

## **Knowing that we know nothing: the Socratic paradox and health sector reform in Papua New Guinea**

Benjamin Day and Luke Elich\*

*PhD candidate, ANU and General Manager, International Health, AbtJTA*

The complexity of the development process is increasingly being recognised in the international development community. There is a growing awareness of underlying socio-political constraints to development that are particularly entrenched in fragile states. Yet meagre evidence currently exists about how donors can effectively contribute to overcoming these constraints. Rather than understanding and addressing them, donor interventions are oftentimes based on flawed assumptions about the fragile state context in which they are operating.

This paper will focus on donor-supported health system reform efforts in Papua New Guinea (PNG) between 2000 and 2010. Within this particular context, we seek to demonstrate how little the development community understands about what works and what doesn't work. Such an admission has critical implications for aid planning and implementation.

The paper proceeds in three parts. The first part analyses relevant donor and program-produced documents related to health sector reform. This analysis will reveal the continual restatement of like problem diagnosis and proposed 'solutions'. Very little progress has been made in advancing these 'solutions' or improving basic service delivery and the health status of the population has, by numerous measures, deteriorated. The second part demonstrates how this failure derives, in part, from the application of flawed assumptions about what works in the PNG context. In particular, it will reveal the limited utility of the widely accepted WHO health system building block framework in guiding health sector reform efforts. We argue that, while this framework has enabled the identification of auxiliary effects, its application leads to flawed 'solutions' which fail to address the fundamental constraints in the PNG health system. The paper concludes by drawing on the insights of systems thinking and offers a number of suggestions for how future efforts might begin to escape the unfruitful patterns of the past.