

# Australian aid to PNG: transparency, accountability and the partnership environment – Part 2



HE John Ma'o Kali CMG OBE at the 2020 Australasian AID Conference

by John Ma'o Kali CMG OBE

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*This is the second of a two-part blog series based on a speech by Papua New Guinea's High Commissioner to Australia at the February 2020 Australasian AID Conference. You can also watch a [video recording](#) or listen to the [podcast](#).*

I ended the [first post](#) of my two-part blog on Australian aid to Papua New Guinea (PNG) by noting how the world is changing. Some of the current realities facing the Australian aid effort in PNG include the following:

- Increased Chinese engagement and support to PNG is changing Australian motivations and how support is allocated.
- PNG government systems and processes seem a little disorganised and appear weak. We acknowledge that, but that should not encourage the Australian program to be channelled through parallel systems, because it increases the risks of further weakening our own systems. Rather, we must work at ways to strengthen our governance systems. Our government has recognised this and is now focussed on reform.
- Senior government officials don't always have the resources or the time to consider and fully understand what is happening outside of government systems.
- The Australian partnership has been focussing more on the political and economic fronts rather than on development principles. While this is important in establishing the personal touch at the political level, it encourages political leaders to drive service delivery and I suspect this has in many ways impacted on how development aid has been delivered. This has of course encouraged Australian DFAT (Australian High Commission) officials to bypass bureaucrats and go directly to political leaders.

What is the way forward? For a start, I would fully encourage a greater level of economic cooperation through improved trade with improved opportunities for our commodities into the Australian markets and schemes for labour mobility, to help us move from aid to trade.

With regards to development assistance, for Papua New Guineans, it's essential that we experience and engage ourselves as equal partners in the governance of any development assistance. The days of being a passive aid recipient are long gone.

For me being equal partners means:

- joint agreements in the design, budgeting and prioritisation of programs
- open consultation in the identification and preparation of program initiatives before any changes are made to the delivery of support
- joint participation in the design and finalisation of programs
- joint decision making in the governance and planning of all assistance
- joint management in the delivery of programs
- joint involvement in the monitoring, review, and evaluation of programs and being fully aware of the results and impact
- progressive management and oversight of programs by Papua New Guineans, rather than international experts.

It is essential that we constantly review our bilateral and multilateral relationship arrangements for the maximum benefit of Papua New Guineans. This forum is but one excellent example and I would encourage the organisers to bring these open forums to PNG.

Bilateral agreements that build expectations on deliverables that to be achieved, must be managed within a genuine joint partnership, built on trust.

In my experience, both as a Departmental Secretary and in my current role, a preoccupation with program efficiency sometimes comes at a cost of effectiveness because of the loss of transparency and the lack of recognition and ownership of, not only our systems and processes, but our values and ethics.

It is not necessarily what, or where Australian support is being provided – I have no doubt that there are a lot of good things happening on the ground –, I am concerned about how the support is being delivered.

We have been cognisant of this for years, but it was only in early 2016 when our government approved a Joint Understanding on Public Sector Partnerships. I know this was accepted by the Australian High Commission at the time, and it went to a

subsequent ministerial forum with Australia. The Joint Understanding was our attempt to re-establish agreed management, coordination and decision making arrangements, and the governance of partnership programs, based on the considerable past experience of my senior Papua New Guinean government colleagues.

Included in the Joint Understanding was a proposal to establish a Papua New Guinean Technical Advisory Facility to better oversight and coordinate the considerable numbers of international experts being provided in the public sector. The proposed Facility was to be jointly managed in a true equal partnership way.

Facilities are now a common part of the Australian partnership with PNG. Regrettably, they lack the equal partnership approach I have outlined, and so lack transparency and accountability for our government.

While I acknowledge that the environment for development assistance has changed considerably over the years, it is essential we learn from the experience of the past in order to prepare for the future. We should draw on program evaluation reports, and listen to the experience of my Papua New Guinean colleagues, who have been consistently involved over the many years of Australian support. This experience demonstrates that the transparency and accountability in the delivery of the Australian support would be greatly improved if there were:

- joint agreements in the design, budgeting and prioritisation of programs
- consultation in the identification and preparation of programs
- joint participation in the design of programs
- joint decision making in the governance and management of programs
- joint accountability in the monitoring, review and evaluation of programs
- progressive growth in management and oversight of programs by Papua New Guineans, rather than international experts.

### **Conclusion**

I want to emphasise that Papua New Guineans, including myself, acknowledge the majority of Australian support has been well received. While the paradigm that drives the Australian partnership with PNG is changing, the issues and challenges for PNG remain the same.

We are mostly concerned with improving services of our economic and social sectors, through values and ethical leadership and governance. At a time in which Australian personnel, policies and delivery mechanisms are changing, we should learn from past experiences in order to shape the future, especially in terms of the management of transparency and accountability of the Papua New

Guinea–Australia partnership.

Ours is one that must be built on love and trust, which have been won through blood sweat and tears, through our comradeship and on the battlefields.

*His Excellency, John Ma'o Kali, CMG OBE is Papua New Guinea's High Commissioner to Australia.*

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Link:

<https://devpolicy.org/australian-aid-to-png-transparency-accountability-and-the-partnership-environment-part-2-20200409/>