

Responses to the 1997–98 Drought in PNG

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Abstract

This paper is my personal reflection upon the responses to the 1997–98 drought in PNG. I had various political roles during this time, which have given me a unique overview of the situation in PNG. Initially, as chair of the National Drought Relief Committee, I was party to the first foreign drought relief efforts, and I saw how these overshadowed the PNG responses to the drought, which were further hampered by ineffective governmental administrative processes. In fact, as a result of diplomatic differences and an inability to compromise, the PNG government actually missed out on foreign financial aid that was given instead to various nongovernment organisations. Later, in other positions, I found it frustrating to witness a politically-motivated distribution of donated food in Madang Province that failed to reach those most in need, and also to observe at first hand the effects of administrative disorganisation in the utilisation of resources and supplies. Australia took a leading role in the response to the PNG drought but, whilst we were grateful for their efforts, I feel that if they had not been so forceful, and if we in PNG had been more organised and resourceful, then we ourselves could have prevented the drought from becoming an international crisis. I now feel that we have a lot to learn from our experiences from the drought of 1997–98, and that we should be able to use these lessons to prevent similar crises in the future. Of particular importance is aiming to achieve food security as a nation, with an emphasis on improved, sustainable agronomic practices. Perhaps most importantly, it is essential that we draw up and implement plans to provide a supply of potable water to every community in PNG.

THIS paper is my personal account of the responses to the drought of 1997–98 in PNG, in which I was involved in many different roles. Initially, in October 1997, I accepted an invitation from Bill Skate, then PNG Prime Minister, to chair the National Drought Relief Committee. As I did not keep a written record of events at the time, this account is simply from memory and represents my personal point of view.

My primary question is: whose drought was it? If it had not been for the Australian Government, perhaps we would never have known that we had a drought. Whilst some PNG Government reports indicated that

food shortages were occurring, it was Australian ‘experts’ who told us of the impending magnitude of the drought.

I initially believed that the media exaggerated the drought situation, publishing reports and statements made by politicians hoping for personal advantage. At the time, I was concerned that this exaggeration might lead the public to overreact to the crisis. Without rain, many of the essential root crops would fail and, in areas where there were few alternatives, people would go hungry. In a Western country, this would be a relatively straightforward problem, but PNG is not a Western country. Despite the warnings, the PNG National Disaster Office was not prepared for such widespread drought, and there were consequently major problems with funding and the logistics of food distribution.

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Initial Responses to the Drought

The role of Australia

Whilst we did appreciate the assistance from Australia during the drought in PNG, I have always felt that PNG should have taken the lead in drought relief measures, and that we were overshadowed by Australia, which prevented us from doing so.

In early meetings between relevant organisations, a decision was made to ask two experts on PNG agriculture and food supply systems, from The Australian National University, to quickly put together teams to travel throughout PNG to evaluate the drought. This project was funded by the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID).

Australia also more or less completely bypassed both the PNG National Disaster Office and the PNG Defence Force, because the PNG Government could not fund a response to the developing drought and because the National Disaster Office was unprepared for the situation. Despite this, Australia took the initiative, with the Australian Defence Force and their aircraft distributing food to the worst-affected, most remote regions of PNG.

The role of the PNG Defence Force

Due to the involvement of the Australian Defence Force, the PNG Defence Force was marginalised—at a time when their involvement would have improved both their image and their morale. The tremendous human resource of the PNG Defence Force continues to be ignored in times of crisis. If it were necessary to have additional logistic support from elsewhere, these requests should have been made by PNG through the appropriate diplomatic channels, and should not have been initiated from outside PNG.

The involvement of the PNG Defence Force was limited to providing some physical facilities and resources, and they had almost no part in the planning and implementation of the drought assessments or the delivery of relief supplies. It must be acknowledged that not one PNG Defence Force aircraft was serviceable—but, had some of the available funds been used to repair these aircraft, many of the supplies could have been carried on PNG aircraft.

Funding

Funding was the greatest concern during the drought. As the results of field assessments began to reach the

Australian team leaders at the Department of Provincial and Local Government Affairs in Port Moresby, it became obvious that the drought was more serious and widespread than we had thought at first. It was soon apparent that we would need more money than that allocated by the PNG Government.

