

Access to Information brings Empowerment and Opportunity

A visit to Divine Word University in Madang provides an insight into the future. Here are scores of students sitting at modern computer screens accessing world-class educational material and latest information from around the globe. Absurdly, however, the university is forbidden from using low cost wireless technology around the campus as authorities fear other Madang residents might also access fast and affordable internet access, so the university was obliged to use costly fibre-optic cables to link the satellite receiver/transmitter to the network across the campus.

Around PNG's towns a small number, largely those with landlines (max 50,000), can obtain internet access at slow speeds and high cost, as the independent service providers are required to operate through Telekom's expensive monopoly links, rather than competing in providing the full service. Even the broadband connection provided (to relatively few) is very slow and expensive by international standards. On leaving our towns, however, modern communications cease to be unavailable, except in a few districts in certain provinces where Telekom's costly and unreliable mobile service has now been extended.

PNG is crying out for access to information. Wherever one travels people are starved of information, even basic information which could materially benefit their lives. It seems they have been forgotten, (except briefly during election times, when they are spoon-fed snippets, projects and gifts). The lack of accurate and timely information encourages abuse by non-performing or corrupt officials/leaders and fosters harmful speculation (including belief in sorcery, bizarre cults, or pyramidal money scams). Access to accurate and timely information (together with literacy and other basic education) is essential to nation-building, enabling people to learn of services, opportunities and hazards (including human, plant and animal diseases), sometimes critical to their lives. Reliable and affordable communications are also fundamental to economic development.

Knowledge of how government operates, and how public funds are budgeted and then managed are basic to the working of an effective democratic State, empowering its citizens to participate in the nation's operations, notably holding leaders and officials accountable, both in allocating expenditure for genuine national or local priorities and ensuring subsequent implementation according to budget. Dictatorships and feudal states operate by minimising access to accurate information, including from independent sources. Are some leaders here also intentionally keeping people in the dark? Is it easier to encourage the handout mentality, and restrict knowledge of how government should and actually does work? Keeping so many government and board deliberations and inquiry findings secret suggests so. We know there are strong voices within government committed to greater information access, but others apparently resist. For example, a recent workshop was told that the Rural Development Office refuses to release information on District Support Grants.

PNG has a largely free press, both newsprint and radio/tv, although there is clearly a need for far more investigative journalism and readiness to ask tough questions and follow up on unanswered ones (including why tens of millions of public funds can be stolen from the State, superannuation funds, SOEs and Investment Corporation, without anyone apparently being taken to task!), whilst media organisations must be able to retain a cadre of experienced journalists. Unfortunately, the media's voice and the limited material from government agencies barely reaches beyond main centres, as feeder roads and many district centres have deteriorated badly over recent decades and many provincial radio stations are inoperative, and modern telecommunications have apparently been actively restrained.

Back in the 1970s PNG was at the forefront of telecommunications technology (for developing countries), with major investment in infrastructure, based upon a policy highlighting communications as a key tool for development. Why does government (including at provincial/district/local levels) provide such limited information to the community (e.g on responsibilities and services and how money is budgeted and spent)? Maintaining too many layers of government, with unclear responsibilities, allows abuse to go

unnoticed. Surely, government should be transparent and hold no secrets from the people it serves? Clearly defined responsibilities and community awareness, together with adequately funded watchdogs and enforcement, would cut down abuse and ensure more productive investment of public funds and improved services.

Why does government maintain such constraints on private investors from extending the current inadequate communications network, e.g. mobiles and internet, (or investing in power and transport infrastructure, including through private-public partnerships)? All around the developing world, including this region, these communications services have leapt past PNG, in speed, reliability and affordability. Such goods and services, including access to information and modern two-way communications can alert authorities or communities of disease outbreaks or other urgent issues, disseminate education material, enable rural teachers to undertake banking using mobile phones without needing to visit town (as in South Africa), allow LLGs to chase up overdue funds, encourage greater community oversight and help keep leaders accountable. Whilst restoring State-owned monopoly enterprises, like Telekom, to profitability is generally preferable to their former parlous state, this is not the point. Government's role is setting conditions for efficient delivery of widespread communications services to users, for positive economic/social impact, not being a monopoly provider of these services itself. With private investment and competition, telecommunications services (for a start) can be extended widely across the country at a fraction of the cost to consumers (as has occurred almost universally overseas), providing extensive related opportunities. Even some State providers have gained increased turnover, in such competitive and expanded markets.

There are various core functions which the State (national/provincial or local authorities) must perform, notably maintaining (in some cases restoring/upgrading) basic infrastructure (such as main and feeder roads) and essential services (including education and primary health awareness and care), sometimes in partnerships with other service providers, such as churches and NGOs. PNG's State-owned utilities were devastated, together with other State enterprises, after years of political appointments and projects, wastage of core talent, awarding of inflated contracts, and general pillage and corruption. The Morauta government decided that, with successive governments demonstrating an inability to manage these enterprises responsibly, it would be better to remove them from temptation and privatise them, arguing that government should leave commercial activities to a private sector better able to run businesses. The (unduly costly) privatization exercise, however, made only modest progress before the change of government, and there was a risk of creating some private monopolies.

The Somare government discontinued privatisation, but made some progress in reducing debt and improving the viability of some enterprises, (largely owing to the stabilised economy, commodity-led economic recovery and continued monopoly status). But these services remain utterly inadequate and a major constraint to the country's development and its people's lives. A recent workshop on business opportunities concluded, whilst in 2000 PNG may have been unready for privatization, retaining a nostalgia for State utilities, by 2007 the public (and business) is fed up with the lack of available, reliable or affordable services, which can be provided through private investment, partnerships and, particularly, competition. Reputable international investors are not queuing up to enter PNG, the Government alters rules too often and is too inclined to offer exclusive deals (as in the gas industry lately) to relatively minor players, but it's time to give PNG a break and allow the market to provide competitive modern communications whilst also making a commitment to open government.