

Communication as a Cultural Development Tool for Driving Effective Provincial Constituent Services: A Case Study of Chimbu (Simbu) Province in Papua New Guinea

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DOI: 10.47760/cognizance.2023.v03i11.018

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

We acknowledge Willie Doaemo of Morobe Foundation Inc for his immense contribution to the development of this paper. We also acknowledge the support provided by Morobe Foundation Inc.

Abstract:

Utilizing a cross-sectional qualitative design, this study examined how the Chimbu provincial government systems in Papua New Guinea (PNG) employed communication strategies as cultural tools in the delivery of services to constituents in remote rural areas. Participants were asked to reflect on the effectiveness of governmental communication strategies in engaging local communities during the Covid-19 pandemic. Despite weaknesses, the study finds that the PNG government employed a comprehensive communication strategy to control infections in communities. It provided concise messaging to ensure local communities adhered to Covid-19 protocols, such as hand washing, social distancing, masking, and vaccinating while collaborating with other agencies to enhance messaging. The study also demonstrates how both the government and opposition collaborated for public safety during the pandemic.

Introduction

Public health policy requires a high degree of coordination between central and local governmental bodies. Tradeoffs between control and flexibility, oversight, and independence, affect how effectively strategic goals may be achieved. The Covid-19 pandemic presented significant challenges to government bureaucracies across the globe. Central governments had to coordinate with local leaders and stakeholders for efficient and effective implementation of public health measures to fight the spread of the virus.

PNG comprises mainland New Guinea, including the lower mainland called Papua region, and a range of islands called the island regions. Papua New Guinea gained independence

from Australia in 1975. The constitution of 1992, inherited from its colonial masters, provided for the establishment of provincial and local governance. The administering power of the common law serves to promote the political, economic, social, and educational advancement of the citizens of Papua New Guinea.

Papua New Guinea remains part of the British Commonwealth. A Governor General represents the King of England as the constitutional head of state. Executive powers lie with the Prime Minister and the National Executive Council, who are kept separate to function independently. The National Executive Council is formally appointed by the Governor General on the recommendation of the Prime Minister. The ministers, as council members, are appointed by the Prime Minister. Papua New Guinea has a unicameral parliamentary system with 112 members, of which some 20 per cent are elected from provincial electorates, representing the twenty-three provinces. Political parties form parliament, with the party gaining a plurality of seats forming the government, and the party with the second most seats forming the official opposition. When no party has a majority of seats, a coalition is required to maintain the confidence of the parliament. The current coalition government is formed by the PANGU Party supported by United Resource Party and National Alliance Party. Public policy tends to be centralized, with the national government dictating national policy and allocating funds to provinces for their implementation¹

PNG has enjoyed considerable income from mineral and petroleum projects over the last 20 years. The country has tremendous economic potential, arising from its natural endowments of minerals and petroleum, large tracts of unoccupied fertile land, large forestry, and fishery resources, as well as from the country's considerable tourism prospects. However, PNG has been unable to convert this income to broaden its development due to the prevalence of corrupt business practices.² Furthermore, the mountainous central highlands remain underdeveloped due to inaccessible terrain. Development agendas have been myopic in their formulation, implementation, and monitoring since independence, due to elevated levels of corruption, lack of steady funding, and weak oversight institutions³

Civil society organizations in PNG may be divided into three broad categories: Church and church-affiliated organizations, local and indigenous groups, and human rights advocacy groups. Church groups comprise a large subset of PNG civil society, which remains 95% Christian (European Union, 2018). Religious organizations operate 50% of health care services and 40% of primary and secondary services, as well as a myriad of social support groups (Simpson, 2019). Local and indigenous groups also play a significant role in PNG civil society, in which social ties in rural areas are predominantly organized along clanship and extended family lines. These groups thus tend to reflect the concerns of rural residents. Environmental and agricultural concerns are a primary focus among rural organizations. Both international and local human rights organizations focus attention on issues, such as security, women and minority rights, and child healthcare (Simpson, 2019).

