“Sometimes called a “silent” or a “quiet” revolution, decentralization is among the most important reforms of the past 50 years”, ... implemented in a majority of developing and developing countries”. ... the decentralisation process affects all spheres of society, from the nature and quality for governance to national wealth and economic growth and, more broadly to citizen well-being” (OECD;2019).

Introduction

The above statement is from the lead sentence in the introduction to a report of 2019 titled, “Making Decentralisation Work: A Handbook for Policy Makers” by the Secretariat of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD)\(^1\). Decentralisation is an important policy reform agenda regardless of whether a country is “developed” or “developing”.

PNG has been at the forefront of this reform agenda, introducing three major reforms to the decentralised system of Government within the last forty-five years. Moving from a highly centralised colonial administration to a highly decentralised system in 1976 at Independence. Since then, reforms have resulted in a centralised/decentralised system as described by some analysts.

The system introduced in 1976 allowed for elected provincial governments headed by Premiers, effectively decentralising political control to the provinces. The accompanying administrative system led to significant capacity challenges for a newly independent country at both national and provincial levels. Political decentralisation eroded powers of national parliamentarians, leading to the reforms of 1996. These reforms handed powers to the National Members of Parliament who now assumed membership of Provincial Assemblies with the Regional Member of Parliament being head of the political and executive government of their province. In 2014, Open Members of Parliament assumed more executive powers at the District Level after the passing of the District Development Authority Act.

The main arguments for these reforms were to strengthen overall governance systems in order to improve the delivery of basic services. It however remains an open question whether the reforms are achieving their intended objectives.

Is the Current Decentralised Governance System Effective.

There are persistent reports of the deteriorating levels of access to basic services in PNG, even if this differs enormously across the nation. There is considerable consensus that the current governance system is not working to improve delivery of basic services.

People across the country have cried out for improvements in access to basic services in both urban and rural regions. Many in rural areas who miss out suffer in silence as they have limited means to communicate their complaints to the authorities. Some change to the above has been brought about by posts on social media that really tell us of the dire conditions.

Some leaders have argued that their electorates are simply too large to be serviced efficiently. They have demanded that their districts be split into separate electorates so that the people could have access to funds and basic services. Will increased number of electorates lead to improved governance and service delivery across the country?

The reforms to decentralised governance arrangements may have had unintended knock-on effects on other parts of “Governance Systems”. The effective role and functioning of the “National Parliament” as an Institution as originally envisaged when the Constitution of PNG was adopted at Independence, could have been affected. National Members of Parliament spend more time and effort focusing on issues to do with Provincial and District Level matters and less attention to matters of national priority. Oversight matters on the work of the Executive Government, the Public Service and matters of national and international interest to PNG as a whole, get less attention. Some National Government Ministers seem to use resources intended for national priorities to promote development initiatives in their electorates, often times to the detriment of overall national needs.

Parliamentary oversight through the Public Accounts Committee of the National Parliament has also been lacking. This Committee is meant to hold the Executive Government accountable for the implementation of the budget and work programs, but they have not been able to do their work. The Committee members are more focused on the needs of their Electorates (Provincial and District) rather than accountability of the disbursed funds? And in any case, all Members of Parliament are now effectively part of the Executive arm of Government, diminishing the oversight role and responsibilities of the National Parliament of keeping the Executive Government in check. This is an important function of Parliament under the West Minister System of Government that PNG adopted.

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The deteriorating access to basic services sits at odds with the National Budget which has broken records with the 2022 Budget reaching twenty Billion Kina. How can an increasing quantum of funding provided through the national budget co-exist with deteriorating access to basic services? Is this due to waste? The Auditor General has not been able to conduct Financial Audits of Provincial and District Development Authorities since 2016. Even prior reports highlighted significant weaknesses that may not have been addressed. The Auditors General’s Office is inadequately funded, preventing it from carrying out its work effectively.

Another indication of the weak governance system generated by the reforms is the pressure from the Members of Parliament for more funds. The current Prime Minister has announced recently that if his party wins the 2022 National Elections then he will introduce reforms whereby the Prime Minister is elected through a popular vote by the people. Former Prime Ministers and other leaders have also expressed their support for the proposed change. This push for removing the pressure from Members of Parliament who wield the sword of “votes of no confidence” over Prime Ministers may improve one aspect. But solving that one problem may not improve governance and service delivery if other components that may potentially be affected are not addressed. For instance, a popularly elected Prime Minister may usurp the powers of the parliament, leading to even worse governance, if appropriate check and balance systems are not addressed at the same time.

The public service has lacked both cohesion and direction. Coordination of functions at the national, provincial, and district levels have been haphazard. Some commentators have complained of a large, lethargic and hungry bureaucracy that has consumed a large chunk of the national budget. At provincial levels, public servants are not sure who is their "boss"; - Provincial Administrators, District Administrators or Consultants engaged by MPs. Many public servants at both national and provincial levels, conveniently keep out of sight and get paid regularly, as the electronic payroll system keeps on paying the fortnightly salaries, whether you are at work or not.

Provincial government leaders have repeatedly called for greater autonomy powers so that Provincial Governments can use the appropriate powers and functional responsibilities in order to improve service delivery. However, there seem to be no realistic response from the National Government authorities as options seem difficult and other matters require attention.

Finally, the Governments own commissioned report by the Constitutional Law Reform Commission (CLRC) and the Department of Provincial Affairs (DPLGA) of 2015, states emphatically, ‘the current organic law (i.e., the decentralised system), is no longer viable to effectively deliver basic services and a new system was needed’. A proposal for change in the form of a draft Organic Law that was submitted to Government, has yet to be considered by Parliament, seven (7) years since the report was compiled.

The system is chugging along with the obvious danger signals calling for action, but if we are not serious and do not do anything soon, the systems may grind to a halt or may result in other non-desired outcomes that will be difficult to change.

What needs to be Done?

The CRLRC/DPLGA Report of 2015 makes one very important observation. Past Reforms to the Decentralisation of Government had been ad-hoc and on a piece meal basis... The Organic Law has been amended so many times that it has lost its original purpose and meaning for a decentralised system of government. (2015:XX).

The report recommends strongly for a more holistic approach when considering future reforms to the Decentralised Systems of Government in PNG.

The PNG National Research Institute has established the Autonomy and Decentralisation Research Project to explore and facilitate research and discussions in a holistic manner. A “Framework for Discussion on Autonomy Governance Issues” is proposed that enables discussions on issues and options for improvement encompassing all aspects of governance systems.

A National Conference is being organised on February 16th and 17th of 2022, to consider ideas on effective decentralised systems of government in PNG. The conference program will allow for discussions sharing experiences and ideas for future decentralised governance arrangements. Research Papers from both National and International experts will be presented to inform discussions.

Political leaders, public service leaders and others are invited to participate. There will be limited space for in-attendance participants due to Covid 19 Restrictions. However, the sessions are being broadcast via Zoom, the NBC and through Facebook - both NBC and PNG NRI for others wanting to participate.

A key objective of the conference is for the Government to consider the issues and decide on a “Process” to review and consider reforms to the Decentralised System of Government in a more holistic manner. In doing so, a more effective decentralised system of government, including other enabling governance system can be considered, leading to improved and sustained basic services delivery system in Papua New Guinea.

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