

Participation and Accountability

Business is booming in our cities. Those in buoyant industries are doing well. Government is relishing increased revenue and hosting incessant celebratory parties. Yet public services and state-owned enterprises are more ineffective than ever. In most rural areas there's little to celebrate, except Digicel's revolution. Great promises have been made for District funding, but capacity is limited with little practical materialising. PNG cannot afford to waste the increased funding available for infrastructure and services.

Handout mentality undermines development. Headlines regularly announce "gifts" by MPs! Funds are called "discretionary". In reality they're all public funds, for use for genuine local priorities in accordance with set procedures. They belong neither to MPs nor bureaucrats and must be managed accountably. These funds were widely abused, even before the recent increase in District funding. "Demystifying" the budget and establishing genuine community awareness and 'ownership' of the budgetary process and oversight of expenditure and appointments are essential if there are to be meaningful improvements, especially with this commodity boom probably be short-lived.

Thirty two years ago PNG secured Independence, led by idealistic young leaders from across the country. They shared a vision, despite their differences. Some of the population was ambivalent and a significant portion even opposed independence at that time, concerned that control would merely shift to a new local elite. Poor economic performance over many years since and government incapacity have left many disillusioned.

There was a perception at Independence that mistakes and conflicts of other developing countries could be avoided here. As the most culturally diverse nation on earth PNG would invariably experience stresses in building nationhood. However, with its enlightened Constitution and embracive institutions, PNG has remained remarkably cohesive, despite some frictions and rivalries. It has avoided domination by one group, prevalent in some African countries, (although women remain subjugated). Whilst rapid urban migration and settlement have stretched nerves and capacity, there has been conciliation and tolerance between ethnic groups.

Regional, tribal, ethnic and migration concerns, nevertheless, will require sensitivity and careful planning. Discontent prevails over top appointments apparently being filled disproportionately from one region and the flush of small businesses and labour from overseas. The community is increasingly highlighting wider failures and solutions, but political leadership apparently lags behind, reluctant to acknowledge, let alone tackle, many of the nation's pressing governance, capacity and social problems.

The recent National Development Forum (NDF) highlighted some of these issues starkly, demonstrating a remarkably shared view by participants from civil society, public servants and private sector. CIMC is a critical mechanism for interaction over a range of

economic and social issues of wide public concern. The NDF, held annually at Parliament brings the culmination of a year's consultations together in a single forum. The only absentees from the process are Parliamentarians. In the past significant numbers attended consultations, which, during Sir Rabbie and Wingti's tenure, were even chaired for entire days by the Prime Minister. This year, despite excellent presentations by many of the nation's most respected public, private and civil society leaders, and quality discussion, only four MPs participated. Good leadership entails listening. It's disappointing so few showed the interest or humility to participate, especially with many newly elected.

There is growing public dismay over PNG's continued unacceptable social indicators and deteriorating essential services? Since Independence the economy has been sluggish, although high commodity prices, combined with some reforms started under Morauta and fiscal/political stability, have enabled improved (if localised) recent growth. Public demands are (largely) modest, notably access to markets (to sell and buy produce), reasonable education and health services. Yet our infrastructure and services in many areas are little improved and widely deteriorated over recent decades, despite considerable resource revenue. Capacity has been lost and funds widely wasted/abused.

Although communication costs has been slashed worldwide over many years, telecommunications stagnated in the early 1980s and internet access, of great value for schools, has been costly and limited. The mobile telephone revolution arrived here late, but is now, through investment and competition, making a positive social and economic impact to the lives of thousands of ordinary people, who can find markets and trade products, call for help, maintain contacts, potentially undertake banking, and generally participate in wider aspects of society. Extraordinarily this massive social advance is threatened by some politicians, certainly not in the interests of those they're meant to serve! Some leaders behave as though they own the nation's assets, rather than listening and serving the community. (The extent of property acquisition by some leaders during their term of office, well in excess of salary, might provide clues!)

PNG's problem over the years stem largely from lack of accountability. Despite fine laws and policies, there's been little attempt to hold leaders or public sector staff accountable. The watchdog organisations, like the Ombudsman and Auditor General, are all severely under-funded, whilst some have become severely corrupted themselves, including from cronyism in appointments. Our resource management organisations (e.g. forestry) and commissions of inquiry result in virtually no enforcement or prosecutions. Yet new institutions are proposed, with valuable functions like ICAC, Human Rights Commission, etc. What's the point unless they have real impartiality, resources and teeth?

The 2007 National and Regional Development Forums demonstrated considerable awareness, not necessarily of the detailed rules and processes themselves (e.g. over budget management), but of the extensive misuse of public money, bad appointments, and the resulting impact; namely with services not delivered. The recent NCD election, however, demonstrated growing public awareness and willingness to demand higher standards and accountability. Communities in "failing provinces" have also learnt lessons

from better performing (though often less wealthy) provinces, which utilise processes enabling greater accountability. Despite clear rules for District funding, with Planning and Budgeting Committees (JDP&BPC), most feedback indicated that these committees largely don't exist or are merely rubber stamps, with appointments made by MPs, and these funds, critical for district services, used largely for the MP's own projects. Funds are also abused by unsupervised public servants.

International experience show the benefits from civil society, private sector and independent professionals (plus media) being actively involved in scrutinising public expenditure, contracts and appointments at the national, provincial and local levels, to ensure compliance with laws and best practice and suitable persons appointed. Government must become transparent (replacing secrecy beloved by many Ministers and officials). Public servants sent to remote locations, whether for financial, law enforcement or other roles, need suitable conditions, including housing and other services (e.g. telecommunications) to perform well, but with real penalties (including dismissal) applicable for non-performance. In many cases services are best provided by, or at least in partnership with the private sector or NGOs/CSOs/churches.

Despite many notable achievements, PNG has suffered decades of wasted opportunities, resulting largely from inadequate accountability and poor public sector management and performance, handicapping growth of local businesses and discouraging sound overseas investment. Now is the opportunity to make amends and give a brighter future to the population across this country, not just the urban elite or during commodity booms. Greater accountability, with active community participation and partnership in the development process, including resource planning and management (of budgets and natural resources) are essential for the whole country to enjoy improved and sustained prospects. Are the political and public sector leadership prepared to loosen their clasp and share responsibilities and opportunities?

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