

Working against corruption in PNG

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Date : June 14, 2011

This is a guest post by Thomas Webster of the National Research Institute in Papua New Guinea. It is an excerpt from an address that he gave University of Goroka 2011 Graduation on 30 March 2011.

Papua New Guinea has many challenges but it also offers lots of opportunities. Your future and your destiny will be of your own making. The onus is on you to make those dreams come true.

Nothing will go wrong if you work hard; have a bit of common sense, honesty and decency. If you work hard, are honest and law abiding, I can assure you that there will be many benefits and rewards for a happy and prosperous future.

However, our dreams and future are also dependent on the enabling environment around us.

We need to work and live in a society that recognizes and rewards hard work. We need to live in a law-abiding environment, where the justice system punishes criminals and enables a peaceful environment for us to work and live in. We want to live in a society where the transport and other infrastructure are available. We want to travel on good roads to reach schools, to reach health centers, to reach markets in order to buy and sell. Many of you who take up teaching as a career will want to work in schools where there are good houses for teachers, where classrooms have sound facilities and equipment to make teaching an enjoyable, interesting and rewarding career.

Unfortunately, there is a cancer that has grown so fast in our society that it threatens the very existence of PNG and will make it difficult if not impossible to achieve your dreams, if we do not take any action now.

That cancer is CORRUPTION.

Sir Mekere Morauta more than ten years ago was reported to have stated that corruption was systematic and systemic. If it is was wide spread, growing inwards as acceptable behavior at that time, this cancer is now gradually strangling development and killing this country of ours, Papua New Guinea.

International comparative studies on the perceptions of corruptive behavior by public officials conducted every year, put PNG at the bottom end of the scales and this has been worsening over the recent years.

There is corruption at all levels of government, national, provincial, district level, and local level governments and even at school board levels.

The Parliamentary Public Accounts Committee reports regularly that most government organizations have not had audited accounts with evidence of much abuse of public resources.

It takes two to tango and the private sector is also a party to the corruptive behavior of government officials. I have heard some good businessman say that they have to pay someone to get things done; otherwise they will not be able to do business. If they complain, they will be punished even more, because there is no official mechanism to deal with corrupt officials.

Corruption has contributed to the breakdown of basic infrastructure. Roads that used to exist more than two decades ago are no longer there. Many of the roads to the schools and places where you will be expected to work are in such a state that trucks and public transport no longer operate to those places.

Because of corruption, we cannot expect the police to protect us, nor the courts to punish the criminals, letting them to continue threatening the well being of good citizens.

If you or any of your family members are sick and you are able to get transport to the hospital, you may find that the drugs needed to cure the illness is not available because of corruption.

This cancer is now threatening the very essence of good governance and how we make decisions at the highest levels. Established systems and processes are no longer being followed but are being abused for personal gain. The laws, the administrative framework for good governance in managing and using resources for the benefit of all Papua New Guinean's are not being adhered to. The conduct of business of the National Parliament, where, our elected members represent us, has been weakened to a state where it no longer has adequate oversight on the executive government.

The annual government budgets are adequate to provide essential services but have been wasted, misapplied and simply stolen resulting in inadequate and poor levels of services. Basic Government services are lacking not because of the lack of money. It is a question of how and what we do with the money that has been allocated.

If the development assistance provided by AusAid, European Union and other development partners in some critical areas of health, education and road maintenance were not provided, we would be in real trouble.

Billions of kina have been spent on various projects over the last couple of years, but the projects have not been implemented according to approved guidelines so there is very little to show for these. Contract management and supervision guidelines are not followed. Millions of kina are paid up front for the complete value of a project when the work has not been even done yet. Contractors have pocketed the money and walked away without completing the project or for paltry work that in most instances have not met the full terms of the contract.

Roads and other major infrastructure that existed at the time of independence have not been maintained because funds allocated have been abused. Schools and health facilities in rural PNG have deteriorated because the transport systems are so poor for staff and other supporting services to flow.

A little over five years ago, when I was involved in a program working on accelerating girls participation in education, the school inspector for Okapa District here in Eastern Highlands Province told us at a meeting that even at the commencement of second term, half the schools in his district were not fully operational because teachers had not moved to the schools due to impassible road conditions.

If many other districts in PNG were facing a similar situation, then it is no wonder that our education and health indicators are as poor as they are.

