

Working for Human Rights, Climate Change, the 2030 Agenda, and Gender Equality

An Interview with Vanuatu's Ambassador to the United Nations: Odo Tevi

by

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Vanuatu's UN Ambassador, Odo Tevi

His Excellency Odo Tevi is Vanuatu's Permanent Representative and Ambassador to the United Nations, and has been serving since June 2014. He was interviewed in his office at 800 Second Avenue in Manhattan, just west of the United Nations Headquarters, on 28 September 2015. The interviewers were Lew Toulmin and Sophie Hollingsworth.

Q: What is your background?

A: My family is from the north end of Pentecost Island. I studied economics in Papua New Guinea and the UK. I became a government economist, and eventually the Governor of the Reserve Bank of Vanuatu for 10 years. I was then a consultant to the Melanesian Spearhead Group, Asian Development Bank and World Bank, and I currently serve on the Board of the Pacific Institute of Public Policy. The government of Vanuatu asked if I would be interested in a three year contract as Vanuatu's Ambassador to the UN. I was honored to accept.

Q: You have been Vanuatu's ambassador to the UN for just over a year now -- what have you learned in this time?

A: When I first came to the UN, I was fortunate to take up a very senior position, since Ambassador to the UN is usually the pinnacle of any diplomatic service. I decided to spend my first six months listening to others, observing, and learning how things worked here, as a sort of student of diplomacy. Then I became quite active in taking positions, serving as chair of various committees, and making Vanuatu more visible to the global community.

Q: What are the major issues you focus on?

A: I am active in committees on climate change and the environment, oceans and seas, finance, the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals agenda, human rights and gender issues. I am involved in discussions on UN reforms, and I helped Vanuatu establish diplomatic relations with other countries such as with Latvia. My involvement is usually focused on areas that are of interest to Vanuatu. In February for a standard one-month rotation I was honoured to chair the UN Asia-

Pacific Group, which includes 55 nations with a population of over four billion people. In this role, I had the opportunity to discuss with the Arab States Group their position on nuclear matters. Furthermore I was honoured to chair the global committee on the UN Charter, the constitution of the UN.

Q: What major votes were you involved in?

A: I was proud to vote against female genital mutilation, and vote for all forms of human rights, including gender equality and opportunities for marginalized individuals. I supported small island states and land-locked countries that have special development cases, and I ensured that their concerns are highly featured in UN policy and work. I voted for the UN Resolution that stated that members of the Bahá'í and other non-Muslim faiths should not be persecuted or denied rights in Iran. For all my votes, the Vanuatu Office here in New York has to seek guidance from the Vanuatu Government, notably the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

Q: What methods do you favor?

A: I believe in dialogue and cooperation, and also in using “cultural diplomacy” and “soft power” to understand other people’s cultures and goals, rather than “hard power” military or sanctions options. I work closely with a block of 4-5 Ambassadors in different groups of “Global Friends” with similar interests to lobby, issue statements, and influence Resolutions on cross-cutting issues. I also attend meetings with various groups such as Pacific Ambassadors, the Least Developed Countries (LDC) Group, and the Alliance of Small Island States.



A huge disabled gun outside the UN building, symbolizing its mission of peace

Q: We thought your office was located in the Vanuatu Shipping Registry, not here. What happened?

A: Yes, our office was in the Registry near Wall Street for many years, but that was not really convenient to the UN Headquarters. So we moved to this one-room office space on the Commonwealth Floor of an office building near the UN. This is also a financially smart move because the Commonwealth Secretariat assists in subsidizing the operational expenses of the office. We are next door to a number of other small Commonwealth countries, like Dominica and Kiribati.

Q: What is a typical work day in your life?

A: I get up early and commute from my apartment on Roosevelt Island, next to Manhattan, using an aerial tramway – very unusual. Then I come to the office briefly to check my schedule, and walk a block to the UN Headquarters building. There I attend meetings all day and sometimes late into the night. In complex negotiations on some important issues such as the 2030 Agenda, I worked until three in the morning! I rarely leave the Headquarters, and I usually eat in the UN cafeteria or café. I often work for some time on weekends, too.

Q: Is your family here with you?

A: Yes. My wife, Sharon, and our three children Alicia, 9, Thierry, 7, and Andrea, 5, all live with me in our apartment. They attend school here, and their pronunciation is now starting to sound rather American!

Q: Were you recently able to hear Pope Francis address the UN?

A: Yes. That was an historic occasion, and I was privileged to be in the General Assembly Hall to hear his speech. I was particularly pleased by the Pope's statement that, "We all become stronger when we think about the least of those among us, the marginalized and the poor." I completely agree with his focus on our moral responsibility.

Q: Did you recently hear US President Obama speak at the UN General Assembly?

A: Yes, he was very eloquent. I share many ideas with him. We both believe in freedom, individual rights, religious freedom, societal progress, and gender equality. Most of these values are already embedded in the Vanuatu Constitution.

Q: Is Vanuatu valued by the UN and other UN members?

A: Yes. The UN does a good job of supporting vulnerable societies, less developed countries and small island developing states, including Vanuatu. And our contributions to UN debates and resolutions are much valued by other UN members. When Vanuatu was struck by Cyclone Pam in March this year, the UN and Vanuatu Mission Office held a meeting with most of the UN membership. As a result, a lot of assistance was sent to Vanuatu. For example, the United Arab Emirates and Botswana donated over VT70 million and VT10 million respectively. Some of the assistance came through my office and was transferred to the Reserve Bank of Vanuatu.

