

Taking Charge of PNG's own Destiny

At last week's seminar on the World Development Report - Agriculture and Development - Deputy Prime Minister, Puka Temu, was upbeat on economic prospects and the critical role agriculture plays in achieving broad-based development. He emphasised the need for the private sector and civil society to be in the driving seat, including their full involvement in implementing and oversight of the National Agricultural Development Plan, whilst acknowledging government processes remain far from perfect.

Despite Dr Temu and some colleagues' constructive commitments on NADP and mobile phone competition, there remains considerable public and private sector scepticism over processes, management of public finances and obscure decision-making (notably on ICT), so positive evidence is awaited. Dr Temu's inclination to be upbeat has merit, so long as it doesn't obscure real issues. Emphasis on wealth creation over poverty alleviation, seems inadequate, even naïve, suggesting denial of growing poverty in PNG and the need for specific remedial interventions. Widespread income-earning opportunities are needed, but inequality is increasing and large parts of the population experience real hardship, to an extent unacceptable in a nation with PNG's abundant resources. Responsibility lies substantially with Government and leadership for failing over many years to perform core functions of providing basic infrastructure and services (including law, order and justice) needed for economic and social development, whilst squandering funds on overheads, foreign travel, failure to tackle corruption or advance public sector reform, and protecting non-performing state-owned monopolies, rather than opening to real competition and encouraging new investment.

In recent months this column has focused upon the need for PNG, including Parliament, executive government and the wider community, to take greater responsibility for its own destiny. The country and its households must correctly identify and address their own problems and embrace opportunities available, whether maintaining infrastructure, tackling crime (including corruption), addressing long standing disputes, or safeguarding one's family health. It means not automatically blaming others for problems, whether illness or road condition, when one's failed to budget properly, misused maintenance funds, open telecommunications to full competition or continued to over-consume alcohol and junk food, smoke, and skip exercise. The tribal system provides support, belonging, cultural richness, and local authority, but should not be abused. Ethnic conflict in Mt Hagen should have no place in 21st Century PNG, any more than in Kenya or former Yugoslavia. True leaders focus on peace, disarmament and dispute resolution, not harbouring or stirring enmity for their own vested interests; whilst fostering post-tribalism in bringing communities together.

We identified PNG's many natural advantages, and some natural handicaps, but that most of the impediments to business, investment (and social improvement) result from manmade factors, readily resolved if addressed seriously and collectively.

As Chief Ombudsman, Ila Geno, emphasised recently, we must all be watchdogs, contributing to ensuring funds and public assets are used properly, and responsible

agencies and public servants perform accountably. The public servants (including MPs) are responsible to the public, not the reverse.

For many years government has virtually abrogated its responsibilities in rural areas, which have been left to their own devices. With lack of operational funding, public goods and services collapsed, except where Churches, some NGOs and resource projects operated. Hundreds of rural banking outlets also closed. Roads became impassable and opportunities to benefit from trading crops and purchasing goods and services became memories. Increased public funds now available, new technology and private sector partnerships all provide opportunities for restoration and progress, but only where there's readiness to identify and tackle the problems (especially governance), and empower the community and enable private investment. It's not about grandiose, white elephant projects or State enterprises buying gold mines! How can the State perform its regulatory function, applying health, safety and environmental standards properly, if it owns the business itself!

There are many within the community doing excellent work tackling local problems, maintaining social cohesion and local services, in villages and urban settlements, even without State contributions, but there is also poor or absent leadership, problems being left to fester, whilst some so-called leaders (whether in the Highlands or Bougainville) escalate problems by arming their clans rather than seriously addressing causes of conflict. How could anyone conceive of stirring up further antagonism in Bougainville, after years of devastating conflict destroyed the lives of thousands of adults and children. Surely now is the time to learn the lessons and continue pursuing peace. Peace, justice and true democracy require commitment and effort from the entire community; people must work for it and it's worth working for, but it doesn't simply happen. Sadly there are many who remain eager to abuse the political system, public finances or existing community divisions for their own ends; greedy for power and wealth.

We must come together to find solutions, ensuring public funds contribute to those solutions, and not wasted. Invariably, sustainable solutions require partnerships between State, private sector and local communities.

For years providing rural infrastructure and services (including power and communications) has been seen as unaffordable and unsustainable. Yet, Digicel instantly discarded this public sector negativity, viewing rural areas (where the majority live) as opportunity, rather than barrier. They've strewn villages with mobile towers, providing phone access, rent and jobs, enabling villagers to participate in the fuller life of their country. Telikom has taken heed, belatedly, but must get out and compete fully, extending affordable services, rather than seeking shelter from competition. The public sector should learn from Digicel in providing other rural services, partnering the private sector or allowing private sector provision of some public services.

Several positive recent demonstrations of leadership from some of PNG and the region's new generation of politicians, provide grounds for optimism. The new Solomon Islands Prime Minister, Derek Sikua, opened the New Year with a demonstration of frankness, honesty and conciliation. Apologising to his country's neighbours, including PNG, for Solomon Islands' Government's unconstructive and

idiosyncratic behaviour over recent years, he commenced the process of restoring its tarnished reputation. He also apologised to neighbouring islanders who'd suffered during recent traumatic social tensions; a mature and courageous conciliatory step. Why is it so hard for leaders to apologise and conciliate? Dr Sikua also acknowledged extensive corruption prevalent in Solomons' government, and the destructive impact of an unscrupulous logging industry, contributing to that corruption, whilst providing no lasting economic or social benefit. Honesty and frankness is a critical, though only initial step to addressing problems.

PNG's Foreign Minister Abal's "post tribal" leadership over Engan conflict is commended. Planning Minister, Paul Tiensten's direction to probe the Development Budget and trust funds is overdue, following increased scrutiny by NEFC of goods and services grants to provinces. Likewise, public exposure by Environment Minister, Benny Allen, of corrupt inducements for environmental approvals is positive, highlighting long perceived malpractice, (as prevalent in land approvals), but tough follow up is required for a tangible deterrent.

Establishing a credible independent Finance Inquiry, with tough penalties, is essential to restoring needed confidence in core public institutions. Public expectations of government are very low. Cleansing government and making it work for the community (rather than for itself and its cronies) is a big job, but not impossible. Whoever makes tangible progress will gain strong support from the public, private sector and most public servants. The new NCD Governor is apparently starting to make a tangible difference. The National Government must provide necessary support and not undermine his authority, whilst tackling provinces where abuse is rife. As with ICT/mobile phone competition government must firmly support, rather than disrupt, positive progress, or appear endorsing non-performance and malpractice.