

Planting the Seeds of Development

Rains have finally fallen over the parched National Capital, having reached most of the country over recent weeks. Farmers have raced to get crops planted, and still hope for a good season. This year, with El Nino conditions, forecasters are predicting a shorter wet season with less than normal rain. Those recalling the last big El Nino of 1997/8 will hope those drought conditions (and associated fires) are not repeated. For those gardening the hills around NCD it's a struggle in the best of years with poor soil conditions and short growing season.

Although rarely recognised, our farmers, supplying food and other products both for their own needs and for sale, should be amongst the most respected members of our community. Whilst not highly rewarded financially, they demonstrate their valuable practical contribution providing for their families and the wider community and economy. As with other formal and informal sector enterprise, farming requires investment, and, more than most, it faces risks (notably from the elements, pests, diseases and markets). Agriculture and other landuse management, including forestry, requires a long term focus or the resource will deteriorate. As with other business, farmers can run down their stock, but after a while, if you plant and harvest without putting anything back, the land will become unproductive. In traditional landuse villagers abandon that garden and clear a new one, hitherto left fallow to restore its fertility. Increasingly, as populations grow, particularly in peri-urban areas, fallowing is not an option. PNG needs to ensure informal sector investors – including smallholder farmers-, like formal sector businesses, receive appropriate investment conditions, and have suitable advice, to take a long term view.

The National Agricultural Research Institute (NARI) recently published a valuable report on hillside farming in NCD, based upon a survey undertaken in 2002. It highlights the major expansion of gardening over the past twenty years on Port Moresby's hitherto unfarmed and infertile hills, and how it has become a major source of food and income for much of the population in the settlements, particularly from a few provinces. Women typically perform much of the gardening, with the largest portion of farmers being in their thirties, with only primary or no formal education. The majority (81%) had no other paid employment, demonstrating the need for these households to produce a successful crop. Whilst only a few were wholly dependent upon food from their gardens, the majority combined domestic consumption with produce for sale, both in local and main markets. Whilst there were a few commercial farmers working larger land areas, the majority cultivated more than one small garden. For those with other work security was the most prevalent.

With its short season and poor growing conditions farmers concentrate upon a small range of annual crops, notably peanuts, corn and sweet potato, and, to a lesser extent, other crops including cassava, pumpkin, and beans. Most farmers follow traditional practices used in their home provinces, and apply no fertiliser or pesticides. The survey found the major difficulties faced by those farming NCD's hillsides, apart from

inadequate water, was poor soils and fertility and erosion (apparent in 84% of gardens). Weeds, pests and theft were also concerns to some farmers.

With the intensity of agriculture on Moresby's hills, and around other urban centres, it is inevitable that soil fertility and hence output will decline over time, unless adequate inputs (e.g from composting) are provided, and firm action is required to safeguard exposed soils from being washed away during rains.

Farmers need technical guidance on suitable farming practices for permanent agriculture practised in peri-urban areas, often with significantly different conditions from their home villages. However, the critical precondition for farmers to make the necessary extra effort (investment) needed to safeguard the soil and its productivity, is to know they and their families will have long term use of this land. No-one will put in back-breaking effort, or invest other capital in long term activity, such as tree planting (for soil protection or cropping), or nurturing their soil, through composting, or even mulching, as opposed to simply clearing and burning, unless they know that they will benefit from their effort into the future, neither being displaced nor their produce stolen.

Few settlers (in NCD or other centres) have tenure over the land they are gardening. Most are simply squatting, whilst a few have informal arrangements with customary landowners. Some positive initiatives have occurred, notably in Lae, providing some longer-term tenure security through more formalised agreements between customary owning clans and settlers. Whilst voluntary registration of customary land may not be universally popular, there is clearly a strong desire by customary owners around urban centres to have their title recorded now, before ownership becomes obscured by time and in-migration. The recent approval by Cabinet of the Land Task Force's recommendations provides for progress in cleaning up the current deficient land administration, improving land dispute resolution, and progressing mechanisms on customary land where communities genuinely seek it, with adequate safeguards in place. It will require firm follow up, including continued support from a Minister dedicated to honest and transparent land management processes (not always a characteristic of Lands Ministers and officials!) Whilst some peri-urban land may be fertile, long-term tenure granted to settlers gardening NCD's hills should reflect the land's low productivity.

The hillside farming study is part of NARI's Peri-urban Agriculture Programme, looking at critical issues of agricultural intensification. Moving to a system of continuous farming in these and the country's other increasingly dense population districts, (notably using permaculture) is a priority concern. Research is an important component, but with the inadequate state of agricultural extension system, and low levels of literacy, particularly amongst women (our main farmers), more effort is required for disseminating research results or existing knowledge. Whilst farmers' knowledge was gained largely from their villages, ensuring improved opportunities, including marketing, requires effective research and extension, sound law and order and infrastructure, but also a major drive on improving literacy, which can lead to further practical skills training.

2007, an election year, will be a critical one for PNG's future. As with agriculture, forestry and fisheries, it is necessary to invest and plan for the longer term, not just hastily exploit the resources, undermining future prospects. As the expression goes, never kill the goose that lays the golden egg, or for that matter the mature turtle that lays hundred of eggs! One could sign tens more fisheries licences to overseas operators, bypass requirements for forestry permits, or overlook waste disposal requirements on new mines, each for someone's short term gain, or concentrate on applying the rules fairly and building on requirements for sound long term investment and development, including infrastructure, law and order, education and training, primary health, good governance and tackling rampant corruption.

Likewise, voters in 2007 should resist those offering instant inducements, of cash, beer or false promises, like avoiding promises of quick returns from money schemes. These all come at someone's cost, usually yours. One rarely gets something for nothing, and then not for long. As the coffee industry's motto goes, "look after your coffee and it will look after you", so steady benefits only come from carefully nurturing your potential skills and other resources, including the land.