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Building community engagement in Papua New Guinea, part 1: opening up governance

*This is the first post in a three-part series on the work of the **Building Community Engagement in Papua New Guinea** (BCEP) program, which seeks to strengthen relations between citizens and the state in PNG.*

For the last three years, I've been acting as a "critical friend" to this fascinating program in PNG. As the name suggests, BCEP supports civil society, helping it strengthen its engagement with the state, but also changing norms in crucial areas such as gender-based violence or disability.

It is one of Australia's biggest governance and civil society organisation (CSO) programs — Australia's aid program traditionally favours partnerships with governments. It will provide a key test of Australia's **locally led development framework**, which is something other donors have found easier to promise than to put into practice.

This series of posts summarises some stories of change I've been writing to try and capture for Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), and others, what impact a program like BCEP has on the ground. They don't represent full evaluations but are an attempt to understand what is going on through conversations with BCEP staff and partners. This post focuses on BCEP's support for several open governance initiatives.



First, a bit of context for readers less familiar with PNG. It is an extraordinary country. Its population of somewhere around 15 million (no-one really knows) is divided up into some 850 tribes, with distinct languages which are often different enough not to be understood by a Papua New Guinean not from that area or tribe – so *tok pisin* (pidgin) is the lingua franca. Its Westminster governance system is uncomfortably overlaid onto a traditional set of tribal loyalties.

Helping citizens' voices be heard in budget processes. Ever since independence (50 years ago this year), PNG budgets have been set in the capital, Port Moresby. Every June and July, national, provincial and district finance officials travel to the finance ministry to discuss the budget framework. At both the national and subnational level, the process has been closed and somewhat secretive, exclusively reserved for a chosen few.

Until now. Supporting PNG's **Open Government Partnership** (OGP) was the entry point that allowed BCEP to identify "regional budget workshops" as a way to prise open the process. The OGP (sorry about all the acronyms) is housed within the Department of National Planning and Monitoring (DNPM), and together with DNPM, BCEP identified an ideal partner with the mandate to make it happen.

That partner was the **Consultative Implementation and Monitoring Council** (CIMC), a policy dialogue platform. It has a vast network of relationships with both government and civil society and is legally mandated through a decision of the National Executive Council – PNG's cabinet of senior ministers.

With BCEP funding and technical support, CIMC embarked on a series of pilot regional budget information workshops, aimed at demonstrating the feasibility and value of a different approach to budget setting.

Four regional workshops were held, followed by a **national Budget Information Workshop** in Port Moresby. CIMC brought together all the government departments involved in planning, implementing and reporting on the budget at the national and sub-national levels and invited them to explain their roles and potential entry points for citizens' participation.

According to Francis Wargirai, at the time a Senior Project Officer at CIMC and now Senior Policy Manager at BCEP, "people were thirsty for this information" and appreciated BCEP's "bringing them together with government departments who have the power and could explain how money is allocated, and how it trickles down to the local levels." He added, "I think the idea has caught on. In the Highlands we planted a seed, for people to start thinking about it. Elsewhere the seed was already planted and the shoots needed watering."



Community Consultations on the operation of health centres in the PNG Highlands (Care International)

How will BCEP and CIMC know if the seeds have sprouted? It is too early to expect concrete results on the ground in terms of changed budget allocations, but there are some positive signals. DNPM minister Ano Pala has recommended establishing a "Joint Government-CSO Committee" to monitor and report on National Budget implementation. The Minister has also proposed an amendment to the *National Procurement Act 2017* to include CSO participation at the subnational level.

Social accountability in healthcare. PNG's healthcare system is dogged by a range of problems such as shortages of basic medicines and low staff morale, culminating in poor treatment of patients and staff absenteeism.

Since 2016, BCEP's partner Care International has been working with community leaders and village health volunteers in Morobe province to address this situation via a social accountability approach.

This introduces feedback mechanisms, such as community scorecards, a publicly

displayed *Citizens' Charter* and support for strengthening Community Health Committees. An evaluation in late 2024 concluded that:

Community or user voice in health-service decision making was largely non-existent prior to the introduction of social accountability approaches. Because of the project, communities are now organising and advocating with service providers and Government authorities for improved health services.

As an illustration, Care points to improvements at Markham District Hospital, where the Officer in Charge requested eleven complaint feedback boxes and citizens' charters to be placed in the labour ward, post-natal ward, general outpatient area and elsewhere.

After two months, the sectional heads opened the boxes and discovered 162 complaints from service users. These included poor health worker attendance, unclean toilets and an incinerator needing refurbishment. One of the main complaints raised was that there is no standby generator. This means that when power goes off during the night, health workers use torches for deliveries in the labour ward.

After discussing these issues, the Markham District Health Committee installed solar lights in the wards and provided security around the hospital area. They installed six new septic toilets for the patients as well.

While the social accountability tools and processes were important, success was most likely when the right relationships and individuals were in place. According to Sonia Gawi of Care:

Success in Markham came because I know the district administrator from a previous job. I could go sit in his office, invite him along for a sensitisation session, then he came on board. I constantly keep my eye open to make those connections.

Responding to a crisis: the January 2024 riots. The combination of flexible BCEP funding and the Church Professionals Network's (CPN) connections allowed it to respond quickly to the **10 January 2024 riots** in Port Moresby. It had previously proposed a series of quarterly "Minds Meet" dialogues on salient topics in public policy, so decided to dedicate the first of these, in March 2024, to the underlying causes of the riots. This was the first substantive public policy discussion about the origins of the riots.

The network has extraordinary access to PNG decision makers, according to the CPN's Samuel Ray: "The Secretary of Justice is a life member. The key people are bought into our work and will show up to our events." The CPN is already an accomplished insider influencer. Ray says:

We talk to them in a nice way, say that we want to bring them on board, but at the back of our minds we are always asking "what is the problem here?" We know the Auditor General doesn't have power, so we ask them "what are the challenges you face?", not "you have to do this or that".

These three case studies demonstrate how BCEP is supporting citizens to break into previously closed governance systems. Whether it's opening up budget processes, creating feedback mechanisms in healthcare, or enabling rapid policy responses to crises, there are some common threads: the importance of finding the right partners with legitimacy and networks, the value of flexible funding that can respond quickly to opportunities and, above all, the centrality of relationships in making change happen in PNG.

In the next post in this series, I'll examine how BCEP and its partners are tackling one of PNG's most challenging issues: sorcery accusation-related violence.

This post first appeared on the [DevPolicy blog](#).

About the author

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