

Plans, Capacity, Governance, Disasters and Freedom of Information

We are horrified at the scenes of death and carnage Haiti. Haiti is small Caribbean island state with a population about 1 ½ times that of PNG, squeezed into an area about the size of Southern Highlands Province (including Hela) and smaller than Morobe. Like PNG it's on a fault line and very prone to earthquakes. It's a country which has suffered from years of conflict, poor governance and corruption, and its natural resources are severely depleted. As with China's recent Sichuan earthquake disaster, many deaths appear to have occurred in public buildings, like schools and hospitals, which failed to meet required specifications in an earthquake zone.

Papua New Guinea is prone to natural disasters and only recently UPNG published the report from the 1998 Aitape Tsunami, serving as a timely reminder of the risks and impact of natural events, and the need for preparedness for inevitable periodic disasters which PNG and its neighbours, such as Solomon Islands and Indonesia face. One cannot prepare for all eventualities, but we need wide public awareness of the considered plans and response arrangements and facilities.

In some ways Papua New Guinea is fortunate. Its population is widely dispersed and many buildings are single storey, made with light weight and flexible bush materials. Apart from the risk of associated tsunamis and landslides, so far there have been few deaths here from collapsing buildings during large magnitude earthquakes. With increasing urbanisation and larger 'permanent' buildings and other infrastructure (bridges, ports) we can only minimise future impact if buildings are designed and constructed to sound earthquake specifications. In Italy recently a large new public hospital was dismantled, because authorities found the contractor had saved costs to boost profits, by reducing required costly reinforcing materials in the concrete. If there'd been a major shake in that earthquake prone area, staff and patients in that hospital would have been killed, in the same way as vast numbers have now in Haiti and Sichuan. Corruption has burgeoned in PNG over the past 15 years, and many contracts, like land allocations and resource permits and licensing, have not followed correct procedures. Tenders are called, winning bids selected, then other firms selected. Oversight of construction and application of standards is weakened by both lack of staff, including, for example, to oversee construction standards with remote infrastructure, like logging roads, and by the readiness of some officials and, unfortunately, also some businesses to undertake corrupt transactions to win contracts or by-pass standards. The beneficiaries are few, but the wider community are the losers.

Sadly, in PNG this is reflective of a wider breakdown in public systems. The country set out with an impressive and committed public service, with a core of competent managers and standards and a major focus upon extending infrastructure and services widely to meet economic and social needs right into rural areas. Political infighting, including between tiers of government, and politicised control of government funds, through programmes and Trust Funds (which widely turn into slush funds – from DSIP to NADP), rather than through routine public service systems, or supervised outsourcing, have resulted in massive waste of public funds, breakdown of infrastructure and services and amongst the lowest social indicators amongst developing countries, despite PNG's relative resource wealth. When the country faces new or increased threats, such as cholera or growing criminal activity and gun-

ownership and jail breaks, threatening the public and business, management and systems are not geared to respond.

Increased future revenue from LNG (post 2017) will not resolve the problem. In fact, experience worldwide has shown major oil related revenue and activity can undermine economies and public good provision unless governance issues have been addressed first. Botswana's successful utilisation of its mineral wealth for broad-based economic and social development has been dependent upon leadership, commitment and installing effective governance systems, including having one of the lowest corruption rates in Africa. PNG can achieve impressive growth rates and provide broad-based development opportunities, but only if it makes a real commitment to addressing its declining systems now. It requires a new kind of leadership, which really leads and doesn't prevaricate or avoid making hard decisions for fear of political backlash. It requires a broad coalition of leaders, working with the private sector, NGOs and empowering and bringing the public onside, not continuing to keep communities ill-informed and increasingly dependent upon handouts. We're seeing something of this needed commitment in the National Capital.

Action must be taken now, before we lose further experienced public sector managers of integrity. Many Department now shadows of their former selves, with heads who are never there or have no management skills and surrounded by non-performing wantoks. Government leaders know this, but take no apparent steps to resolve it. Law enforcement agencies require operational independence (combined with public accountability) but their heads are afraid of political dismissal if addressing corruption and some other crimes. It will be a massive task restoring institutions, and outsourcing various functions, but it starts with recruiting suitable top management, bringing them in from outside where necessary, to be revive systems, merit-based appointments (and dismissals) and rekindle public service morale.

One area where PNG ranks relatively well, including against some regional neighbours, is on media and information freedom. We do release Budget and audit information; findings of our many inquiries are usually release or ultimately leak out. The trouble is that despite the law, government bodies (including companies) widely fail to provide the Auditor-General with their accounts to audit, there is little or no follow up to recommendations and much of the public is illiterate, with our inadequate education system, to be able to use information effectively, and this information rarely gets out of main centres. Access to reliable information, including on government, is critical to development, enabling government to be held accountable for public funds and standards, including competitive contracting and ensuring natural disasters don't escalate into man-made disasters.

Fiji has slipped backwards badly in recent years, losing information freedom and much institutional oversight and accountability. Indonesia, by contrast, long renowned for its corruption and poor governance, has offloaded its mantle, making recent leaps with new legislation requiring freedom of information; India likewise. Malaysia, despite enviable economic performance, is restrained by lack of accountability and public access to much information, being left well behind Indonesia and other neighbours. It's hoped that China, following the Sichuan experience and extensive other natural and human disasters (including in its mines) and innumerable public protests, will increasingly recognise the social benefits from greater openness and

transparent, enhancing public and international confidence needed for a country with so much to offer and an increasingly important international role.

Papua New Guinea also has a growing international role, but growing confidence and assertiveness also requires greater recognition and resolution of its own governance and social problems, rather than putting its head in the sand whilst the problems grow. Not everything can be left to the private sector and civil society; it requires a real partnership, if PNG is to take advantage of its opportunities and avoid the socially and economically self-destructive scenario of Nigeria and many other resource-endowed nations, or Haiti's fate in the face of natural disasters or conflict, for which we are ill-prepared or equipped and lacking effective plans and institutions.