the imposition of the content and process …

by outsiders*"* (EURODAD, 2001, p. 3) and towards more effective, informative evaluation.

This study contributes to calls for a deeper critical review of evaluation that reaches into, and questions, its epistemological roots. Most evaluations are driven by a positivist epistemology that seeks 'evidence' and 'results'. They adopt techniques widely used throughout the world that measure (and frequently quantify) changes leading towards or away from pre-determined development objectives. There is a strong material element (what is built or provided) and knowledge about such things is deemed to be objective, rigorous and scientific. Those who evaluate are skilled and neutral and the personalities or biases of the evaluators should never impinge on the process. 'Results' are measured, and 'success' is evaluated, against what was planned. Such evaluations are important and necessary in development practice worldwide. They aim to satisfy donor requirements for transparency and accountability for aid funds.

Yet at the local level, such as in villages and organisations in Vanuatu, people may construct meaning and knowledge about development in very different ways (Gegeo and Gegeo-Watson, 2001). What may determine whether a change is good or bad is how people *feel* about it. Thus, it may not be predetermined objectives but the process of change that is important, and it may be as much visceral as material. How are power relationships altered? Are identity, *mana* and custom compromised? Are relationships restructured? Alternative indigenous epistemologies, then, would drive evaluations by seeking knowledge that was constructed in place through a network of social and cultural filters. It is knowledge that is not objective but may be highly subjective. It is 'evidence' that may seem soft or variable or contested or even irrational to outsiders. Yet, it is knowledge that is built and held by the people who have to live with the development that takes place. These people should be the ones who determine ultimate success or failure.

Furthermore, the personality of the evaluator is important: to understand local meanings and interpretations, appropriate communication is vital and that is predicated on effective relationships between evaluators and those being evaluated. Being impersonal, scientific and objective may well undermine the very essence of effective evaluation. If ownership is a key principle for effective development, then evaluation should be driven by the ultimate (local) owners of development. The meanings and knowledge and the meaningful knowledge that

inform evaluations, and the relationships that facilitate evaluations, have local contexts as much as the development projects themselves.

**References**

Bolton, L. (2003). *Unfolding the moon: Enacting women's kastom in Vanuatu*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.

Bongmatur, W. (1994). National cultural policies. In L. Lindstrom & G. M. White (Eds.), *Culture, kastom, tradition: Developing cultural policy in Melanesia*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific.

Buiter, W. H. (2007). 'Country ownership': A term whose time has gone. *Development in Practice, 17*(4/5), 647-652.

Chambers, R. (1983) *Rural development: Putting the last first*. Harlow: Prentice Hall.

Chambers, R. (1997). *Whose reality counts? Putting the frst last*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications.

Creswell, J. W. (2009). *Research design: Qualitative, quantitative, and mixed methods approaches*. New Delhi: SAGE Publications.

Crowley, T. (1995). *A new Bislama dictionary*. Suva: University of the South Pacific.

Daley, L. (2010). Hijacking development futures: "Land development" and reform in Vanuatu. In T. Anderson & G. Lee (Eds.), *In Defence of Melanesian customary land* (pp. 33-39). Sydney: AID/WATCH.

EURODAD. (2001). The changing nature of development co-operation: Building ownership. *Many dollars, any change?* Brussels: European Network on Debt and Development.

Eyben, R. (2004). *Relationships matter for supporting change in favour of poor people* (Vol. 8). Brighton: Institute of Development Studies.

Eyben, R. (2010). Hiding relations: The irony of 'effective aid'. *The European Journal of Development Research, 22*(3), 382-397.

Gay, D. (2004). The emperor's tailor: An assessment of Vanuatu's Comprehensive Reform Program. *Pacific Economic Bulletin, 19*(3), 22-39.

Gay, D. (2014). Development economics in the Vanuatu context: One size doesn't fit all. Retrieved January 29, 2014, from http://emergenteconomics. com/2014/01/18/development-economics-in-the-vanuatu-context-one-size-doesnt-fit-all/

Gegeo, D.W. (1998). Indigenous knowledge and empowerment: rural development examined from within. *The Contemporary Pacific* 10(2), 289-315.

