

The State of our Transport Infrastructure.

Papua New Guinea has abundant laws, institutions and policies. Many of our laws are unread and un-followed, although most are sound, if in places somewhat outdated or duplicative. We have around 1000 public institutions, but, as highlighted recently by the Auditor General, only about 5 have been up to scratch with their accounts, so public funds are widely wasted, or at least untracked. We are constantly seeing new policies and strategies, including the Medium Term Development Strategy, Fiscal and Debt strategies and recently the Vision 2050 (40 year plan) and the secretive Long Term Development Strategy, but who follows these, especially those kept hidden and not subject of wide public consultation prior to release?

Last week there was a valuable three day workshop organised by the Transport Department on a future transport strategy for PNG. It highlighted many current deficiencies facing transport, from the plethora of often overlapping laws and institutions, to lack of funding and poor governance, which allows people to have licenses and vehicles be registered without driving lessons, tests or roadworthy vehicles. Every day we read about collapsed or declining rural transport access, inability to get produce to market undermining agriculture, fatal accidents as a result of unsafe roads (as well as poor vehicles and driver behaviour) or of politicians or officials washing their hands of responsibility for the atrocious state of roads in towns like Lae or rural airstrips. Yet, for years everyone, including Government, has been emphasising the need for maintenance, and where necessary restoration, over new roads, but the reality is that only an abysmal K30 million has been provided to the Works Department for road maintenance for 2010. What can be done with K30 million? (Perhaps this is better than the year in the 1990s when one notorious Works Minister succeeded in allocating about 80% of the country's road maintenance funds to his province, notably for his own company!)

Let us remember the words of the Medium term Development Strategy, applicable for the past 5 years: *“the overarching development strategy is defined as export-driven economic growth, rural development and poverty reduction, including through good governance and the promotion of agriculture, forestry, fisheries and tourism on a sustainable basis. The strategy will be realized by empowering Papua New Guineans, especially those in rural areas, to mobilize their own resources for higher living standards. Expenditure Priorities 2005 – 2010. Based on the development strategy, and consistent with the requirement to empower Papua New Guineans to drive the development process, the mutually supporting expenditure priorities under the MTDS are:*

- *Rehabilitation and Maintenance of Transport Infrastructure.*
- *Promotion of Income Earning Opportunities,.....”*

Yet despite being the first priority we still only allocated K30 million for road maintenance, a fraction of the cost of the luxury 11 seater, three engine executive jet, reputedly bought for K128 million and only able to land in a handful of main airports in PNG. In the meantime Airlines PNG and Civil Aviation have reportedly ceased services to the Goilala and Koiari airstrips on the grounds of lack of safety and servicing, and around the country hundreds of airstrips, formerly serviced regularly by government charters and commercial RPTs, are never, or very infrequently, visited. As stated in this column hitherto, despite the occasional tragic accident, far more die

as a result of lack of access to services (including hospitals for emergencies) by road, plane or sea than from these accidents; although much can also be done to reduce the risks on roads, air or sea.

So, Government must put its money where its mouth is; it needs to prioritise expenditure, cutting back on pointless duplication and undertaking a genuine right-sizing exercise with the public sector (i.e. putting more money where it's needed but cutting where it's not).

Of course the Government can, correctly, state that, through the Development Budget, much more funding has now been allocated for road and other infrastructure; but how much of this has had real impact? It's true more funds are coming from the development partners and complementing government commitments for Lae port and more for some of the key highways (although only a fraction of what PNG's decaying ports and associated services need); the National Roads Authority has been established and is accessing (only a portion of) a road levy for maintaining portions of the Highways, and major funding has been allocated through the DSIP for District roads. The problem here, however, is that the mechanism is deficient, and the respective Open Members and their associates (on the JDP&BPC and District Administrator) normally have little capacity to plan and manage these funds effectively. The trouble is that, although DSIP funds are substantial and much larger than hitherto managed at the district level, such funds are modest in relation to the task; these funds can go a long way to maintaining existing District infrastructure, however, if major restoration or new road construction is involved then these funds will be absorbed immediately with nothing left over for needed maintenance of other roads or local infrastructure. Some MPs and Districts certainly seem to be using their allocations wisely, but many look at these funds as pots of money for new projects, rather than core maintenance, with expenditure often involving limited design, lack of competitive bidding or supervision, with funds rapidly exhausted, apart from the more extensive waste from corruption reported in some Districts.

So substantial public (combined with some private) funding is required for PNG's infrastructure to be restored and upgraded, but entailing emphasis upon maintenance (as it's far more expensive to restore once drains haven't been clearer, surfaces graded and potholes on sealed roads filled) sound prioritisation, design and supervision and accountability, involving professionals and wider public oversight. There needs to be effective coordination of this process, from data collection on the state of infrastructure, right through to clarity on financial and implementation responsibilities. There is a strong case for some clear user contribution to local infrastructure, whether through levies or in-kind, but at the same time implementation bodies, whether local level governments or National Roads Authority need clear accountability to those users and funders, not just through obscure public service mechanisms.

The toll from accidents in recent years has been rising and tragic, with greater numbers of vehicles on the roads, poor road standards, high speeds, poor driver skills and wide use of alcohol by drivers, even of some passenger vehicles on a Friday night returning to the village. Clear public awareness of risks and driver training and testing is required, but unsafe stretches of road ('black spots') must be identified and redesigned or at least marked and remedial actions taken, like placing bright chevrons

on the Konedobu corner at the foot of the Poroporena Freeway, as well as strong and adequately high crash barriers that nudge vehicles back onto the road, rather than allowing them to cross the central reservation into oncoming traffic and beyond.

The provision of transport infrastructure is a core government function. Yet we know that much of the task is already handled by the private sector, from ships to PMVs, trucks and aircraft, and internationally ports and airports, even bridges, and railways are owned by companies. We need to increase the level of investment from all sources. Major mining and oil companies are already upgrading or maintaining sections of highway, notably under tax credits, or in the vicinity of projects. At least until LNG revenue commences late this decade, government will be pressed for funds; public funds need to be planned and expended carefully, and extra private sector and local community/user contributions needed, including on a commercial basis under PPPs or through opening up some infrastructure and services to competition. All we know is that currently we seem to have the worst scenario, with inadequate resources, lack of coordination in information, implementation or enforcement; so we need to be ready to think outside the box, adopt ideas and success stories from around the country and overseas (including perhaps Pae Gure's idea of posting graduates to the District level for an internship, supervised by a District support unit), so that the public and businesses obtain the transport access they need to develop the economy and for the welfare of the population right out into the most remote areas.