

Focussing on Self- Help – at the Community to National Levels

It may have come as a surprise to many hearing of the Prime Minister talking in New Zealand about PNG becoming an aid donor. Sounds good perhaps before an international audience, but most within the country and many internationally realising how hollow it sounds, or out of touch with current realities of PNG, suffering the lowest social indicators in the Pacific region, the highest maternal mortality rates and only about 50% school intake.

Notions such as independence or becoming a donor have emotional appeal, but practicalities like access to basic health services, schools, jobs and income earning opportunities, and not being threatened by lawlessness are of greater practical importance to most people. Bougainville has autonomy, with some seeking independence, but in reality (despite social and environmental problems) they are now far more dependent than before the crisis, with its former vibrant economy, sound health, educational and income-earning opportunities, whereas now, despite their fine Constitution, they have by far the highest level of per capita support from National Government and donors of any Province; so would Independence just create another basket-case Pacific nation, lacking a vibrant economy and domestic revenue and dependent upon overseas aid, including from PNG?

In the modern globalised world, and going far back into the past, no nation is a true island, totally independent of others. Unless we all revert to subsistence agriculture and abandon all trade, international investment and aid, we are all, as individuals and countries, somewhat dependent upon others, and even then there remains dependence upon families, clans and local alliances and exchange during times of drought or shortage. Nowadays, we are also impacted by the effects of other's actions, whether polluting our seas or releasing greenhouse gases, even if one can avoid global financial markets.

What the country (and Bougainville for that matter) needs, however, is greater spirit of self-reliance and less dependence upon others, whether from donors, external businesses, MPs using slush funds (actually public funds).

The Prime Minister recently suggested on TV (al Jazeera channel) that Papua New Guineans are intrinsically somewhat lazy, in contrast to the Chinese. Well it's true that the Chinese, at least first generation settlers, come from a society requiring its population to be innovative and hardworking, uninterruptedly.

Papua New Guineans living traditional subsistence lifestyles have not needed to work continually, nor was there much incentive to increase output, with limited opportunities to trade and enhance lifestyles. Nowadays, as population pressure grows, and PNG is increasingly globalised with new opportunities arise, there is both pressure and benefit for many to work and study hard for survival and to fulfil growing aspirations.

The gardens stretching across steep mountain slopes of Chimbu and now increasingly covering NCD's arid hillsides is testament to how readily Papua New Guinean gardeners, especially women, work hard to survive and provide opportunities for their households. Papua New Guineans have not traditional experienced uninterrupted or

routine hard work, but most (especially women) readily work extremely hard, given the need or incentive.

Sadly, government has let the country down severely over recent decades. What was required was for government to provide basic infrastructure and services routinely, focussing particularly upon enhancing the community's capacity to help itself, including supporting an effective and independent police service. This required all weather roads, reliable air-services including to remote locations, access to basic health and financial services, and broad-based literacy and numeracy, plus adequate technical and professional education, research and extension services providing practical agricultural and business training and support, and marketing infrastructure, like adequate fresh produce outlets.

Many leaders encouraged public funds to be converted to politically controlled largesse, encouraging dependency and handout mentality, rather than self-help, whilst farmers and other businesses realise opportunities are not derived from hard work on their land or business, but by moving to NCD and securing land titles from the corrupted Land administration or contracts and out-of-court settlements from politicians/officials.

We fail to restore essential highways, for example after cyclone Guba, although many Provincial Works Managers do commendable work trying to sustain basic road access with minimal funds allocated for road maintenance.

Yes, the donors can be criticised for feeding 'aid dependency' in places, duplication and poor coordination, impossibly complex or demanding processes, excessive and in some cases overpaid or unsuitable consultants, and funding core responsibilities of government, but donor funds are largely accountable and often invaluable.

More serious is the massive wastage and lack of accountability over PNG's own public funds and government's failure to provide the core infrastructure and services for which government exists. In the past many of these services were provided reliably, when government had markedly less funds than now, so public funds are being wasted in national and provincial headquarters, on incessant (and largely useless) overseas travel, low priority/white elephant projects (and luxuries – like the new Government jet), or with funds spent without outcome (e.g. no classrooms built) and apparently condoned at some top levels.

How can the Prime Minister even talk of PNG being an aid donor with most of our rural airstrips now closed, and associated rural services? This lack of service provision translates into large numbers of unnecessary deaths and lack of rural opportunities.

Why has all this been allowed to happen, when many sound systems and services were hitherto in place and thousands of public servants were performing their jobs, reasonably competently? PNG is not uniquely corrupt and many have been prepared to stand up and resist the decline in public sector standards and performance apparent around them, but there has been a lack of support from leadership. The wider public has been too tolerant, too readily accepting government's failure, whilst focussing upon addressing basic household needs.

The downward trend can be addressed, given the will, but it must be done urgently; starting with a major programme (with donor and private sector support) to enhance skills training, as so many of the country's professionals (including health workers) are now aging, with inadequate trained successors to succeed them. The PNG State is failing. It doesn't need to and there'll be even less excuse with increased future revenue, but it will fail, unless leaders and society recognise and address the problem, rather than having illusions of grandeur, far removed from PNG's realities, whilst in constant luxury of overseas hotels, international forums and ingratiating waiters and officials.

How will PNG turn itself around? This will happen as individuals and the whole country decide enough is enough, and take the bull by the horn. At the recent CIMC regional forum in Popondetta one community showed how they would not sit around waiting for government, and for a fraction of the cost of contractors, went ahead and restored their road access and have been developing local economic activities. This can be repeated around the country. James Rutana, in Bougainville, describes hunting donor funds for cocoa restoration, but then just going ahead and doing it himself, and now running a thriving operation, providing extensive employment and training school. Near Banz a whole community has taken the initiative in their own hands, to restore standards and opportunities, whilst other communities around the country (including Taurama Valley) are showing similar self-help examples. Such success stories naturally attract external interest and support, which is valuable, so long as enhancing, not undermining community initiative.

Moving away from seeing government, politicians, roads, schools or hospitals as vehicles for handouts or compensation, and communities instead seeing public infrastructure and services as community assets is critical. Some leaders thrive on keeping communities ill-informed and being unaccountable. That must be reversed, with Budget preparation and implementation publicly accessible at national and local levels. Giving communities the opportunity to express priorities and oversee expenditure is critical to public ownership of public goods and services. Audits may appear dull and remote, but adequately funding for audits and wide public circulation is critical. There are enough grade 10 leavers in villages, who could learn to read budgets and brief communities at ward level, what money is available for what, and how funds have actually been spent. Improving rural telecommunications, since the arrival of competition from Digicel and future VSAT and other services, provides opportunities for rural communities to be better informed, and contribute more actively at local, District, Provincial and National levels.

It is the private sector which drives growth and opportunities in the country, but it is up to the community to demand the public sector play its part, performing rather than undermining local opportunities. However, even where government remains a bottleneck, there is much more that many local communities can do to help themselves, by planning and cooperating, as demonstrated by many communities and local leaders in recent years around PNG, rather than waiting for government or donors or squabbling amongst themselves, as occurs so readily between Highlands clans, or jealous factions in many coastal communities, who hate seeing one man, woman or group show initiative and advance ahead in the village, even where everyone will benefit. Current leaders should either support this process or stand

aside for those who can. Striking deals with external logging companies, however, under the guise of bogus agricultural projects, is not the way to bring local development, merely a way to impoverish the local community, for outside gain.

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