Gegeo, D.W. and Watson-Gegeo, K.A. (2001) "How we know": Kwara'ae rural villagers doing indigenous epistemology, *The Contemporary Pacific* 13(1), 55-88.

Halapua, S. (2000). Talanoa process: The case of Fiji. Retrieved 3 February, 2014, from http://unpan1.un.org/intradoc/groups/public/documents/un/unpan022610.pdf

IMF. (2001). Strengthening country ownership of fund-supported programs. Washington: International Monetary Fund.

Killick, T. (2003). *Aid and the political economy of policy change*. London: Taylor & Francis.

Leandro, J. E., Schafer, H., & Frontini, G. (1999). Towards a more effective conditionality: An operational framework. World Development, 27(2), 285-300.

Ligo, G. (1980). Kastom mo kalja. In B. Weightman & H. Lini (Eds.), *Vanuatu: Twenti wan tingting long taem blong Independens* (pp. 54-65). Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific and South Pacific Social Sciences Association.

Lynch, J., & Crowley, T. (2001). *Languages of Vanuatu: A wew survey and bibliography*. Canberra: ANU Press.

Mancuso Brehm, V. (2001). Promoting effective North-South NGO partnerships: A comparative study of 10 European NGOs. *The International NGO Training and Research Centre Occasional Papers Series*, 1-75. Oxford: INTRAC. Retrieved 19 November 2015 from http://dspace.africaportal.org/jspui/handle/123456789/21784

Nari, R. (2000) 'Comprehensive reform program in the Republic of Vanuatu: A major challenge, through the eyes of a ni-Vanuatu'. Update paper. Canberra: Asia Pacific School of Economics and Management, Australian National University.

OECD. (2005). *Paris Declaration on aid effectiveness*, Paris. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

OECD. (2010). Glossary of key terms in evaluation and results based management. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

OECD. (2011). Aid effectiveness 2005-2010: Progress in implementing the Paris Declaration. Paris: Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development.

Pacific Institute of Public Policy. (2009). Planning, monitoring and evaluation of government systems: A women and child focused perspective baseline diagnosis. Kiribati, Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Port Vila: Pacific Institute of Public Policy.

Regenvanu, S. (1980). Kraon. In B. Weightman & H. Lini (Eds.), *Vanuatu: Twenti wan tingting long team blong Independens* (pp. 66-81). Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies, University of the South Pacific and South Pacific Social Sciences Association.

Rodman, M. (1995). Breathing spaces: Customary land tenure in Vanuatu. In R. G. Ward & E. Kindon (Eds.), *Land, Custom and Practice in the South Pacific* (pp. 65-108) Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Rousseau, B. (2011). Shifting others: Kastom and politics at the Vanuatu Cultural Centre. In J. Taylor & N. Thieberger (Eds.), *Working Together in Vanuatu: Research Histories, Collaborations, Projects and Reflections*. Canberra: ANU E Press.

Segone, M. (2009). Enhancing evidence-based policy-making through country-led monitoring and evaluation systems. In M. Segone (Ed.), *Country-Led Monitoring and Evaluation Systems* Geneva: UNICEF.

Tonkinson, R. (1982). National identity and the problem of kastom in Vanuatu. *Mankind, 13*(4), 306-315.

United Nations Development Programme. (2009). *Handbook on planning, monitoring and evaluating for development results* Retrieved from http://web.undp.org/evaluation/handbook/

Wallace, T., Bornstein, L., & Chapman, J. (2006). *The aid chain: Coercion and commitment in development NGOs*. London: Intermediate Technology Publications Ltd.

Warrick, O. (2009). Ethics and methods in research for community based adaptation: Reflections from rural Vanuatu. In H. Reid (Ed.), *Community-Based Adaptation to Climate Change* (pp. 76-87). London: International Institute for Environment and Development.

World Bank. (1998). *Assessing aid: What works, what doesn't and why*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

World Bank. (2017). 6.11 World development indicators: Aid dependency. Retrieved 29 June, 2018, from http://wdi.worldbank.org/table/6.11#