The Simbu region sits in the central highlands of the country, with rugged mountain terrain making transportation and the construction of large urban areas difficult. Simbu province comprises six districts that are administered by a governor. The region derives its name from

¹ Duncan & Banga, 2018; Reilley et al., 2014

² Mellam & Alois, 2003

³ Mawuli & Sanida, 2014; Reilley et al., 2014.

the Chimbu ethnic group, who share the Kuman language and attendant dialects. The province has a population of approximately 180,000 residents and the local economy is dominated by small scale farming, and craft making. Recent efforts to improve the local economy have been made to improve the efficiency, scale, and profitability of Simbu province, as well as improve infrastructure in the mountainous terrain.⁴

Objective of the Study

The study on "Effective Organizational Communication as a Tool to Drive Effective Constituent Services" is conducted as part of Morobe Development Foundation (MDF)'s mission in carrying-out projects that will benefit rural communities in Papua New Guinea. With a specific focus on Simbu Province, this study aims to support the provincial government's efforts by identifying and gathering data on policy practices that are relevant, effective, and scalable for best practices, cost-effectiveness, and the prudent management of a public service system, specifically the PNG National Department of Health. In addition to the local government, the study also seeks to benefit the communities of Simbu Province and can be used as a benchmark by policy makers, donors, and other communities across Papua New Guinea.

Literature Review

Rafter et al. (2022) posits that political expressions and nuances are collectively rooted in the local people and in their everyday activities and practices. Therefore, analysis of critical issues in political communications requires an interrogation of the cultural diversity and complexities that shape communication structures in service delivery to the population. This is particularly significant where, according to Stanley (2008), 85% of Papua New Guinea's population resides in rural areas with a history of poor infrastructural developments and educational opportunities. For example, plans for developing a robust telecommunication network across Papua New Guinea started as far back as 1964, but changes in political willpower and shifts in government systems slowed its momentum and impacts.⁵ Radio has long been the backbone of public communication in PNG, as it is affordable, scalable; and easily reaches large audiences. Later ambitions to develop an extensive 2G mobile service have been only partly successful. While urban coverage has improved, rural areas remain underserved⁶

Communication practices in provincial service delivery

Access to communication channels remains limited in Papua New Guinea despite considerable progress in infrastructural development. Mobile phone usage in Papua New Guinea, for example, was initially reserved for only several geographical areas and jurisdictions.⁷ As expansion of mobile infrastructure stalled, efforts by the state to resurrect the sector have either proved futile or have been fraught with severe resistance and inconsistencies, thus slowing sustainable growth and economic progress.⁸ This assertion is

⁴ Miape, 2023

⁵ ICC, 2007

⁶ McLeod, 2021

⁷ Watson, 2011

⁸ Parker and Serrano, 2000

corroborated by the World Bank (2014) which presented a report on the nation's insistent deployment of 2G second-generation mobile services in rural areas rather than the improved and highly functional 3G/4G networks. However, government encouragement of competition in telecommunication services has led to some quality delivery systems and public participation. Cave's (2012) research asserts that public policy and participation in telecommunications have resulted in improved communication channels for governance processes across Papua New Guinea.

Although there have been improvements, achieving international standards in local governance, communications remain a challenge.⁹ The continued impediment in quality service delivery has been linked to abuse of state institutions by public officials. A study by Ketan (2013) reveals that service delivery in the Western Highlands Province, for example, is characterized by, "a woeful record of administrative ineptitude, dreadful financial management and political interference with public service functions."¹⁰ The Politicization of appointments and political interference also account for this phenomenon. Major reforms, initiated in 1995, had minimal impact because statutes, principles and resolutions for those reforms were poorly constructed and implemented.¹¹ A more decentralised governance system, designed to promote an all-inclusive governance structure, was later formulated, and implemented. This structure was comprised of provincial governments, LLGs, Community governments and administrative districts.¹²

Communication practices in decentralised provincial governance systems

Governance communication plays a crucial role in the delivery of effective constituent services, as it helps to establish clear lines of communication between different governmental levels and its stakeholders. It further binds central and rural governments together by enabling the execution of policy goals and the promotion of collective social and national discourses. This communicative force becomes counterproductive, where abuse of power, corruption, liminal cultural norms, poor consultation, and personnel incompetence occur at various levels of the government service delivery continuum.

Decentralised systems allow the central government to easily delegate critical responsibilities of funding, accountability, and transparency to local community structures.¹³ Okon (2017) conceptualised communication as a critical decentralising cultural tool for the effective administration of local governance. He argues that communication "engenders trust, rapport, and close relationships with the governed."¹⁴ However, decentralised systems in Papua New Guinea have been insufficiently integrated for the central government to provide adequate funding or support for a wide range of services. Furthermore, the local structures have been too relaxed to effectively counteract corrupt practices.¹⁵ This endemic corruption degrades trust in political institutions, impeding the implementation of policy. Socio-cultural factors, such as persistent illiteracy amongst local constituents, have skewed the nature of

