

Safe and Reliable Transport and Telecommunications Access

This country has been shocked lately by two horrendous accidents, one involving an aircraft near Kokoda and the other two passenger-laden trucks travelling between NCD and Gulf province. Tonga has just experienced the tragic sinking of a passenger ferry with loss of about 100 lives, and PNG and its island neighbours are constantly losing small vessels, normally banana boats and their occupants during inter-island journeys.

Some of PNG's accidents involve equipment failure, lack of safety gear, alcohol and bad driving or simply errors of judgement, on other occasions there is simply bad luck, with sudden storms or loss of visibility with enclosing clouds, freak waves, livestock or children rushing on to the road or airstrip. Sadly, we cannot eliminate all accidents, but we can minimise their occurrence. This requires action by both users and respective authorities to: - avoid drink driving, not overload vessels, ensure infrastructure such as roads and equipment are well maintained, with verges and ditches cleared, grass cut on airstrips, and installing suitable navigational or warning equipment including radar or ground detection monitors (this includes equipment both within vehicles/craft and external gear, such as road signs, 'cats eyes' and crash barriers, maritime nav aids or cones, fences and windsocks on airstrips, which must not be stolen). It also requires ensuring suitable training and tests (not bogus driving tests as sometimes occurs in PNG) and wearing spectacles where needed. We must also reduce the impact of accidents when they inevitably do sometimes occur, such as using seat belts, having enough readily accessible life-rafts and lifejackets on board, airbags in cars, first aid kits, two-way radios and emergency rations at sea.

PNG is certainly a challenging country in which to travel, with long sea journeys, high forested mountains, large swamps and extensive areas of sparse population. It often experiences heavy cloud cover and big storms, which rip out bridges, whip up calm seas into instant frenzy (as with dreaded 'gubas') or force light aircraft to seek escape through narrowing gaps. The country's infrastructure is poor and in many cases hazardous, such as slippery mountain tracks, passing beneath towering, landslide prone cliffs, or even ill-designed urban highways, containing hazardous curves as on the Poroporena "freeway", which, despite repeated accidents, still has no warning signs or safety barriers.

Papua New Guineans (and visitors) need to travel and trade their goods and services, by sea, air, road, river and sometimes on foot or potentially using suitable pack-animals (such as pack-horses, donkeys, mules or oxen). Improved telecommunications can sometimes substitute for physical travel, allowing access to information, contracts and dialogue instead of visits, whilst mobile phone banking can replace trips to the bank. Normally, however, improved telecommunications enables increased, rather than reduced travel and trade, including inward visitors, such as tourists, produce buyers etc.

We must recognise that, whilst some travel (usually overseas) may entail extravagant waste of public funds, transport and travel is essential for Papua New Guinea, both as a trading nation and means to earn income, foreign exchange and revenue, including through overseas visitors, and as an essential means of providing needed public goods and services, but also because humans are social animals and need interaction with

friends and relatives, as demonstrated by the constant use of mobile phones just for chatting. With such a limited road network air-travel plays a markedly more important role in PNG's development than for most counties.

Increased traffic numbers and faster transport potentially increases risks, but in PNG lack of ready access for remoter communities causes far greater mortality, poverty and loss of opportunity than the occasional, though shocking accidents associated with increased mobility. Declining road, air and boat services, including regular government charters to remoter stations over recent years, has undermined essential services and the readiness of public servants to be posted or remain in "hardship" postings, removing also the prospect of evacuation of patients to provincial hospitals for emergency treatment and reducing income-earning opportunities from produce sales. Lower accident levels can be achieved with adequate commitment, including public awareness and enforcement, with driving vehicles or boats under undue influence of liquor posing one of the greatest risks, as demonstrated by a survey in NCD from the late 1980s which found, on a Thursday afternoon (not even pay Friday), about half the drivers tested over the safe limit and many totally inebriated!

PNG needs major investment in transport infrastructure, but also requires independent quality control and audit, so that, as with financial management, those responsible for external checking quality and standards, or undertaking crash investigations are separate from those handling road or airport construction, aircraft, vehicle and vessel ownership and maintenance. We simply cannot give a shipowner charge of the maritime safety authority, however skilled or connected. PNG has long under-invested in infrastructure maintenance, apparently preferring to demand donors reconstruct roads or bridges once they're dilapidated. For example, back in the semi-wasted 1990s, one year's paltry national allocation for road maintenance all went to one province (coincidentally the Works Minister's home province of Madang) but then largely wasted in activities utilising that same Minister's own equipment! There was similar apparent abuse of coastal navigation aids.

