

SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC INDICATORS, SUITABLE MEASUREMENTS AND THEIR USE

We all need goals and standards in life, however, modest, and it's widely recognised that those who set themselves high goals and standards and rigorously strive to achieve them, are more successful, productive and generally more satisfied in life, at least assuming their targets are realistic and achievable. Like an individual, a country needs goals and principles, which are suitable, realistic and achievable, and must be measured on performance against those objectives and standards (including at least some international yardsticks).

Papua New Guinea is widely recognised as having a solid foundation of goals, as set out in the National Constitution and a plethora of policies. Most are sound and realistic, but a few somewhat ill-considered, and in some cases counter-productive, having been dashed out without much research, consideration or consultation. The outcome of good policy, if rigorously and comprehensively applied, should be valuable for the country's development, or particularly that segment of the community it's targeted to assist, (e.g. addressing poverty or maternal mortality, or the needs of persons with disability). The outcome of bad policy, or poor or deficient application of good policy, can be very damaging, or simply fail to progress needed socio-economic reform or advancement.

So, having the right policies and programmes is one thing; the application of these policies (and enabling laws and regulations) another, and a third requirement is for these policies or programmes, and prevailing social, economic and environmental conditions, to be measurable and measured. There's limited value in a policy, or even program, for example to eradicate malaria, if it's ill designed or poorly implemented, or without evaluating its outcome, i.e. whether it's effective or not, which requires measuring the prevalence of malaria before and after the intervention, or the state of fish stocks before and after conservation measures are applied, or the state of the economy or employment, in response to economic measures, including investment policies and regulations or, for example, application of a revised minimum wages determination. This, in turn, requires that we know what we're measuring and how to measure it, and whether this is the most relevant measurement, such as what criteria (or proxies) best measure wealth and poverty; not just applying simple averages, but also reflecting economic disparities (e.g. between regions, urban-rural, and between and even within households), and suitable measures, not just overall economic activity, as reflected in GDP, but also showing benefits retained in-country or locally (i.e. not remitted overseas), and an overall economic balance sheet, also indicating depleted stocks of natural resources and costs of waste and other deteriorating (or improving) environmental or social conditions (termed externalities, born by the wider public).

The recent 2 ½ day forum, co-hosted by ANUEdge, IM4DC and the INA, brought together statisticians, economists and other social scientists, natural scientists, medical researchers and practitioners, policy makers, civil society members and development partners, to examine how far PNG has progressed with achieving social and economic goals, including the Millennium Development Goals, how suitable and accurate the measurements are, what challenges prevail and how to improve measurements in the future, set suitable goals and achieve them, and particularly how to escape the paradox of plenty (plentiful natural resources but poor social and economic development outcomes) and achieve far better social, economic and environmental performance in the future.

As widely reported, PNG is unlikely to achieve any of the 8 Millennium Development Goals by 2015, or many of its own related social goals, and is trailing well behind in the Asia-Pacific region, despite the positive, sometimes high, economic growth rate of the past 13 years. Despite being declared a

lower-middle income country, life for a large portion of the population is disadvantaged (by international standards), and in many cases relatively short, with poverty (by various criteria, including high mortality rates) particularly associated with remoteness (and inaccessibility to essential services and markets), but also prevalent in urban centres, in the face of high living costs and limited jobs and income.

The workshop shared extensive data and research findings, based upon national censuses and surveys, and more localised studies, but, as widely recognised, a major feature of PNG has been the lack of reliable or timely data, and where data is available, it is used inadequately in contributing to formulation and updating of policies and plans. Over the years, government has widely failed to recognise, or chosen to ignore, the need or value of sound data, perhaps because it has little experience, capacity or inclination to use research findings in policy formulation.

The National Census (a ten yearly event) was deferred a year (to 2011), and since then much of the output has remained unavailable until 2015, halfway toward when the next Census is due. Even then, despite the cost and international support, there are doubts over aspects of its reliability. GDP figures have been based substantially upon estimates since 2006, rather than hard data, so, whilst acknowledging the limitations of GDP as a measure of economic performance, the capacity to add further economic variables (as suggested in the forum), to provide a clearer picture of performance, would be heavily constrained by (reliable) data availability. Until the late 1980s monthly trade data, for example, was publicly available during the subsequent month, but now accessing trade data is similar to audits of government organisations; i.e. years behind schedule.

Limited use of data to contribute to public policy and programs, and perhaps dissatisfaction with findings highlighting poor social and economic performance, have maybe discouraged public funding for data collection. Perhaps this became a vicious cycle, with poor or late data provision undermining further funding for its collection and utilisation. And yet, despite big knowledge gaps, including some critical data, there is nevertheless considerable information available, if one can access it, and if one cares to use it. It may also reflect deficient skills and training of policy leaders in the utilisation of data, but also a prevalence in the PNG public sector to hoard information (whether census data or maps and satellite images) and strong reticence to share, even with colleagues in the same organisation, despite public funding (including from development partners).

The recent forum highlighted some of the findings of research and data collection in PNG, from population trends and high morbidity and mortality rates, including from specific diseases like TB (a disease reflecting poverty and poor public health services, highly prevalent in locations such as Kikori, but also major urban centres), but also showing some positive trends, such as reductions in malaria rates and the factors seemingly responsible; (notably, extensive provision of treated bed nets). The forum also indicated the gaps, inadequacies and delays in data provision and utilisation, including for economic and social policy and its application.

Recent policy announcements, notably led from National Planning, with the Responsible Sustainable Development Strategy, and its emphasis on economic and social sustainability, and various associated policies, from water supply, sanitation and hygiene (WaSH) to the new population policy, (addressing one of PNG's long-overlooked development challenges), suggest a revived recognition by policy makers of the need for evidence-based policy. Yet, the establishment of DDAs and the provision of massive standardised funding under DSIP (K15 mill per district), seem to run in the face of the evidence provided by NEFC and audits of past DSIP performance, showing extensive abuse; clearly, at this stage, political expediency is a more powerful driver than sound data for budget allocations, yet this may not also be so, as the wider public increasingly accesses and, hopefully,

utilises data, including locally-based budget tracking, to encourage or require improved planning and greater accountability.

Paul Barker, 6 April 2015