Q: Based on your UN experience, what message do you have for the youth of Vanuatu?

A: The future is all about making use of opportunities that are ahead of you. Talent can be found everywhere, but opportunities are limited. At the UN and in Vanuatu we need to create opportunities for our youth to make use of their talents. And our youth need to be active in getting educated, and taking advantage of opportunities that do arise. The world is getting smaller, and fortunately globalization can create more opportunities for our youth.

Q: Do you like New York?

A: I love New York. It's a very exciting city, very multi-cultural with a bit of craziness thrown in. It's quite expensive, though. When I was a kid I always told my young friends that I wanted to live for a while in New York and London. So this is a dream job in many ways. I actually turned down a much more lucrative consultancy position with the Asian Development Bank in order to serve Vanuatu here at the United Nations.

Q: What was your most memorable moment at the UN?

A: Holding the chairmanship of the committee on revitalizing and strengthening the UN Charter -- which is the Constitution of the UN. The committee discussed important matters such as possibly adding new clauses to the Charter, and how to prevent unilateral actions by members which would violate the Charter. These large meetings sometimes got quite heated, unlike most meetings in Vanuatu. At one point North Korea was demanding that I throw South Korea out of the room, and at another point the Argentines wanted the British to be excluded. Since I believe in free discussion, I always ruled that everyone could stay and make their statements.

Q: Can Vanuatu ever obtain a seat on the powerful UN Security Council?

A: Yes and no. Vanuatu and any nation can apply for one of the rotating seats, and in fact the Solomon Islands has applied. But to be selected the country delegation must have the capacity to

serve. Since the UNSC has so many important issues, you need a substantial staff that can respond 24/7/365, and attend numerous meetings every day.

Q: Can Vanuatu participate in the UN in other ways, besides membership?

A: Yes. We recently provided 17 peacekeepers from the Vanuatu Police and Mobile Force to the UN operation in the Ivory Coast. This is just one example of our peacekeeping activities. Also we need more ni-Vanuatu to work in the UN.

Q: How large is your office staff, compared to others?

A: The USA has over 300 staff members in its UN Mission, including one staffer devoted entirely to Twitter and Facebook! Japan has over 100 staff members, and Fiji has 6 or 7 staffers. Our Vanuatu delegation is just me and my ni-Vanuatu secretary. We also have a six-month German intern who just started. We used to have more staff, but now must do our work with limited resources. So in this environment I have to learn fast and also prioritize our work. It is the most challenging job I have ever had, with so many issues to learn and deal with.

Q: Are you the Vanuatu Ambassador to the United States, as well as to the UN?

A: No, although the Vanuatu Government is thinking about having me accredited to the US one day. This will entirely depend on the Government. We really need visibility in Washington, DC to look after our interests there, with the US government, the World Bank, the Export-Import Bank, and other major institutions located there.

Q: How has Cyclone Pam affected your work?

A: Immediately after Cyclone Pam, I focused on re-construction for about 90% of my time. I met with UN agencies, various bodies and development partners, discussing possible support. I also had the opportunity to speak live on New York Television -- discussing the impacts of Cyclone Pam, and how climate change has made vulnerable societies even more vulnerable. Furthermore Vanuatu was going to "graduate" from the Least Developed Country status (LDC). With the significant impact of Cyclone Pam, we may have to delay graduation. Fortunately the Vanuatu Council of Ministers made a decision that we delay graduation for some time. So we have drafted a UN Resolution for the delay, and hopefully this year during the 70th session of the UN General Assembly the Resolution will be passed. We have submitted the Resolution to the Association of Small Island States for their review, and it will next go to the G77 group to seek their support. When we have gathered enough support, then I shall seek endorsement on the floor of the General Assembly. We are optimistic that it will pass, since similar disaster Resolutions were passed for Samoa and the Maldives after they were hit by cyclones.

Q: What is the key challenge for Vanuatu moving forward?

A: Resilience. We need resilience to build our economy in such areas as infrastructure and housing. This is particularly true now in the face of climate change and more numerous life threatening natural disasters. Vanuatu society is urbanizing rapidly, so some of the traditional forms of resilience may no longer apply to many of our people, though they are still important. In terms of our role in global affairs, we need to have more visibility at the UN, especially when Vanuatu is expected to lead on several key issues that affect the region. This must also be accompanied with sufficient resources.

Q: Recently Vanuatu won a UN award for “information and communications technologies (ICTs) in sustainable development.” Can you comment?

A: Yes, our Prime Minister Hon. Sato Kilman accepted the award here in New York from the Secretary-General of the UN’s International Telecommunication Union (ITU). I was pleased to be present. ICTs are key in transforming our country’s economy and improving resilience. With good communications, life can change for the better, especially for the people in our outer islands, some of whom have had to walk five kilometers to get a usable cell phone signal. ICTs can provide good cyclone and weather warnings, and can expand and disseminate information in sectors such as education. I believe this award will provide us an incentive to do more work in ICTs and also in other areas such as education and health. I congratulate the Government for the ICT award and the collective efforts of the ICT sector that has made this happen. Also, I congratulate the quiet achievers such as Fred Samuel and many others who made this happen.

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Lew Toulmin has served for three years as an advisor to the Chief Information Officer in the Vanuatu Prime Minister’s Office, and Sophie Hollingsworth is a certified master of yachts living in New York, with a background in environmental issues and public health. Both are members of The Explorers Club, located in New York, whose members have been first to the North and South Poles, the Moon, the deepest ocean trenches, and the summit of Mt. Everest.

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