

ISLAND TO GLOBAL: VANUATU EXPORT ACCELERATION PROGRAM

INTRODUCTION

The **Island to Global** program is seeking to open new horizons for Ni-Vanuatu businesses, helping them take confident steps toward international markets.

Funded by the Australian Government and implemented by **V-Lab** in collaboration with **PACER Plus**, the 15 months initiative was launched on **September 26, 2024**, during the Vanuatu Made Trade Show. Its mission is simple but ambitious: to accompany five local enterprises on their export journey through a tailored package of training, certification, coaching, and market exposure.

At its core, Island to Global focuses on building the capacity of local businesses to become export-ready. Participants have received hands-on training in areas such as export certification, customs and biosecurity compliance, financial management, marketing, and digital transformation. Delivered by local experts and institutional partners including Biosecurity, Customs, PACER Plus, and Quality Solutions these sessions have strengthened business practices, improved customer engagement, and enhanced record-keeping and production systems.

The program emphasizes one key principle: before going global, businesses must first succeed locally. By reinforcing domestic operations, participants have improved their financial stability, built stronger brands, and gained the consistency needed to compete on the world stage.

Through participation in trade events such as the **Naturally Good Expo** in Australia and the **Pasifika Festival** in New Zealand, Vanuatu's entrepreneurs have also been able to connect with distributors, buyers, and partners transforming learning into real opportunities.

As the program unfolded, it became clear that the journey to export success is filled with both opportunities and challenges. Along the way, Island to Global uncovered valuable lessons that are helping shape the future of export development in Vanuatu.



Island to Global Launching - September 26, 2024,



CHALLENGES & LESSONS LEARNED



Island to Global Participant - *Natural Taste of Vanuatu*
Owner: Juliana Juliano

Export Preparedness and Export Readiness

One of the key insights from the Island to Global program has been the distinction between export preparedness and export readiness two related but fundamentally different stages that require specific types of support and intervention.

Being export prepared generally means having a strong and well-structured business that operates successfully in the domestic market. Export readiness, on the other hand, implies that the right product, market, and people are in place to expand internationally. The program revealed that many local businesses still need to strengthen their operations, skills, and resources before making this transition.

Exporting also demands a broad range of technical capabilities and financial resources, which can be overwhelming for most small and medium enterprises (SMEs). Many SMEs in Vanuatu lack access to capital, knowledge, and infrastructure required to comply with international market standards. This experience highlighted the need for ongoing mentorship, tailored training, and stronger coordination between government and private sector partners to help bridge these capacity gaps.

Less Is More: Focusing on High-Potential Businesses

Another important lesson from Island to Global has been the value of focus. When it comes to export support, less is more. Rather than spreading resources too thinly across many small enterprises, the program found greater impact by concentrating on a smaller number of high-potential businesses and investing deeply in their growth.

Exporting is a demanding, long-term journey that requires not just opportunity, but genuine commitment. The experience showed that real progress happens when energy and resources go to those entrepreneurs who are fully ready to commit who have the determination, discipline, and vision to sustain the export journey. By focusing on these committed businesses and giving them intensive, tailored support, programs like Island to Global can generate stronger success stories and create models for others to follow.



Island to Global Participants Training session with the *Vanuatu Department of Customs*



Island to Global Participation in the *Naturally Good Trade Show* in Sydney Australia

Bridging the Missing Links

One other lessons from Island to Global is that Vanuatu's export ecosystem still has two critical missing links one at home, and one abroad.

The first gap lies within Vanuatu itself. For many export-oriented products, it is difficult and often impossible to source all the necessary raw materials from a single supplier or island. Exporters frequently face challenges in securing consistent quantities, especially when dealing with agricultural products. What's missing is a dedicated intermediary a company or individual who can act as a connector between producers and suppliers, aggregating products from across islands to ensure stable and reliable supply. This "middle link" would play a vital role in turning fragmented local production into export-ready volumes.

