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RTI Unit **2018 Annual Report**

Right to Information Unit

The Right to Information Unit is established under Part 8 (1) (2) of the RTI Act and has the following functions:

- To provide secretariat support to the Right to Information Steering Committee;
- To serve as a central resource for Right to Information Officers and officers;
- To develop and monitor the National Implementation Plan;
- To train Right to Information Officers and officers;
- To engage with civil society to promote the use and understanding of the Act by the public;
- To develop educational materials for officers and the general public;
- To develop and execute public education activities suited to Vanuatu socio-economic context;
- To develop a National Code of Practice on information and records management;
- To establish and refine reporting and monitoring mechanisms between itself, Agencies or Entities and the office of the Information Commissioner.

Objective: Guarantee the public's Right to Information

Priorities for 2018:

The Right to Information Unit priorities for 2018 were:

- Prepare Government agencies and relevant private entities for RTI phase implementation
- Ensure gazetting of the RTI Act
- Review and ensure approval of RTI Implementation Plan by COM
- Oversee and coordinate the implementation plan
- Prepare and get Second Ministerial Enforcement Order signed
- Sensitise DGs, Directors and senior management officers on relevance of RTI through one-on-one meetings
- Conduct awareness consultation sessions in government agencies, entities and relevant entities
- Tour provincial governments to conduct RTI Consultations
- Provide secretarial support to RTISC

- Prepare and ensure National Records Management Policy is approved by DCO and COM and its official launch
- Sort out UNDP project fund and sign new agreement
- Respond to queries from government agencies, entities and relevant private entities covered under the RTI Act

Achievements in 2018:

The Right to Information Unit achievements for 2018 were:

- **Prime Minister's intervention:** On instruction from the RTISC the RTI Unit was able to get the Prime Minister's intervention through a letter to all DG's Acting DGs, Directors and Acting Directors to nominate their respective RTI contact person to the RTI officers Training. In addition, the Prime Minister has also instructed that the responsibility of the RTI Officer as stipulated in provisions of the RTI Act be inserted into the JD of an existing officer.
 - **RTI Officers Training:** About 35 nominated government officers went through RTI Officers Training in March this year. The training was supported by UN-PRAC through a consultant, Aylair Livingstone who facilitated the training. This was a major step in the preparation stages for the signing of RTI Order and for RTI implementation.
 - **Recruitment of Publication Officer:** All processes for the recruitment of the RTI Publication Officer has been complied with and completed prior to submission to PSC for approval. It is hoped that this new officer begins his job with RTI Unit before the end of the year. This position along with the second position of RTI Education Officer, has issues with funding for their salaries following the introduction of GRT and family Allowances.
 - **RTI Agency Consultation Sessions:** The RTI Unit has conducted 10 RTI Consultations in government agencies, relevant private entities and private entities this year. They were the Ombudsman's Office, Port Vila Municipal Council, Luganville Municipal Council, Ministry and Department of Lands, Department of Correctional Services, Tafea Provincial departmental heads at Isangel, Tanna.
 - **Second Ministerial RTI Enforcement Order signed:** The signing ceremony was to have been the highlight of the international **Right to Know Day** on 28 October but due to the unavailability of the then Acting PM, it later got signed on 28 October. The signing was very well covered by the local, regional and international news media.
 - **International Right To Know Day:** For the first time this year, the RTI Unit took the lead in organising activities to celebrate international RTI day. We got the PSC circular out for public service open day to exercise provisions of RTI Act to anyone who called in on the day to seek information. Members of the public were able to obtain information from government offices on the day as well as journalists who were able to get information they could not get in other days, for news purposes.
 - **Promotion and communication materials:** Three press releases were issued this year – one on the RTI Training, second was on the Prime Minister's directive for DGs and Directors to ensure RTI Officers responsibilities are guarded by their respective agencies, and the third was on launch of the RIM Policy.
- The Unit was also engaged in three separate talk-back-shows on RTI. The first took place earlier this year at Capital FM on the latest developments under the RTI Act, the second at VBTC a week before the signing of the Ministerial Enforcement Order focusing on what it means to be included in the Ministerial Order, and the third

happened at Buzz FM which was a radio talk show discussing the RTI policy in the context of the history of journalism in Vanuatu.

