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LOCAL GOVERNMENT AND THE EVOLUTION OF LOCAL DEMOCRACY IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA, 1964 — 2008

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Introduction

The period 1964-1974 saw the development, and success, of local councils and local democracy. Local councils were generally effective and successful between 1964-1965 and 1974-1975 because, among other things, there was strong political will and a strong sense of purpose by the colonial administration to make councils work. Also, they were given all the necessary support. Moreover, local councils were successful because they operated within a framework of effective local democracy and local governance:

- there were local elections that reflected the will of the people
- there was participation in decision making on important issues, through frequent visits by patrol officers and kiaps, who stayed in what were known as council barracks, during their visits;
- participation in decision making was also evident through cooperative societies, which were successful;
- decision making was inclusive, and reflected the

whole of communities, again through frequent visits by kiaps, and through the cooperative societies; and

- decision making was open, and involved community consultation and consensus.¹

However, local councils and local democracy were not so effective between 1975 and the mid-1990s, because the democratic framework to ensure their effectiveness was replaced by the 1976 Organic Law on Provincial Government, which saw provincial governments take over the roles and responsibilities of local councils. Provincial governments had become a threat to national and local politicians. As a consequence, local councils withered. The OLPG was intended to promote decentralisation, but sadly, it rendered ineffective the institution that was closest to the people – the local councils. The OLPG went against the Commonwealth's belief that *“decentralisation and local government are more effective and lead to more sustainable development, if they are democratic”*.²

¹ Councils collected head tax to help pay for development projects. Administrative support to councils included the Commissioner for Local Government; Regional Local Government Officers, as policy advisers; District Officers, as administrative advisers; Department of Works and Transport Advisers; and the Department of Works Local Government Technical Support Division.

² Commonwealth Secretariat, 2005, p.7.

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At the national level, there were centralisation tendencies on the part of the national government to assume greater control and intervention. These tendencies characterised the period from 1986 to 1996, which led to the reform of the provincial government system, including the resuscitation of the local councils, under the 1995 Organic Law on Provincial Governments and Local-level Governments (OLPGLLG), following the recommendations of the 1993 Bipartisan Committee on Provincial Government.

National government intervention came in the form of the Village Services Scheme (VSS), in 1993. However, initiatives under the VSS were overtaken by the 1995 OLPGLLG. Although the OLPGLLG led to the deepening of local democracy through the establishment of wards and ward development committees, capacity and funding constraints continued as problems in service delivery, among other things, because enabling national legislation that would have empowered them to raise their own revenue was either not updated or enacted between 1995 and 2006.

For more than a decade, there was a lack of political will and leadership to devise enabling legislation that would empower local councils to generate internal revenue, apart from national government grants, under the OLPGLLG. Despite the OLPGLLG's intention to revive local councils, it added to the complexity of legislation, public office, and administration, which further undermined local democracy, local councils, and local governance.³

Ironically, the OLPGLLG had the attributes of a framework for the deepening of local democracy and local governance. As a result of the OLPGLLG, there are 313 local-level governments (LLGs), with 6 137 wards throughout Papua New Guinea.⁴ These are made up of:

- 106 LLGs, with 2 163 wards in the Highlands Region;
- 95 LLGs, with 2 011 wards in the Momase Region;
- 50 LLGs, with 762 wards in the New Guinea Islands Region; and
- 62 LLGs, with 1 201 wards in the Southern Region.

What the OLPGLLG lacked, in terms of implementation, was the political will, leadership, and direction to translate the Organic Law into national Acts, combined with a system of intergovernmental funding, based on a formula of K20 per head, which, in turn, created a wide range of capabilities for LLGs across the country. At the community level, wards and ward development committees are democratic structures, but many have not been transformed into inclusive participatory democracies, as many councillors do not know how to make wards and ward committees become functional.

The period 1997 to 2008 saw national government intervention that led to the removal of LLG presidents from provincial assemblies, provincial executive councils, and provincial committees. After the passage of the *District Authorities Bill* in 2006, the influence of LLGs at the provincial level ceased, as the LLG presidents were no longer members of the provincial assemblies. However, their influence still remains at the district, LLG, and ward levels. There is plenty of room for women's participation at the LLG and ward levels, which was evident in the 2008 LLG elections.

Reforms to funding arrangements under the National Economic and Fiscal Commission's (NEFC) guidelines should increase the capacity of LLGs to undertake service delivery on the basis of need. This is a paradigm shift from the old model under the OLPGLLG, where funding to LLGs was based on K20 per head, per LLG population.

Local Governments and Local Democracy: The Way Forward

Despite the 2006 *District Authorities Act*, the OLPGLLG still has the makings of a framework for effective local democracy and local governance, because it recognises wards and ward development committees where people can be directly involved in decision making. Wards and ward committees are necessary to meet the needs of local communities. As democracy means 'rule by the people', wards and ward committees give people a voice in the decisions and the matters that affect their lives.

