

## *How can churches lead to better national outcomes? A PNG example*

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Papua New Guinea's "Churches Partnership Program" has led to improved health and education services in remote areas, better disaster response, positive culture changes through the country and improved governance. It was built using existing church structures, with the knowledge that over 90% of the Papua New Guinean population are church members. The Programme consists of seven main church denominations in PNG, linking them to seven church-based accredited NGOs in Australia and funding from DFAT<sup>1</sup>.

The funders have recognised that PNG churches act as a strong civil society, and are arguably more ubiquitous and influential than the local or national government.

Instead of relying on a "standard" progression of development where the social contract between citizen and state strengthens, the CPP programme aims to make use of the existing parallel institutions (the churches) which are already providing value; churches manage a large number of state schools and health care facilities in PNG. Churches have the potential not only to perform functions that the state cannot, but also to provide political pressure for, and model, good governance. The membership of any church will of course be imperfect, and the CPP is not immune to difficulties, but by providing the right environment, mentors and parameters it is widely considered to be producing net benefits for the nation.

This short paper describes the rationale behind four dimensions of the programme which have made it largely successful, as well as factors which have led to difficulties.

CPP started with a conversation between Australian church leaders and DFAT. Both parties believed they held a small part of the solution to a dysfunctional state, but were interested in bringing to the fore the PNG churches which were understood to hold far greater potential for national stability.

Further details about the CPP are available publically. What follows are four critical factors which were sewn into the programme from the beginning, which are not necessarily typical of large programmes funded by governments.

1. **Long time frame.** The funder allowed 2 x five-year phases before increasing demands of high rigor and comprehensive data. This allowed 10 years for deep conversations, wrestling with purpose, structures and mechanisms to form organically, and for consensus decision making.

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<sup>1</sup> The Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, Australian Government.

2. **Funding of relationships.** Two 3+ day forums per year were pivotal in allowing relationships and trust to form. Trust between Catholics and Protestants, and between denominations with a history of competition for geographical dominance was not initially high. Yet through regular forums and gatherings, one would see church leaders across theological divides laughing together, planning together, sharing information together, and being remarkably vulnerable together. Based on the fairly low number of documents and plans produced, it would be tempting to superficially conclude that each forum was inefficient and poor value for money. Another conclusion is that taking influential people and creating a space for unity – in a country that desperately needs unity – is a powerful and highly constructive thing to do.
3. **Language.** The language of “human rights” feels foreign, colonial and ungodly to many people in the Pacific. The language of theology feels right, and trustworthy, and familiar. The programme leadership ensured time and space to create a platform of theological unity across different churches, in a language that felt natural.  
 First, the “Theology on Development” was written by all seven churches, directing them to act for dignity, respect, empowerment and advocacy. This document has the unifying effect of the SDGs, but written in the language of the church, by the church, for the church.  
 Second, the “Theology of Gender Equality”, also a unifying document, is deeply and widely changing how people see gender justice: church leaders influence theological colleges, which influence preachers, who influence the majority of the country.  
 As an example of the language of theology, churches bring an understanding of being human as a birth right from God. Being human is to be created in God’s image and therefore an inherently good thing. This language promotes a deep respect for all genders, rather than eliciting a defensive distrust typical of phrases like “gender justice” or “feminism”.
4. **Letting go of Power.** Although the partnership was funded by DFAT the partnership leadership was inter-church, and between churches and NGOs (like Baptist World Aid, or Caritas). The leadership structure has resulted in strong PNG voice and leadership, and with expert support from NGOs trained in a support role (strategy, databases, monitoring etc). This approach has led to churches increasing their ability to serve citizens throughout the country, as well as applying democratic pressure to the PNG government in a way that DFAT cannot.

A number of other factors have acted *against* successes of the programme. Of these the following examples may be able to be managed by funding parties and/or programme designers.

1. Funding has followed the usual practice of being approved for development rather than other church-related purposes such as proselytization or printing prayer books. While few are calling for this to change, it has presented some internal challenges for some churches. Churches in PNG have historically managed a great many schools and hospitals. Supported by large quantities of Australian funding, they are

now managing adult literacy programmes, livelihood training, HIV counselling and testing, women's safe houses, scholarship programmes, disabilities services and a great many more initiatives.

Rural preachers, on the other hand, surviving on a meagre income are in some cases feeling left out – both in terms of money and having a seat at the table.

CPP involves the church fulfilling its potential as a force for good in society, and they must consider each layer of their structures. Because each church structure is set up differently, these difficulties are not uniform. Solutions are therefore not able to be standardised.

2. PNG churches have a long history of engagement with the government of PNG. The government is not strong or stable enough to provide normal government services to all parts of the country, and has a record of funding churches to manage state schools and hospitals in many areas. CPP has been designed to create a wider and deeper partnership with the government of PNG to align with and augment government services and to hold government to account – all with a people-centred purpose. In reality engagement has been erratic, piecemeal and ungratifying despite a broad rhetoric from government of support for all CPP principles.

More positive exceptions include specific government departments engaging in specific collaborations for which they are accountable within their own structures.