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CHANGES AND CHALLENGES IN SERVICE DELIVERY BROUGHT BY THE 1995 REFORMS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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Key Points

- In 1995, reforms were introduced to the sub-national political structures and governance systems in order to decentralise provincial functions to the districts and the Local Level Governments (LLG).
- The 1995 reforms were intended to address the challenges and the decline in service delivery, however, it created new challenges that further restricted service delivery.
- As a result of the 1995 reforms, more powers were ceded to national politicians who take control of the district funding and service delivery in the LLGs.
- The 1995 reforms have resulted in a system that serves the best interest of national politicians, as the supporters of the elected member benefit and receive services, while others receive very little.
- There is a need to review the 1995 reforms to enhance an improvement in service delivery in Papua New Guinea.

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Papua New Guinea (PNG) has three tiers of government: the National, Provincial and the Local Level Government (LLG) respectively. The provincial government service delivery system was established in 1975 under the Organic Law on Provincial Government (OLPG), stipulated in the National Constitution of PNG (Duncan & Banga, 2018). This OLPG system was changed with the reforms in 1995 to Organic Law on Provincial and Local Level Government (OLPGLLG). This change has brought about confusion over the roles and responsibilities of the national and the provincial agencies in delivering services to the people. This article examines the changes of 1995 reforms as to illustrate the positive and negative impacts of the reforms to service delivery in PNG.

Historical development

After more than two decades that PNG had its independence in 1975, there is a sharp decline in the quality and the effectiveness of service delivery in the provinces (Ketan, 2013). The better road conditions, well-equipped schools, and health facilities that the public in PNG had witnessed few years ago, mostly in the rural settings are no longer maintained. The national government began to blame the provincial governments for the decline in the sustenance and effectiveness of those services. Funding constraints and inadequate skilled personnel were identified as key contributing factors (Ketan, 2013). Political power struggle between the provincial and the national government after the 1995 reforms, led to the establishment of the District Development Authority (DDA) in 2014. This gave more powers to the national politicians and there emerged a more centralised governance systems in the districts compared to that of the previous provincial government system before the reforms.

Major changes of the 1995 reforms in PNG

Change in the political structure affecting service delivery

The change in the Organic Law on Provincial Government (OLPG) to Organic Law on Provincial Government and Local Level Government (OLPGLLG) in the light of improving service delivery had the opposite impact on service

¹ This shift has vested more power to the national politicians, who are legislators, have now become district chair of the projects and developments. A legislator was turned into an implementor of the legislation with the reforms which raises concerns on the issues of transparency and accountability of the DSIP funds.

delivery mechanisms¹. The District Service Improvement Program (DSIP) funding was made available directly to the District Development Authorities (DDA) and not through the provincial government. The new system has bypassed the second tier of the government. The national government is now directly coordinating with the DDAs and Local Level Governments (LLGs) to utilise national budgets and implement district development plans.

It was noted by Reilly et al. (2014) that before the 1995 reforms, the national government continually blamed the provincial government for the decline in service delivery. The provincial government system is labeled as corrupt and weak in terms of service delivery. However, studies done by Wiltshire (2012), on the realities of service delivery shows that reforms had further worsened the situation. Many people became vulnerable to accessing basic services like health and education. The reforms seemed to have created competition between the national politicians and the provincial politicians for political favors at the expense of the DSIP and PSIP funding. The national politicians grew more powerful and influential in the districts than the provincial politicians.

Change in political governance system affecting service delivery

Papua New Guinea has witnessed the emergence of a more centralised system of governance and not so much on the decentralised functions (Ketan, 2013; Reilly et al., 2014). It is noted that the DSIP fund is directly controlled by the national politicians through the office of the DDA as the chair person. Thus, most of the services in the LLGs were delivered on political patronage and not freely distributed as it used to be before the 1995 reforms. This revealed an emergence of a political culture that empowered voters to lobby for service delivery with their votes. Seemingly, winning candidates reward their voters and supporters with gifts and services such as schools, health posts, roads and bridges while those on the losing side gets nothing. The services are diverted to those in favour of the national politicians and not shared equally as it was intended by the reforms.

The power struggle between the provincial politicians and the national politicians continue to divide the supporters. These observed differences also featured in the appointment of people into the provincial and the district administration

offices. If an individual is not a supporter of the current national or provincial member elected, he/she could hardly be given a job despite qualification and experiences. A classic example is the Gulf Province. People who have voted for the winning candidate, have a share, or have secured a position and those who are not, simply do not have a place (Wiltshire, 2012). Such a trend had further divided the people in the LLGs and communities resulting in conflicts and violence. This is why many are being deprived of receiving basic services (schools, health posts, roads and bridges), as illustrated in the literature reviewed. The national politicians run the show with the DSIP funding at their discretion. Based on the studies done, 'Equal distribution of services' is only a phrase, but in reality, it is the supporters of the MPs who benefited the most. The outlook of the reforms is more on the decentralisation of functions, but the effectiveness of service delivery lies in the centralised governance system in the districts that controls and manipulate the decision making on DSIP funds in PNG.