³ The Public Sector Reform Advisory Group states that Papua New Guinea has lost almost 30 years of opportunities. In its view, to ignore the possibility of refining systems, and instead, repeatedly adopt major changes and end up with no level of government that is competent to deal with the needs of most citizens, is a long-term failure, PSRAG Second Report 2006:14).

⁴ Ministry for Provincial and Local Government Affairs, 'Papua New Guinea Local Government Gazette, No. G1', Port Moresby, 15 January 2007, pp.1-55.

Strengthening local democracy is based on the belief that strong, effective, democratic local government is the best way of ensuring local democracy. Wards and ward committees should involve the local people and service users, such as PMV operators, tradestore operators, dinghy operators, village carpenters, guest-house operators, and others, so that resources can be more effectively and appropriately used. The greater capacity that local governments, wards and ward committees have in involving service providers in decision making, the stronger and more sustainable those decisions will be.

Local governments, wards, and ward committees are responsible for local roads, primary education, primary health care, cultural facilities, sports, local economic development, and administrative services, such as electoral arrangements, population statistics, and licensing, which are some of the everyday services that are necessary for a decent basic standard of living. Many of these services relate to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), hence the local involvement in delivering the MDGs is of paramount importance.⁵

Local services may be provided in partnership with donor organisations, the private sector, and service providers, such as PMV, dinghy, and tradestore operators, and even to landowners. Donors could give funding direct to local councils for infrastructure and other economic development projects. Such projects would be approved by local councils, through the wards and ward committees, and included in their budgets. Local governments, wards, and ward committees could bring in expertise or service providers to provide a variety of services under the national government's public-private partnership arrangements.

Wards and ward committees are necessary for community leadership and for developing sustainable communities. Local governments need to work with their wards and ward committees, and other service providers to draw up long-term plans for the future of their areas. They must work together with other sectors and service providers to agree on the plans, and how to implement them locally.

Local autonomy and capacity are necessary for local councils, wards, and ward committees to function. At the same time, local councils, wards, and ward committees must continue to work in partnership with the national government and provincial governments, to achieve national, provincial, and district priorities and objectives. Partnerships between these levels of government are essential for good local governance.

Local councils, wards, and ward committees need a sound financial basis. While councils may generate some internal revenue from local taxes and licences, they need funding from the national government to ensure that money is available for distribution to areas that most need support.

Attempts by the NEFC to redistribute inter-government funding on the basis of need constitute an appropriate initiative. The passage of the Bill in parliament to amend the funding arrangements could not have come at a better time, because poorer areas may not be able to raise enough money locally to fund the services they need, as their tax base is low.

The new funding arrangements proposed by the NEFC are necessary to ensure that local councils, wards, and ward committees have sufficient financial capacity to meet the needs of their communities. Local councils must set their own budgets so that they can meet community needs, through wards and ward committees.

At least three seats could be reserved for women in local-level elections, representing residents in eastern, central, and western areas, and be elected by male and female voters.

Women's participation in local elections and councils can be guaranteed by law. Women can also contest local-level elections at the ward level. Among other things, this would generate women's empowerment and accountability to the voters at the ward and LLG levels. Women's empowerment is in line with the third objective of the MDGs.⁶

5 Commonwealth Secretariat, 2005, p. 13.

6 Commonwealth Secretariat 2005, Appendix 3. The 2008 LLG Elections have made history for women in PNG. Kainantu women have scored a great victory in the Kainantu District LLG elections by electing a woman as president. The winner, Mrs. Hombomia, defeated a strong line-up of 18 male candidates and came out victor with a convincing 4 770 votes, beating the nearest rival and early leader by more than 1 500 votes. Women have been elected councillors for the Vanimo Urban LLG and Wewak Urban LLG in West Sepik and East Sepik Provinces, and women were elected councillors in East New Britain, as well as in Motu Koitabu in the 2008 LLG elections (*Post-Courier*, 25 June 2008; *The National*, 17 June 2008, p. 5).

Conclusion

The OLPGLLG and other legislation, such as the Organic Law on National and Local-level Government Elections (OLNLLGE), and including funding under NEFC's arrangements, need to be integrated into a framework for local democracy and local governance, where there is/are:

- local elections that reflect the will of the people in a safe, political environment (the 2008 Local-level Government Elections suggest that some areas are not safe for the exercise of a secret ballot);
- participation in decision making through consultation and community consensus (wards and ward committees are better placed as democratic structures to foster participation in decision making on important issues);
- inclusive decision making that reflects the whole of the community (wards and ward committees are already in place to foster inclusive decision making);
- decision making that is open and transparent (wards and ward committees as well as the local councils, can allow for this, as they are closest to the people, as well as the local councils);
- fairness, honesty, openness, transparency, and accountability, as well as checks and balances to combat corruption and law and order issues (village courts, and land mediation and community-based organisations, together with wards and ward committees already exist to promote these values); and
- local autonomy to manage local affairs (freedom and power to drive the local agenda and be able to respond to the needs of their communities).

This framework needs to be monitored and evaluated on a consistent basis by national and

local governments, at the local level, to ensure effective local democracy, local governance, and service delivery in the local communities.

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