

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Maewo Community Action Group Fundraising for Solar Powered, Critical Communications Link

May 2, 2016 - GWATIAWOL VILLAGE, MAEWO ISLAND, Republic of Vanuatu:

For the first time in Vanuatu, remote villagers without access to mobile network have taken matters into their own hands by fundraising to build the communities' own mobile network tower. The charitable association is called the **Maewo Telecommunications Committee (Inc.)**, or MTC, and was officially registered with the Vanuatu Financial Services Commission on the 5th of April 2016.

While the MTC must raise funds for the tower on their own, the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer (OGCIO), the Telecommunications and Radiocommunications Regulator (TRR), and the Ministry of Health (MoH) have expressed support of the project to make sure health clinics on Maewo will have access to the Government Broadband Network (GBN), once the tower is completed. In addition, Telsat Broadband has agreed to let MTC purchase materials to build the tower at cost, and will be providing on the job training to one of Maewo's certified electrical engineers in order to maintain the system.

This work is one small part of a larger initiative called the Vanuatu Inter-Island Telemedicine and Learning Network (VITAL), which is launching a pilot in conjunction with MTC and enables a pathway for communication between all levels of care from the aid post to Lolowai Provincial Hospital and through to Luganville's Northern District Hospital on Santo Island. Telemedicine, a type of healthcare service using voice, video, and other Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), lets doctors connect and diagnose ailments of patients on outer islands without the need for travel, unless surgery or another hands on medical intervention is needed.

MTC Chairman and former President of Penama Province, Ezekiel Boelum, stated, "We have petitioned the government and asked network providers for years. In 2003, TVL introduced mobile phone service to rural communities in Maewo and in 2007 Digicel service was added; however, the Eastern side, especially Naviso Village, never received network service. We started this committee to improve health, education, information sharing and communication and to lift up the standard of living in our communities through mobile network and Internet."

Since broadband Internet access is almost non-existent on Maewo, schools, government offices and health facilities are currently unable to connect electronically with government offices. Bridging these connections with reliable telecommunications will improve educational opportunities, monitoring of government services, and health outcomes. Also, it

will help to end needless deaths and to advance long-term economic, social and community development prospects. The MTC has expressed the desire to help other underserved islands with grant applications, construction plans, and lessons learned for towers once the project is finished.

The MTC is looking for support from the Ni-Vanuatu and expatriate communities through an online crowdfunding effort, which will be launched soon. In addition, they will be selling food and handicrafts at ICT Days on May 17th and 18th at the National Convention Centre. If you would like to help or to learn more, please visit <http://www.facebook.com/MaewoWifi>.