

Working with patronage in Papua New Guinea

by Mark Moran

12 November 2024



Community meeting, South Fly District
Photo Credit: Mark Moran

More than 80% of people in PNG live in rural areas and **more than 60% of them** are multidimensionally poor. It is therefore reasonable for Andrew Anton Mako **to ask why** a greater share of budget spending does not reach these people.

Part of the answer lies in the practice of patronage. PNG is a “competitive clientelist” state, where patronage politics and patron-client relations dominate. Political leaders compete to provide benefits to their supporters, provided by patrons to their client groups. Patronage networks are systemic in PNG with patrons competing to establish exclusive client bases at each level of government in order to **gather and distribute** public finances. Citizens and public servants working in the system search for personal benefits, and leaders and managers at all levels focus on delivering benefits to their supporters at the expense of national governance.

PNG is not exceptional in this regard and aligns with other **resource-rich** developing countries. The history of many developed nations has also included periods of clientelism, including the recent history of parts of Europe. While there are cultural precedents in Melanesian culture, **patronage networks go well beyond** “wantok” lines and “bikmen” leaders. Patronage is more frequently described as misappropriation and redistribution rather than “corruption”. It goes to “the order of things” in public financial management in PNG.

Aid agencies struggle to deal with patronage. It reaches to the highest levels of government. While political economy analyses are becoming more common, they are often not acted upon. Understanding how to work effectively with patronage politics is critical to achieving results.

Drawing on **qualitative interviews**, the following nine lessons are intended as a guide.

1. **While it may not be possible fully to understand the reach and power of patronage politics, one should assume that patronage networks are omnipresent.** The finances and activities of development projects will undoubtedly attract patronage.
2. **The ability of aid agencies to reform patronage politics is limited.** Although there are **strategies**

available to reform patronage systems, none of these is proven in PNG. Adaptive learning approaches can navigate the political complexities involved, but these can struggle against inflexible aid administration systems. Patronage politics in PNG is deeply embedded and is resistant to reform.

3. **Be wary of simplistic “capability deficit” explanations and look instead to the range of political and financial incentives operating.** Much development effort is devoted to building the skills and competencies of individuals and the capability of organisations. This ignores the deeper informal institutional incentives that drive behaviour. Underperforming officers targeted for “capacity development” in their formal roles may be performing highly in their informal ones within patronage networks.
4. **Aid interventions may encourage patronage in seemingly nondescript ways.** Hotel venues for workshops can be used by patronage networks. Attendees can politically network with each other, and with others who join them at the venue. Those responsible for organising the event can inflate the budget or exaggerate participant numbers to secure a kickback from the owner. They can confer patronage by selecting favoured participants, so they are owed favours in return.
5. **The only people who truly understand patronage networks are those working within them.** Aid agencies can use a range of modalities to understand them, but what counts is sustained low-intensity everyday relationships with insiders, which are most readily formed by program staff who are embedded in the offices of line agencies.
6. **Whether insiders are active within patronage networks, or actively avoiding them, they are vulnerable and will be reluctant to speak out.** Officers within the bureaucracy struggle to manage the authorities arising from their formal position and their informal positions within a patronage network. Those holding positions in the hierarchy may have sufficient political influence to withstand patronage politics from subordinates, but not from superiors. Officers who actively receive or confer patronage are then beholden to requests from others in the network. Those who refuse learn the identity of the perpetrator and where they informally sit in the network but, in the process, they become a liability and can be marginalised or even demoted. Project staff who are embedded in these offices sensibly protect their relationships (and themselves). It can be very difficult for outsiders to perceive these dynamics.
7. **Be alert to the potential for social accountability, to parents and communities, but understand this can be limited.** In many villages in PNG, it is still possible for communities to hold service providers to account through mechanisms like posting budgets and expenditure on public noticeboards. But success is **not universal**. Patronage politics has taken root in many village communities, reaching down from district and higher levels, aided by the lack of financial controls operating within decentralised finance systems. Once these local organisations are politically captured, the power of parents and communities to hold them to account is limited.
8. **Be alert for pockets of effectiveness, to the people and places where things are working, which occur despite the system, rather than as a function of it.** The very lack of effective systems cascading down from the national to local level **may create space** for locally led innovations to emerge. These pockets tend to be driven by pro-reform leaders, especially women, but they are isolated. There are opportunities for donor agencies to showcase the factors that lead to success, that might be adapted by others to their location.
9. **Significant opportunities for reform may rest with women leaders.** Patronage systems are overwhelmingly male-dominated. Female officers in the bureaucracy tend to stick more closely to the protocols and procedural protections available to them in the public service. They tend to gain power through the positions they hold in the hierarchy, rather than through patronage networks; it appears that they are neither invited to join them, nor inclined actively to pursue membership of them. Women tend to rely on their own networks. There may be opportunities for **donor agencies to strengthen** these networks into “coalitions for change”, but care must also be taken to do them no harm.

These nine guidelines are generalisable regardless of the sector, donor or project, and probably also to other clientelist states. The ability to achieve outcomes depends not only on technical approaches, but also on recognising what is politically possible. It requires sustained analysis of the incentives of key decision-makers as well as the drivers of organisational behaviour. Why are certain decisions made and why are others – seemingly sensible and technically desirable – not taken?

Aid agencies can go to extraordinary lengths to bypass government systems by setting up parallel procurement and financial systems. These are hardly sustainable and may undermine capacity development. Although achieving change is hard and may take many years, there is scope on the margins to shift the risk-reward ratio away from patronage. There are many people in the system, and almost all women, who would prefer to not engage in patronage politics given the choice, and who can lead reform.

This is no panacea, but there are no other proven options. Further work is required to develop fit-for-purpose analytical tools and frameworks to help aid agencies program more effectively in the context of patronage politics.

Disclosures:

This blog is based on analytical work funded by the Australian Research Council, the Development Leadership Program (University of Birmingham), and the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views are those of the author only.

Author/s:

Mark Moran

Mark Moran PhD is a development effectiveness analyst, writer and researcher. He is the former Chair of Development Effectiveness at the University of Queensland and a Visitor at the Australian National University's Development Policy Centre.

Link: <https://devpolicy.org/working-with-patronage-in-papua-new-guinea-20241112/>