

2007 Achievers, Innovators and other PNG Role Models

The Christmas party season is in full swing and airports are filling with people willing to jostle for a seat to their home provinces. What often astonishes visitors to PNG is that despite the apparent capacity and vitality in this country development has not been more vibrant or widespread over the years.

The 2007 Private Sector Survey undertaken by the INA confirmed human factors as the major constraints to business and investment, particularly law and order problems, corruption, inadequate transport, communications and electricity services, plus red-tape. Tackling these problems is not the responsibility of government alone, but of the whole community, including private sector, working in cooperation with authorities, but Government must take a leadership role. Hopefully, Government has learnt one of 2007's major lessons, namely that genuine competition will improve delivery and reduce cost of services (notably with mobile phones).

The provision of reliable public goods and services (notably transport, police, justice, education and health) is largely a government responsibility. Basic utilities, notably water supply, may be public or private sector functions, whilst commercial services such as aviation, shipping, tele-communications and even electricity are largely private sector activities, requiring competition and some oversight to ensure coverage, affordability and reliability. These are critical for investment by other businesses, and for the wider community. This doesn't mean prices should be standard, as (for non-essential services) they should reflect cost of provision; possible higher prices in a remote location are better than no service.

Traditionally PNG has provided a valuable social safety net, including land access. These customary benefits are partially breaking down, with increased urbanisation, population pressures, some resource grabbing, leaving growing numbers of street kids and orphans, particularly with parents dying from HIV/AIDS and other prevalent ailments. PNG societies imposed various obligations, with re-distribution and reciprocity expected, rather than accumulation. This imposes considerable burdens on households and provides a major disincentive to invest capital, time and effort, into business or improving one's own family's lot, or putting one's head 'above the parapet'. Households or small businesses are also reluctant to pay taxes to the modern State, when households already carry extensive social responsibilities and realising widespread misuse of these public funds.

Many find this levelling pressure so great they either discontinue trying to improve their lives or businesses, or decide the only way to progress is by leaving their own community, possibly even overseas. With growing globalisation more Papua New Guineans with professional skills are acquiring jobs or skills overseas. Most are eager to return in due course, but an increasing number see their professional careers overseas. There is nothing inherently wrong with this (at least after recovery of the cost of publicly funded professional education), and most contribute back home with remittances sent to relatives, but it does impose a burden on the economy and community if adequate replacement skills are not readily available and where restrictions are retained on open recruitment of skilled replacements.

For the foreseeable future it will remain impossible for PNG to pay public sector salaries comparable to developed countries (like Australia). PNG professionals should recognise the limited capacity to pay, particularly considering the considerable expanded services actually needed, for PNG to achieve universal primary education for a start. To retain local public sector professionals, the State must maintain improved living and working conditions and facilities, fostering professional development and work satisfaction. This includes competitive and reliable communications, including mobile phone use for rural banking.

The PNG is alive with energy and talent, providing the country's prospects. There prospects are dependent upon removing impediments, including empowering the young with suitable skills and ensuring reliable infrastructure and communalisations in a safe and harmonious society. PNG has many fine role models in all walks of life from: - all regions, business, politics, public service, community leaders, women, health workers and teachers. Whilst widespread corruption prevails in the public sector, leading to non-delivery of goods and services, there are also many dedicated public servants and members of civil society committed to maintaining professional standards and serving local communities.

At the end of year it is appropriate to mention a few good role models, and encourage readers to provide newspapers with the names of other exceptional performers, who make big contributions, particularly at local levels.

Despite horrendous cases of shameless abuse against women and children particularly from towns and some provinces, women have achieved some recognition in 2007. They may not be Acting Prime Minister (as in Australia), but Mary Kini and the Kup Women for Peace have gained deserved international recognition for their efforts in halting long-standing tribal conflict in Chimbu. Also from Chimbu, Pauline Keena, a lawyer won a women's award for community service. There are innumerable men and women of all ages actively involved, usually with little remuneration, in community and social work, especially with churches and NGOs; for example, YWCA and Peace Melanesia, striving to provide Southern Highlands a better future, than its wasted years of gun rule and financial abuse. There are the energetic Rhoda Moses, Anne Kerepia, Catherine Natera, Sisa Kini and Naomi Yupae with Family Voice in Goroka, Ume Wainetti and team at FSVAC. Annie Kajir, Dr Jane Mogina, Sangion Tiu, Primas Kapi and Miriam Supuma and many other women in the advocacy and environmental fields. In the field of politics and community Dame Carol Kidu has just been named Pacific Person of the Year in recognition of her tireless efforts, whilst Bougainville has been setting an example for the National Parliament and other provinces with three notable elected women members, with Magdalene Toroamsi.