We were also able to utilise UNDP Project funds to purchase a new RTI Pull-up banner and brochures printed on RTI and RIM. These were used to promote RTI during events such as the National Public Service Day and as hand-outs during consultation sessions with agencies.

- **Completion and launch of the National Records and Information Management Policy:** After much consultation with stakeholders, the National Records and Information Management Policy has been completed in July, approved by RTISC and launched on the 9th of November along with other key government documents produced by DSPPAC. The policy will assist the government effort to achieving best practice in its recordkeeping, in support of good governance, accountability and transparency.
- **Public Service Day:** The objectives of RTI was successfully presented RTI during the Public Service Open Day at the Convention Center in May. The Unit had assisted the Administration Officer to set up the PMO booth, decorations etc to make it attractive and to draw attention of by-passers.
- **The RIM Code of Practice:** Records Information Management Code of Practice has been completed and is awaiting approval by RTISC.
- **Sensitisation of DGs and Directors:** The sensitisation strategy for DGs and Directors for this year differs from last year. Last year, we attempted to conduct RTI Consultation by presenting RTI in the power-point format as outlined in the National RTI Implementation Plan but that failed to materialize. This year it is simply a visit and knock on their doors to talk about RTI. DGs and Directors seemed to have other priorities over RTI.
- **Disbursement of RTI Baseline Assessments:** Not all agencies had responded to RTI's numerous calls to fill in the RTI Baseline Assessment Forms.

Challenges in 2018:

The Right to Information Unit had the following challenges in 2018:

- **RTI operation Budget was used up by outstanding incurred for salaries of staff.** Over VT300, 000 from the total VT400, 000 was used to cover up party of the sums incurred for outstanding.
- The challenge of Office Space in 2018 will become a bigger issue when the RTI Publication officer comes in.
- Many DGs and Directors were ignoring our calls for consultation therefore their agencies were not very proactive in opening up access for information.
- Following the National Accessibility Guidelines remains a challenge for web developers in all agencies due to lack of finances.
- **Records and information management:** There are still poor record management systems in many public entities, and a lack of consistency across agencies in records and information management. Many public agencies do not recognise the value of their information as an asset to be recorded, preserved and disseminated.
- Creation of web portal that can accommodate the complex process of information requests and access provided for in the RTI legislation and track requests to monitor compliance
- Establishment of the Office of Information Commissioner

Lessons Learned for 2019:

Looking forward to 2019, the Right to Information Unit will be taking the following steps to meet its objectives:

- This year we need to continue to be aggressive on how we entice senior officials to appreciate RTI and its purpose. The Prime Minister's intervention through a letter to FGs and Directors has boosted efforts to get the most senior government officials to include RTI as a top priority.
Also there remains the need to call on Public bodies to release official information proactively and in a consistent, understandable, timely and accessible manner. This can be accomplished with the introduction of a proactive communication strategy.
- Some agencies are still without a websites, or if they did, were not updated regularly. When they come to appreciate RTI, they will begin to either create or update and properly manage and maintain it.
- With the introduction of the new National Records and Information Management Policy this year, it is hoped that all government agencies and institutions covered under the Act, particularly those that have not valued the importance of proper records keeping will now come to appreciate it. More workshops will be conducted in these areas.
- With limited to no funds, RTI Unit would have to continue to work closer with NGO's to finance RTI Activities. This year two applications were submitted through MAV but failed. We will continue to look around for more opportunities.
- Shortage of staff has been an issue. We need to recruit as soon as we can to be able to share the tasks and responsibilities towards achieving a successful implementation of RTI in all government agencies.
- Establishment of Information Commissioner is very necessary. We need to raise this again with the MJSW.
- To get as many RTI Officers possible, both in urban and sub-urban areas, trained in their roles.