Challenges brought forth by 1995 reforms in PNG

Leadership and administrative challenges

Without having to address the funding constraints and lack of skilled personnel which were the key contributing factors identified towards lack of service delivery, the government pushed for reforms (Reilly et al., 2014). With the first decentralisation in 1975, some powers were transferred to the provinces, but funding allocations were withheld. But with the 1995 reforms, legislative frameworks were established (DDA Act, 2014)² to do away with the Joint District Planning and Budget Priorities Committees in the provincial level so each district do their own planning. These changes seemed to put the provincial politicians under suspense of their roles and duties in the affairs of looking after the national services (like roads, hospitals, provincial high schools, etc.) in the provinces. There is no collaboration and coordination between provincial and district leaders on service delivery noted in the literature reviewed. It became a political issue where the national politicians gained control of their districts while the provincial politicians became less participative in the core district development plans and service delivery.

There is no structure put in place to monitor and assess the use of DSIP funds and the efficiency of service delivery from the literature that were consulted on service delivery in PNG. Thus, every district seemed to have become autonomous and operated in isolation under the DDA and the national politicians. There is ambiguity and confusion noted on the roles and functions of provincial leaders with that of the national leaders. Reilly et al. (2014) stated that

the national politician who is the legislator, has now become an implementor of the legislation. For public servants and other individuals to openly criticise the national politicians for their wrong decision is often seen as a direct attack. It is evident from the literature reviewed that there is a division in the hierarchy of leadership in the provinces that further divides the morale of the public servants and other workers at the grassroots level in PNG.

Challenges on service delivery systems

Studies (Reilly et al., 2014) have shown that the changes in the political structure had done away with the system of equal distribution of goods and services. The concept of 'free service delivery' had been replaced with a new concept of service delivery based on whom you supported and voted for in the national elections. This practice becomes more obvious in the literature on the national elections when candidates lobby for service with peoples' votes. There is a consistent trend noted in scholarly reports on acquiring service mentioned in the successive studies on the national elections in PNG. This trend raises concerns on depriving peoples right for services throughout the country.

Since the reform has given each district the autonomy for planning and budgeting of the DSIP funds, the district administrative structure and planning varies. There is no national development framework for the districts that could be used for monitoring and conducting evaluation of the progress of the district developments. Thus, each district development arrangements are done differently according to their respective DDAs. The question of accountability, transparency, monitoring and evaluation, all lies in with the national politicians as empowered by the DDA Act 2014 and the changes of the 1995 reforms. All the scholarly literature consulted on the reforms seemed to identify a more centralised form of government system emerging in the districts instead of seeing a more decentralised form of governance where services should be delivered equally without boundaries. Whether the public funds are really benefiting the people or not since politicking has become central to service delivery, is something most of the literature left unanswered.

Similar experiences of the service delivery-related problems in PNG (Ketan, 2013; Reilly et al., 2014) were reported in Nigeria and other countries who went through several reforms hoping to improve service delivery. Due to the persistent challenges faced regarding service delivery in Nigeria, the Nigerian Government pushed for structural changes in the governance systems (Oyedele, 2015). The Nigerian Government is recommended to adopt measures that increase the citizens' input in the formulation and implementation of policies on public service delivery. Oyedele (2015) stated that the Public Private Partnership

² In February 2014, the PNG Parliament amended the OLPGLG to remove the Joint District Planning and Budget Priorities Committee. These were replaced under the District Development Authority Act, passed in December 2014, with District Development Authorities (DDAs) as the mechanism for the expenditure of development funds in districts and LLGs.

should be adopted by the government to increase efficiency in public service delivery. Comparatively, if the 1995 reforms on the provincial government functions in PNG could not serve the purpose, there is always many other lessons that our government can draw from other countries like Nigeria and Saudi Arabia that went through several reforms in the recent years to improve service delivery.

Concluding Remarks

The changes in the political structure and the system of governance (OLPG to OLPGLLG) has created more challenges on the situation on service delivery in PNG. The national politicians were vested with more power and control that they demand political favour from the people for service delivery. Services are now concentrated in certain areas in favour of political patronage and not based on the concept of equal distribution. The reforms had opened the doors completely for the national politicians to prey on the DSIP funds and capitalise on their political gains at the expense of DSIP funds. This situation not only divides the politicians and the governance structure, but further divides the people, resulting in a lot of problems during the national elections which continue to affect them for ages. People fight for their candidates to win in the elections so they can become beneficiaries of the DSIP funds. Idubor (2017), in his study recommended that if a reform does not address the issue targeted, it is doomed to fail. If successive studies on the 1995 reforms agree that equal service delivery is still at stake, the Government of PNG need to review the changes created by the reforms or simply doomed to fail if expected results of the reforms seemed unattainable.

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