In the public service, despite continued jealousy of women managers, leaving senior officers wastefully displaced, there have been several new permanent or acting appointments of dedicated and able women, with Betty Palaso at IRC, Hitelai Polume cleaning up a backlog at the Attorney-General's and Phoebe Kibikibi recently appointed as an Ombudsman. They join other highly respected women, like Winifred Kiap and Jean Kekedo in the senior public sector ranks, and former senior staff like Felecia Dobunaba and Winifred Kamit, now in a leading private sector role. In the provinces there are innumerable notable women, such as Madang's Provincial and District Treasurers who spring to mind.

Many more women campaigned in 2007's National Elections, but the system is still not geared to giving the break that the country needs, and the call for the 19 Provincial seats to be provided for women, through the election process, seems the most suitable for 2012. Whilst on the subject of addressing family and sexual violence, the Police Commissioner deserves special commendation for addressing the issue frankly, though must follow up rigorously.

In PNG's idiosyncratic politics it's not simply the winners who merit recognition and praise. Sir Rabbie and Biri Kimisopa are two whose presence will be missed from the House, but have much to contribute outside, whilst many losing candidates can return to critical posts in the private or public sector, as with Dr Tom Kukang in coffee research or Rufina Peter also in agriculture. Of the younger winners, Sam Abal is a politician of heart and integrity who stands out, whilst Powes Parkop's winning of the NCD seat demonstrated a wider demand for integrity and public interest to prevail.

In agriculture newer ventures like "Direct Trading" Coffee Pacifica with John Yogio is making commendable market inroads, along with Jerry Kapka's Kongo Coffee. Agro-nucleus enterprises, like Teresa Arek's Pacific Spices, and the Puritau's Paradise Spices, marketing spices and now galip (canarium) domestically and overseas, are innovative. The stalwarts in the industry, like Alele in vegetables, Brown Bai, Ricky Mitio with CIC, Tiri Kuimbakul, Joe Ganubella with pineapples, Pascal Feria in Madang, Dr Miok Komolong and Hoseah Tubarat, should be commended, along with the larger established agricultural firms currently expanding operations.

In tourism, innovative new locally-owned eco-tourism facilities, like the beautiful community-owned Kumul Lodge in Enga run by Paul and Kim Arut and Waren Dimpole's Ulumani Treetops in Milne Bay complement established hotels and lodges, including Betty Higgin's at the foot of Mr Wilhelm, surfing, bird watching (e.g. Sam Kepuknai in Western Province) and existing dive operations.

Many in business, like Henry Kila, Mel Togolo and Richard Kassman, go that extra mile, throwing in wider community responsibilities, like the INA or TIPNG Councils, and a wide range of church, health, educational and other community organisations. Another is Antony Smare, organising the Oro relief fund, David Toua, who's just been become another Papua New Guinean appointed to senior management overseas, joining engineers, senior pilots, like Granger Narara, doctors, computer scientists, and even an employee of NASA space agency, working in the US, Europe, Asia and Australia, with various public, private and international organisations, like Blaise Kuemlangan with FAO in Rome, Dr Ila Temu briefly running an overseas mine and Isikele Taureka with Chevron,

Good journalists play a critical role as public watchdogs. They're not well remunerated, and generally don't deserve the lambasting given by politicians, who dislike exposure or criticism. Oseah Philemon and Anna Solomon are two of the most distinguished PNG journalists, but NBC's Joseph Ealadonah was appointed PINA chairman this year, Gorethy Kenneth was recently awarded by News Corp's Rupert Murdoch, and other dedicated journalists include Alex Rheeney, Sandra Tuga and colleagues at NBC, the passionate Frank Kolma, ever present Firmin Nanol

(following in Dulciana Somare's footsteps at ABC), Moale Rivu launching his new venture 'Bisnis PNG', not forgetting Justin Kili and Peter Aitsi at the Media Council and the increasingly professional independent FM stations. Long may the good scribes not all be lost to Ministries and big business!

I won't even start with those in the schools, public or church-run universities or the public health facilities around the country, where there's immense talent and role models, whether doctors, teachers, nurses, plus justice and village officials. Our role models include the many constructive community leaders contributing to safer villages and settlements, may their positive contributions be recognised and emulated. Everyone has a role to play, large or small, whether widely recognised or not, in contributing to making PNG a safe and harmonious place to life and work. Merry Christmas and a happy and productive 2008.

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