Maintaining an accurate database of transport and other infrastructure, and undertaking regular maintenance is much cheaper, and enables funds saved to be applied to progressively upgrading and extending infrastructure, with donor support (including PNGSDP and using PPPs). Independent auditing, investigations and environmental control, like keeping core statistics, seem unattractive to politicians when to Budget-time arrives (including at District level), in comparison with constructing new buildings (or renting fancy private ones) or buying new gadgets, like an executive jet to show off to overseas leaders. Government should largely be about routine recurrent expenditure, notably on inventories, maintenance and service delivery, auditing and inspections, not constantly dreaming up new and often worthless or unsustainable projects; and inspections are not just checking registration and safety stickers (or collecting 'presents') but taking dangerous and polluting vehicles off the road, for example. Districts require a technical support unit, as existed hitherto, to help them plan and implement maintenance.

Freight subsidies, as highlighted by Warren Dutton at the recent National Development Forum, also have merit. Whilst 'subsidies' send shivers down some economists' spines, building and maintaining a road to one rural destination is effectively a subsidy, so providing low cost subsidies to sustain needed access to other

remote locations can be economically as well as socially justified, so long within reasonable cost, timeframe and managed transparently. This is especially critical when ensuring more dispersed benefits from enclave resource projects, such as mines or prospective LNG projects. Mr Dutton's example of the modest freight subsidy in Western Province is poignant, allowing one quarter of its households to access rubber markets and make the crop's production worthwhile, especially contrasted with limited apparent benefits from K2 billion kina disbursed in the Province over the years, with little to show for it; much frittered into casual expenditure, bogus claims and relatively unproductive consumption.

Forthcoming wider competition in ICT, combined with universal access arrangements to provide, initially cross-subsidised coverage to remoter locations, should see wider and overdue rollout of the internet, as well as mobile services. Establishing widespread community resource centres shared by different agencies, including NGOs (not duplicative and under-resourced facilities provided by multiple agencies) will extend educational and marketing opportunities to schools and rural farmers. All means are required to reduce transport and other marketing costs suffered by farmers. Their share of commodity prices has fallen over the years, with retail prices generally rising but producer prices falling or remaining static, except during boom years. Improved information on market needs and prices, raising quality to meet demand, entering specialty and 'fair trade' markets aimed at cutting middlemen's margins, maintaining roads to standards which encourage competing buyers and justify investment in refrigerated containers for transporting fruit and vegetables, lowering crime levels, and countering widespread transfer pricing practiced in many industries (not only logging) will increase benefits to local producers and the country.

Farmers and others rural dwellers especially cry out for information. In the past government provided invaluable annual directories of operations and contacts. Now, despite the era of internet, this information is neither compiled nor available. If not provided by government itself, it should be co-funded by government and provided by industry organisations, such as the Rural Industries Council for agriculture, listing and constantly updating details of service providers, such within government and the private sector (including retired extension staff), market outlets and market requirements, etc.

A reliable and safe transport infrastructure and standards, right into rural areas, combined with complementary ICT and other services, are essential to PNG's future economy and the welfare of the majority of its population, through access to markets and services. Broad-based access to information is critical to making government accountable, as well as accessing services and markets and ensuring Papua New Guineans are not left further behind our neighbours in increasingly competitive markets, for goods, services and skills, or from being exploited in resource negotiations. This requires cooperation between government, at the national and local levels, the private sector and civil society, for investment in infrastructure and services and their maintenance, plus effective mechanisms of auditing and public oversight. Digicel saw commercial opportunities in the largely ignored rural areas and invested heavily in infrastructure; other businesses can follow this lead, but in some cases are dependent upon government providing and maintaining core infrastructure to a reliable standard. PNG cannot afford second best, when lives and livelihood are dependent.

We can never make travel entirely safe, but we can reduce risks and increase access considerably, whether by road, sea, air or by electronic communication, if there's a collective will, adequate funding, including rigorous and independent systems, which can ensure both investment and maintenance, but also ensure standards, audits and address identified problems promptly and credibly. The country needs this.