

Building community engagement in PNG, part 3: Churches as change agents



BCEP partners during a discussion at the All Partners Forum, June 2025

Photo Credit: Building Community Engagement in PNG

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This is the final post in a [three-part series](#) on the work of a program seeking to strengthen relations between citizens and the state in Papua New Guinea.

The vast majority of Papua New Guineans are Christians, belonging to a range of Protestant churches (both traditional and the new Pentecostal denominations) or the Catholic church. The churches provide around half of the country's health and education services, primarily in hard-to-reach areas. They are also key to sustaining or changing underlying social norms around crucial issues such as gender or witchcraft.

One sign of their importance is their central role in Australia's aid program: the [Church Partnership Program](#) (CPP) has been going for 21 years as Australia's longest running bilateral program in PNG.

Despite their prominence, the churches have not engaged that much with influencing the wider policies of government. That's where the Australian government-supported [Building Community Engagement in PNG](#) (BCEP) program comes in, helping the churches realise their potential to support positive change in PNG. In the words of one church partner, it's time to "awaken the sleeping giant".

From service delivery to advocacy. The Churches have until recently been responsible for nearly all adult literacy programmes in PNG but, according to Michael Ambo of the Anglican Church, that role is crumbling: "We depended on donor funding, but when that ended it was hard to sustain. Getting government to fund adult literacy was a much more sustainable approach."

But moving from providing adult literacy services to persuading the government to take over required the churches to build up an in-depth knowledge of government

processes and relationships with key decision-makers. BCEP played an influential role here, helping the church bodies build up their networks of government contacts. Ambo says: “It’s been hard, but we’ve seen progress with BCEP coming on board. BCEP connected us and created a pathway for us to advocate with Government.”

Churches and disability: developing a theology of inclusion. The churches hold the key to shifting long term social norms on issues such as disability. BCEP identified the Church Leadership Training College (CLTC), which trains future pastors, as an ideal partner. According to the CLTC’s Dr George Mombi, “CLTC is inter-denominational, so we can act as a catalyst, ignite something across the Body of Christ in PNG.”

The CLTC were also able to advise BCEP on using the right language for the churches. Central to this is developing a “theology of inclusion”. BCEP’s Nicol Cave says this work needs to be subtle, based on a nuanced understanding of the different churches:

“Each Church has a different way of talking about this, for example how ready they are to shift from a charity perspective to one of social citizenship, dignity and agency. Theology helps a process of internalisation.”

This respectful, locally led approach has consequences, according to Nicol:

“All this is taking longer than expected, because we are using the Churches’ own processes to institutionalise — a process of many stages. Impatience is the enemy of genuine localisation / institutionalisation.”

Key lessons from BCEP’s experience with churches and civil society

organisations. Lessons-learned documents about how change happens can be pretty frustrating. Either they go into vast, unreadable detail on the social, political and economic context of any given change, or they helicopter out to the platitudosphere: be flexible, courageous! Localise! Diversity is good!

In going through the previous two posts and the case studies on which they are based, I’ve tried to pull out some lessons, while avoiding both extremes. See what you think.

Finding the right partner. A lot of the successes depended on finding a good lead partner with legitimacy and access to the target institutions, such as the state (on budget transparency) or the churches (on disability). Effective partners have the networks and know the right language to use (for example, procedural language of the state or the theological basis for inclusion of people with disabilities). Sometimes they will then need support to build their capacity in areas where they are weak,

such as how to influence the state, in the case of the Adult Literacy Technical Working Group. In other cases, they already have most of the skills required (the Consultative Implementation and Monitoring Council (CIMC) on regional budgets; the CLTC on disability).

The right kind of technical assistance can make a big difference. Not standard fly in–fly out consultants with slide decks, but a deeper, continuing effort to understand what interests and needs partners have, and what is the best way to address them. That kind of respectful, locally led approach enabled the Melanesian Institute to build an influential leadership role on sorcery accusation-related violence (SARV).

Similarly, **the right kind of funding** is crucial. Big and slow may not be as useful as small and quick. BCEP’s Rapid Response Fund enables it to make small grants more quickly to both new and existing partners. That allowed the Church Professionals Network to respond to the window of opportunity presented by the January 2024 riots. This helped the Church Professionals’ Network to rapidly establish itself as an important and progressive policy voice in PNG.

Working with the churches. Finding ways to work respectfully with PNG’s churches has enormous potential to achieve lasting change across the country on issues such as social inclusion, combatting the stigmatisation of excluded groups such as people with disability. But that work needs to be locally led and take place through church institutions and processes, and it might need more time to achieve results. The potential pay-off for that is long-term impact at scale.

Relationships, relationships, relationships: Whether on adult literacy, disability or a host of other issues, influencing in PNG is built on making and maintaining relationships. The churches, with their deep networks, are ideally placed to work in this way, but other partners also stand or fall on the strength of their relationships. BCEP can help with training on soft skills such as facilitation, but starting with a large network in which the partner is seen as a legitimate voice is essential.

Being ready to adapt tactics in the moment and set aside “best practice”. As noted in the previous blog, in preparing for the SARV Summit, BCEP needed to abandon some of its default models of advocacy around specific, SMART demands in favour of a storytelling approach, which paid off. The process is similar to many other multi-stakeholder approaches, where building trust and agreeing on the problem can lead to unforeseeable ideas and actions to achieve progress.

That’s as far as I’ve got for now, but I’ll carry on accompanying and learning from BCEP (at least until they decide to sack me). It will be interesting to see where Papua New Guineans through BCEP and its partners head with some of this

emerging work and the different approaches they're trying. I'll be reporting back.

Read the [three-part series](#) on the Building Community Engagement in PNG program.

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