

Taking Responsibility

It's easy to blame problems on others, and expect them to fix up the mess. Sometimes others, including former colonial powers, other clans, neighbours or competing businesses, may bear some responsibility for one's current problems, but ultimately it's oneself, whether country, business, household or individual, who is responsible for addressing one's own problems, or achieving one's own potential. Donors can assist, but problem-solving must come from within.

PNG has immense potential, but also its fair share of problems, needing to be addressed. Happily many of these problems are readily resolvable given adequate commitment. Whilst PNG is not a booming Asian economic tiger, despite its unsatisfactory social indicators it is certainly not a basket-case economy, torn by war, drought or deadening social conditions.

Some of PNG's problems are serious and getting worse and must be addressed now, not later, when they may be completely out of hand, others are less urgent, but also require early attention. As with addressing climate change, the cost of action now is much less than once the problem has almost reached a point of no return.

What are some critical areas in 2008 where government, leaders, households, individuals and the wider community must take greater responsibility?

PNG is currently enjoying improved economic growth and "windfall" revenue. It must manage its enhanced earnings and utilise current opportunities wisely, investing for the future, not blowing possibly a temporary flush on consumption or white elephant projects, as in the past.

Priority is needed to seriously address the pervading law and order problem, which badly undermines prospects for business, investment and needed job creation, whilst intoxicated gangs, armed tribes or abusers terrorise parts of the community. Leadership is required to rid PNG of the growing gun culture, payback mentality and victimisation, especially of children and women, including over alleged sorcery. Law and order requires better led, honest policing and effective justice administration, including dispute prevention and resolution. This entails not just authorities, but also more community and personal responsibility for one's own actions. Alcohol and drugs are a major cause of disputes and violence with far-reaching consequences.

PNG's infrastructure is in an atrocious state, whether roads, schools or hospitals. These are public goods for the whole community's benefit. The compensation mentality must be dropped, particularly over provision of goods and services, like access roads or classrooms, where the local community should be sharing responsibility for maintaining their local assets and keeping public places clean.

Maintenance and restoration are priority. Roads and bridge maintenance alone requires at least K1 billion a year, excluding restoration. Only once this amount is annually budgeted (and used properly) can government even consider new infrastructure investment. It is irresponsible to propose major new projects with so much basic maintenance overdue, restoration and upgrading of facilities required to meet growing demand, notably from population growth, even before major costs of

post-disasters restoration, as from Oro's floods. Some restoration, e.g Central Government Offices, would more than cover direct costs, notably exorbitant office rentals.

Addressing waste and corruption is critical to ensure adequate funding for essential goods and services, opportunities available fairly, natural resources managed in the country's interests, and sound businesses invest and operate here. It's not just whether 20% or 80% of public funds are stolen, but whether elections are won fairly, students gain the right opportunities and PNG's land, fisheries and forestry resources managed properly. Corruption is a very real and serious problem, undermining PNG's future, as highlighted in innumerable reports, inquiries and surveys. It's tragic that the rot is barely being touched, with little penalty imposed (providing needed deterrent), but it's especially sad that many in authority it seems are in denial, even accusing commentators of grandstanding when corruption is highlighted. Unless one recognises the problem it's impossible to address it, and PNG's future prospects are dragged down!

Removing unnecessary red tape and achieving real public sector reform is needed if the economy is to prosper and services focused upon priorities. PNG cannot afford to take the easy option of sidelining real reform and leaving irrelevant or obsolete systems in place, handicap genuine investment without tangible benefits.

Major investment in capacity and skills development is critical to extending participation in a more dynamic economy, as well as enhancing public services and accountability. Some skilled citizens will invariably go overseas in this globalised economy, with skills from overseas still invariably needed. This process must not be bottlenecked by Labour Department incapacity.

Making economic growth and opportunities more sustainable also requires removing other bottlenecks, including monopolies and freeing markets for investment and competition. Nationalistic notions over business ownership are misguided when PNG needs utilities and commercial services (including telecommunications and airlines) operated affordably, efficiently and reliably.

Almost daily friends, workmates and public figures are dying, often very young, whilst in villages this premature mortality is commonplace. Many of these deaths, caused by diseases, new lifestyle ailments, accidents or childbirth are preventable. Addressing this constant tragedy requires individuals taking greater responsibility for their own lives and that of family and friends, (as well as markedly improved health services). A recent survey found that in the UK people live on average 14 years longer if they do not smoke, limit alcoholic consumption, take regular exercise and eat plenty of fresh fruit and vegetables. In PNG, with limited adaptation to urban sedentary lifestyles and fast foods, the benefits could be much greater, when combined with restraining betelnut consumption, protection against malaria (notably treated nets), HIV/AIDS and other diseases, early treatment of infections, greater health awareness and less fatalism or blaming others -"working poison"-, and addressing family and sexual violence and raising women's status.

To safeguard PNG's future requires it to recognise its past, respect and protect its natural and cultural heritage, including traditional knowledge. The Forest Minister's

recent statement condemning logging operations disguised as oil palm projects was welcome. PNG's future will be destroyed if the growing cobweb of deceit over natural resource management (and use of public assets) is allowed to prevail.

PNG sets its own rules and standards, and ratifies international conventions. These rules are, however, generally neither read nor followed, and there seems a concerted effort by some in government and cronies to ignore or circumvent those rules. Quantities harvested are misreported, funds misapplied, resources acquired through backdoor deals or other falsehood; anything but doing the right thing! Then monitoring and enforcement is not undertaken properly, and perpetrators continually let off, even allocated further resources, sometimes upon direction, until one day we find our cherished tuna, recreational land or forests no longer there, and what should be sustainable industries and livelihoods destroyed by continual falsity and abuse.

For PNG to take responsibility for its own future, requires wider community participation, whether over mining or other land-use proposals or public fund utilisation, entailing greater information and awareness, involvement in decision-making and oversight, with officials and businesses more accountable, and standards being met transparently. Where (formal or informal) businesses demonstrate reliability and standards, then leave them be, without imposing undue red-tape or extortion.

PNG has options, to become a better place for its population, or a greedy, self-serving and corrupt society, with serious social marginalisation. The country can make its choices, but the first option will require tough leadership and dedication at all levels. Are there enough prepared to take a stand?