PNG has comparatively some of the lowest quality of life indicators compared to other countries. Our infant and child mortality rates, our education participation indicator rates, the average family income levels in most rural areas, in all of these, PNG ranks among some of the lowest in the world.

In the area of education, a field that I have specialist expertise, the PNG basic education indicators are the lowest in the Asia Pacific Region ranking globally on the same levels as countries in the Sub-Saharan region wrought with civil war and disasters.

Corruption is the main reason why PNG is at the bottom of the development ladder using some of the key indicators of the Human Development Indicators put out by UNDP.

These indicators are not pulled out of the air by some officials in New York . They are taken from figures provided by the responsible government agency in Papua New Guinea who collect and collate those figures.

Let us also remind ourselves, that these are simply not just indicators. These reflect the conditions and state

of development of the people. These indicators represent real people, real people of Papua New Guinea; men, women and children that have not benefited from the development of PNG. They will not be able to benefit into the long run, unless we address this cancer.

We are also not only just missing out on key basic services because of corruption, but we also pay for the cost of corruption. When a company pays a corrupt government official to provide a service, that company then passes the costs on to the person who is paying for the goods and services that they provide. So we may actually be paying a few toea's more for the tin of fish or the packet of rice because the company is trying to recoup its expenses of paying a corrupt official.

When there are additional costs incurred for transporting goods because of poor roads, of paying for additional security, those costs are passed on to the consumer.

It is now time to give serious attention to this cancer, corruption.

We must all work collectively to address this disease as a matter of urgency. It requires strong political leadership to recognize and take responsibility for taking urgent action and ensuring that strong anti corruption mechanisms are developed, put in place and administered. Many other countries have successfully addressed corruption through the establishment of an Anti Corruption Commission, something PNG needs to seriously consider and take on board now.

The conduct of our political and top bureaucratic leaders may be captured by the leadership code, but many of our other senior public servants working in collusion with others from outside of the public service are not. We need strong anti-corruption laws and an anti-corruption commission that will deal with anyone, both government officials and those outside of it, engaged in corrupt activities.

The PNG Vision 2050 , and especially the Development Strategic Plan need to recognize corruption as a major obstacle to development and urgently develop specific steps to address it. Otherwise they will remain dreams and another of those plans.

We must put pressure on our leaders, political and bureaucratic leaders to address corruption as a serious issue.

At the same time, you and I as citizens must play our part in addressing corruption. In our personal lives at the workplace or outside of it, we need to make a conscious decision not to take part in or and to promote corruptive behavior. Do not bribe someone to do something for you. Do not ask for a bribe to do something that you are paid to do. Stop others from doing so.

Let us all try to do our bit to rid us of this disease that threatens our well being.

There is much optimism as the LNG Gas project promises to generate billions of kina for the PNG economy, double or even tripling the level of funds available in the PNG Government's annual budget. The spin off economic activities is expected to create more employment opportunities; more income for those involved in service and food production, and as a result more money in the economy for everyone.

The Government has approved PNG Vision 2050 Plan, the national dream for PNG. The Governments first steps in developing strategies to work towards achieving the national dream, is captured in the National Strategic Plan 2010 to 2030. You are expected to be a part of that dream, contributing to achieving that dream for PNG, and in doing so, enabling you to achieve your own dreams.

You will play an important part in the shaping of the future PNG. Our future and the future of the next generations of Papua New Guinea are in your hands.

PNG can choose to go the way of the United Arab Emirates and other oil and gas producing countries that have managed their revenues well for the development and betterment of their current and further citizens of

PNG. If we want to go that route, we must begin to seriously address corruption now.

Or we can simply choose to do nothing and go the way of Nigeria , where hundreds of billions of dollars have been generated from oil revenues over some decades now. However, the living conditions of the people of Nigeria have not advanced.

All the additional revenues and riches that the LNG Gas project will generate, will not make any difference to our lives and well being, if we do not arrest this disease. We will remain poorer and things will get even worse if we do not treat this cancer.

Achieving your dreams and the PNG dream of Vision 2050 will only be possible if we address corruption as a matter of urgency now.

Thomas Webster is the Director of the National Research Institute in Papua New Guinea. The NRI is Papua New Guinea's leading think tank on public policy and development-related issues and trends. You can find more information on the NRI, including the full text of the speech [here](#).