At meetings in the Central Government Complex, heated exchanges took place between public servants and diplomats. Foreign governments and international aid organisations refused to release their monetary aid to a general revenue account. They required that a transparent trust account be established for this purpose, so that they could be certain that the money would be used for the intended purpose of drought relief, and not to pay for other things such as governmental administrative costs. Despite this, the government did not set up a trust fund with transparent conditions of audit and accountability. Instead, the Department of Finance representatives attempted to insist that all donations be banked into a government-controlled account.

Eventually, a government trust account was established, but the delay in its establishment resulted in major donors redirecting their funds to the Red Cross, Caritas, Oxfam and other nongovernment organisations (NGOs). The signatories of the government trust account included the Secretary to the Department of Provincial and Local Government Affairs, the Director-General of the National Disaster and Emergency Services and me.

The only funds deposited by the PNG Government into this account were from the Gaming Board, who were directed to deposit 2 million PNG kina (PGK)² into this trust account. Various other statutory bodies also contributed funds to this account, including Telikom, the PNG Harbours Board and the PNG Banking Corporation. The only cheque withdrawal from this trust account that I countersigned was to fund aid for an unrelated measles outbreak in the Jimi Valley.

Because I was seriously concerned about the lack of a financial response to the drought in PNG, I travelled to Australia at my own expense to meet various organisations willing to help PNG; this visit raised around 8 million PGK.

Distribution of Aid

On my return from Australia, I found that I had been replaced as Chairman of the National Drought Relief Committee by the Hon. Peti Lafanama, Governor of

² In 1997, 1 PGK = approx. US\$0.70 (A\$0.94).

Eastern Highlands Province. I then read in a newspaper that the Prime Minister had appointed me Liaison and Implementation Officer. I was unable to ascertain what duties this position entailed, and in the end I worked to provide any assistance that I could. I also continued to monitor the trust account, watching with great interest the withdrawal of funds, and I wrote letters on behalf of the government thanking donors.

During this time, I took part in field assessments and I was involved in the distribution of food to remote regions. In contrast, in Madang Province, where I live, not one member of the Provincial Disaster Office took part in the assessments within the province, although they had been invited to do so.

Inequity in local distributions of food

When food aid finally arrived in Madang Province for distribution, it was not released to the worst-affected areas. Instead, a political decision was made to fill every available truck and take the food anywhere, provoking a chaotic free-for-all situation. The efforts of the national assessment teams in Madang Province were ignored by the local authorities, who wanted to ensure their own areas would not miss out on the free food. I found this particularly frustrating because, in order to ensure that some of the donated food reached Madang Province, I had made a special request to declare some areas in the province as seriously-affected regions. This request was not based on formal assessments but was largely based on my local knowledge.

I was becoming very concerned that, if the drought was as bad as the assessment teams were predicting, we should ensure what little funds we had available should be used frugally to their best advantage. We should have been avoiding, at all costs, free handouts of food to people who did not really need them. The best use of the funds would have restricted the relief food to rice, flour and oil delivered to only the worst-affected areas identified by the assessment teams. Whilst we were doing this, other donor agencies, NGOs and the Madang Provincial Government were purchasing eggs, powdered milk and other Western foods that were well above the requirements established by the Drought Relief Committee.

Import duty on donated supplies

Another of my roles was in assisting NGOs to get import duty exemptions for supplies. Although such exemptions were approved by the PNG Government,

delays in obtaining relief supplies were caused by difficulty in actually getting many of the donated items through Customs, where officials insisted duty was to be paid.

Medical supplies

I was also involved with having the Department of Finance release money to purchase drugs that were said to be urgently required in many locations throughout PNG. This was not just because there was a drought, but because, even before the drought, there had been an acute shortage of medical supplies and drugs throughout the country.

One of the frustrations I suffered was the number of requests for assistance being made to me personally, day and night. Yet when I myself wanted to contact officials in the provinces it proved virtually impossible to do so. The communications equipment was in place but the human element failed; human greed had a lot to do with this situation.

Australian Isolation from the PNG National Drought Relief Committee

It was around this time that AusAID and the Australian Defence Force began to operate in almost total isolation from the Drought Relief Committee and the PNG Government. I do not blame them for this course of action: they had virtually no choice. Initially, we asked the Australians to provide aircraft to deliver the drought relief supplies that PNG would purchase. They responded quickly, but PNG failed to have the supplies ready because the funds had not been released. The Australians released money through AusAID, purchased the food required and carried it in their aircraft. This pattern continued throughout the entire period of the drought.