The second missing link lies beyond Vanuatu's borders. Once products are ready to export, local businesses need people on the ground in destination markets trade attachés, commissioners, or representatives who understand local consumer preferences, regulations, and distribution networks. These intermediaries can open doors, connect Vanuatu's exporters with buyers, and help navigate the often-complex realities of international trade.

Addressing both of these gaps local aggregation at home and active market connection abroad will be key to building a more complete and effective export ecosystem for Ni-Vanuatu businesses.



Sequencing: Products, Markets, and Buyers

The Island to Global program also highlighted the importance of proper sequencing when approaching export markets. Many SMEs had limited experience in researching overseas markets, understanding regulatory requirements, or identifying potential buyers. Some participants attempted to target markets before establishing key business relationships or confirming product-market fit.

A major lesson learned is that export success depends on a clear progression: first building internal business capacity, then developing strong relationships with potential buyers, and finally targeting specific markets. Prioritizing readiness, relationships, and market knowledge in that order helps SMEs make the most of their limited time, capacity, and resources greatly increasing their chances of export success.

Island to Global - Green Forest Oils products - Nangai and Tamanu Oil - Owner: Juliana Juliano

Scale and Reliability

Consistency in production and supply emerged as another significant challenge. Many participants found it difficult to produce and deliver products at the scale and frequency required by international buyers. Reliability is a critical factor in export markets, where customers expect predictable delivery and consistent quality.

The program also found that most SMEs lack access to accurate market information such as typical export volumes, minimum order quantities, and price benchmarks that would allow them to plan production effectively. Improving access to this information through market research and building production reliability are key steps for Vanuatu's SMEs to strengthen their export readiness and competitiveness.



Island to Global - Green Forest Oils - Selection and Production of Tamanu Nuts



Island to Global - Green Forest Oils - Selling of Tamanu and Nangai Oils at the Pasifika Festival at Auckland New Zealand

Financial Resources and Working Capital

Limited financial resources and working capital were major barriers to export engagement. While many Vanuatu businesses perform well domestically, few have sufficient liquidity to cover the significant operational expenses related to export such as packaging, certification, communication, and logistics preparation.

Because domestic production is often small-scale and demand-driven, few businesses generate the surplus cash flow needed to support export-oriented activities. The Island to Global experience revealed that export support programs must address not only large costs (such as testing, certification, and labeling) but also these day-to-day operational expenses. Access to adequate working capital is vital for SMEs to maintain operations and participate effectively in export markets.

Collaboration for Greater Impact

One of the key strengths of the Island to Global program has been its collaborative approach. The initiative brought together both government and non-government partners, as well as international programs and partners.

This partnership model ensured that participating businesses received well-rounded, complementary support, and that efforts remained aligned toward a shared vision: **making Ni-Vanuatu products more competitive on the global stage.**



Island to Global Board - Meeting with the Government and Private Sector



Island to Global - V-LAB during the MOU signing with Department of Trade and Industry - 26 September 2024

CONCLUSION: TOWARDS A NEW PARADIGM FOR EXPORT GROWTH

The experience of Island to Global has shown that unlocking Vanuatu's export potential requires more than isolated training or one-off initiatives it calls for a new way of thinking. A new system.

One that rethinks how we support our producers, ensuring they are not left to navigate the complexities of export alone. One that brings government agencies, private sector partners, and development actors to work hand in hand, guided by a shared vision. One that is driven not by supply, but by market demand where businesses produce with a clear understanding of what international buyers want and how to deliver it.

This new approach must also recognize that less is more. Rather than spreading resources thinly across many enterprises, the focus should be on high-potential businesses those with the drive, discipline, and readiness to make the export journey a success.

Finally, support must be integrated. Training, certification, financing, logistics, and market access should not operate in silos but as parts of a coordinated system that moves businesses steadily from local strength to global reach.

If Vanuatu is to truly position its entrepreneurs and producers on the world stage, this is the shift that must happen from fragmented efforts to a cohesive, market-driven ecosystem that empowers Ni-Vanuatu businesses to grow, compete, and thrive internationally.

“With focus, collaboration, and a market-driven vision, Vanuatu’s entrepreneurs are ready to turn potential into global success.”