

WTO accession must involve community discussion, says Ambassador

Vanuatu's Ambassador to the European Union Roy Mickey Joy says there's a need for widespread community consultation before Vanuatu joins the World Trade Organisation (WTO). 

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(By Nic Maclellan in Port Vila) Vanuatu's Ambassador to the European Union Roy Mickey Joy says there's a need for widespread community consultation before Vanuatu joins the World Trade Organisation (WTO). We will talk to civil society before the Vanuatu government makes a decision on accession, said Ambassador Joy. Government should engage with civil society before it makes major policy decisions, he added. I believe that whatever's on the table, we'll all have the opportunity to debate the WTO accession package. Roy Mickey Joy was speaking at a forum on Vanuatu's Place in the World organised by the Pacific Institute of Public Policy (PIPP), a Vila-based policy think tank. The public forum, at the Malvatumauri chiefs nakamal in Port Vila, was the sixth in a series organised to mark Vanuatu's 30th anniversary of independence, with other meetings covering land, youth and Vanuatu's role in the region. Later this year, the Vanuatu government will begin consideration of a WTO accession package, to formalise membership of the global trade organisation. Vanuatu first began the accession process in July 1995 with the establishment of a WTO Working Group, but suspended its application in October 2001. At the time, there were criticisms that the accession process was too burdensome for the least-developed country (LDC). Vanuatu is scheduled to graduate from LDC status in 2013, and will lose trade concessions and some development assistance provided to the world's poorest nations. Ambassador Joy described himself as an advocate of WTO accession, arguing that the issue requires considerable attention, as all the bigger countries in the region and all other members of the Melanesian Spearhead Group are WTO members. He stated: "This is not about exports" it's about establishing a credible system that will encourage investors to come. The issue of trade diplomacy has overtaken international aid policy. The two hour panel discussion, broadcast live to the nation in Bislama by Vanuatu's Broadcasting and Television Corporation (VBTC), featured a range of speakers including Vanuatu's UN Ambassador and former Prime Minister Donald Kalpokas, Reserve Bank Governor Odo Tevi, former Fiji foreign minister Kaliopate Tavola, the ADB's Nancy Wells and community microfinance finance activist John Salong. While covering a range of topics "including West Papua, rural development and leadership" there was extensive debate from panelists and audience on trade issues related to the WTO, the Melanesian Spearhead Group Trade Agreement and the ongoing regional PACER-Plus negotiations. There were lively questions and interventions from the 200-strong audience, who raised concerns over the impact of international trade deals on TRIPS and intellectual property, land leases for tourism on the main island of Efate, and potential threats to Vanuatu's manufacturing sector from food imports from Fiji, Australia and New Zealand. Panelist

John Salong highlighted the existing strengths of Vanuatu's culture and land tenure system and argued that regional trade agreements were irrelevant to Vanuatu: We have had many development initiatives " on tourism, creating an international finance centre or expanding agricultural production " that existed without WTO membership or trade treaties like PACER-Plus. □ As Pacific leaders meet this week in Port Vila for the Pacific Islands Forum, the issue of engaging non-state actors □ in trade debates is a concern for the regional organisation. At this year's Forum, private sector organisations will hold a dialogue meeting and make a short presentation to the official plenary session of Forum leaders on Wednesday. Church and community organisations do not have the same access. Separate from the official summit, representatives from Pacific community groups will meet over the next three days for a Pacific Civil Society Assembly on Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and the Millennium Development Goals.

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