Further organisational problems

In November 1997, I travelled throughout the Milne Bay islands providing transport to isolated islands for the Australian assessment team. Before departure, I requested that relief supplies be released to load on the *Melanesian Discoverer*. In the end, I purchased the supplies myself because we could not delay the departure of the vessel. A lack of coordination by the National Drought Relief Committee and the provincial authorities, who knew what I had done, meant that a New Zealand naval vessel undertook a

special trip to the areas we had visited with supplies, delivering food; this was both costly and unnecessary. This is just one example of similar matters that made the work very frustrating.

Adverse Agricultural Practices

On another field trip I travelled into the highlands with a World Bank assessment team interested in providing cash to rural communities through funding employment on public works. I travelled by car from Madang to Kundiawa via Bundi and Keglsugl. What I saw shocked me. The entire western slopes of most mountains were quite bare. This was not just because of the drought, but because of deliberately-lit fires that not only destroyed food gardens, but also destroyed coffee gardens and houses. Thus, the destruction of gardens and houses in the area between Kundiawa and Gumine was the result of an artificial disaster, and not solely a consequence of the drought.

Ironically, despite the drought, there was plenty of water in rivers and creeks. I saw few creeks or rivers that had completely dried up as one would imagine in the midst of a severe drought. It appeared to me that people were not aware that gardens could be watered by hand and that simple irrigation or water pumps could have averted the destruction of many gardens.

After my Milne Bay and highlands experiences, I became very concerned that we would use up all of the money we had raised on merely providing food, in the end finishing up with nothing. I was very keen to see at least half of the money used to fund water supply projects throughout all the areas affected by the drought. Despite the acceptance of this idea in principle, I doubt if very much of the money was ever used to develop good rural water supply projects that could sustain gardens and local drinking and washing supplies at times of low rainfall.

Like many people, I was also concerned that PNG did not appear to have any grain crops, or other crops that would enable us to store food. It is obvious that PNG is a country of abundance, and that severe shortages of food are so rare that it is not necessary to introduce crops especially to prepare for serious droughts. I am not an agronomist, nor do I profess to be an expert in nutrition, but I am a practical person and I have eyes. Even though I saw some very hungry people during my touring around PNG, I never saw people starving to death.

Consequences of the Response to the Drought

I sometimes wonder what the end result would have been had we not been alarmed by the Australians into taking action. To put anything as serious as this to the test would clearly have been folly, but PNG has had serious droughts in previous years and most people have survived them.

Today, with improved global media coverage, everyone knows everything—often before those who are affected. In the case of the drought in PNG, this was true but welcome. Most people who were short of food received some help. Others who needed help went hungry but did not starve, and there were also those who capitalised on the situation and became wealthy. I frequently heard of trade store proprietors getting hold of relief food and selling it over the counter. At other times I received complaints from trade store owners that their business was collapsing because people were getting free rice and not purchasing their rice from the store. As recently as early 2000, I saw relief supplies left over from the drought being distributed at will to anyone who wanted them.

The Future of Water in PNG

Throughout the entire period of the drought, I constantly talked about the need to make PNG a drought-proof country. We have the water; what we need is a national objective to overcome many of the self-made obstacles that restrict the provision of safe drinking water to as many people as possible. What we need are water systems that will work all year, even when it does not rain, in the form of inexpensive gravity-fed systems that do not rely on solar pumps or other mechanical means to pump water. However, amongst the projects that are being considered for this purpose are hi-tech osmosis systems that will not be maintained and will not be economic: most of these systems use as much fuel as the water that they could produce.

I have been encouraged by reading about the Ok Tedi Mining Ltd program to improve food security. Obviously, such an ambitious and worthwhile project will need to address ways in which we can use our natural resources better than we have in the past. It will need to educate people that, when it stops raining, our food still needs water and that in many cases during the drought water could have been provided if there had been a greater awareness. I believe that this conference is able to make a valuable contribution towards alleviating the impact of droughts in PNG by considering

ways in which we could nationally improve the access to potable water by people in rural areas. Water should not be for the privileged few in urban areas; it should be a universal right.

Unfortunately, the decision to privatise the PNG Waterboard and to establish Edu Ranu has reduced the chances that the PNG Waterboard could use its profits to fund rural water schemes. It should be possible to

offset the cost of smaller water projects in both urban and rural areas with the profits earned from larger, more economically viable, schemes. I was very sorry when the European Union cancelled its aid-funded rural micro water projects, which were examples of the most worthwhile, forward-thinking projects ever funded by an overseas donor in PNG.