⁹ Reilly et al., 2015

¹⁰ Ketan, 2013, p.1

¹¹ Simonelli, 2003

¹² NRI, 2006

¹³ Bird & Smart, 2002

¹⁴ Okon 2017, p. 81

¹⁵ Hoban, 2006

communication systems as constituents lack the prerequisite education and are not empowered with the regulatory tools required to effectively demand better governance and accountability.¹⁶

Communication, bureaucracy, and development

Development, as an interactive process, requires engagements and partnerships between the public and governments. National and provincial development decisions in Papua New Guinea tend to be politically partisan, bureaucratic, and reflective of the interests of the upper class.¹⁷ As a service vehicle, bureaucracy remains entrenched despite the existence of social reform systems designed to improve service delivery systems and bureaucratic features.¹⁸ The state bureaucracy confronts a difficult reality in PNG. Lack of a common language, remote and dispersed ethnic groups, low levels of education, and pervasive corruption limit efficacy.¹⁹

Efficient and effective bureaucracies rely on rational processes impartially administered. “Contextually, bureaucracy is the phenomenon of affirmation of the rationalisation of the world.”²⁰ Rationalisation enables the application of the general principles to address human problems, fostering the ability to respond to unstable environments and manage inherent complexities.²¹ Thus, rational action aims at controlling uncertainty and providing stable protocols. However, when rationality and impartiality are violated, not only do government actors lose legitimacy in the eyes of the populace, but efficiency falters.

The decentralized nature of PNG’s governmental structure contributes to rampant corruption among low and mid-level bureaucrats. Endowed with significant autonomy from the center, regional leaders are insulated from national governmental oversight, and often take advantage of this system for personal gain. Furthermore, in the face of a weak welfare system, bureaucrats and constituents alike turn to the *wantok* system²², a traditional form of favor-trading among social networks.²³ Indeed, central government initiatives are often implemented through the distribution of lump-sum funds to lower-level governments, further fueling corruption in their implementation.²⁴ An endemic culture of corruption is not limited to rural areas. For example, the PNG National Department of Health has seen several high-profile corruption scandals including misappropriation of funds and bribery from pharmaceutical companies²⁵

A bloated bureaucracy is often associated with very negative features, such as delays in operation, typified by actions centered on opaque standards, by excessive requests for documentation, and by difficulties in meeting users’ or customers’ requests.²⁶ PNG’s public

¹⁶ Scott, 2005

¹⁷ Supra note 12

¹⁸ Lipset, 2016

¹⁹ Walton, 2020

²⁰ Serpa & Ferreira, 2019

²¹ Touraine, 1985

²² Wantok means 'same language' or 'one talk' in Tok Pisin (the country's lingua franca) and refers to a reciprocal relationship of favours between kin and community members.

²³ Walton, 2020; Walton & Jackson, 2020

²⁴ Duncan & Banga, 2018; Reilley et al., 2014

²⁵ Macintyre, 2018

²⁶ Godoi, Silva, & Cardoso, 2017

service sector is the largest national employer and struggles with information and personnel management.²⁷ Paradoxically, funding for national initiatives is often in the form of short term increases in budgets, limiting the government's ability to create and maintain new bureaucratic structures.²⁸ Even when long term funds are allocated, researchers have found these allocations are not always distributed regularly. Human capital also tends to aggregate at the national level, following better pay.²⁹ Thus, bureaucratic administration fundamentally means the exercise of power, based on technical and positional knowledge. Furthermore, those who wield power tend to entrench their dominance through the knowledge that comes from their position.³⁰ Thus, bureaucratic administrations make individuals powerful through their function, and that such powers can stifle communication practices that are geared towards change and transformations.

Communication Strategy and PNG's Public Health System

Health coverage and messaging in PNG relies on both the National Department of Health as well as religious organizations for most of its services. NGOs and church organizations are critical in the delivery of healthcare in PNG, and religious organizations operate roughly half of the nation's health services.³¹ However, there are several weaknesses of health delivery in PNG, especially the low level of care in rural areas derived from scant resources and inadequate civil society organization.³² Furthermore, The PNG National Department of Health has seen several high-profile corruption scandals including misappropriation of funds and bribery from pharmaceutical companies.³³ The rural population in PNG has been shown to have relatively low levels of health awareness in critical areas.³⁴ Health messaging tends to be unsophisticated among rural communities who rely on word-of-mouth for dissemination of messages.³⁵ While some researchers have examined the effects of text-based public messaging campaigns, PNG has relatively low levels of mobile coverage in rural areas.³⁶

Study Rationale

This preliminary paper seeks to understand how provincial government systems in Papua New Guinea employ communication strategies as cultural tools in the delivery of services to constituents, especially those who live in remote rural areas. It is based on the premise that trust in government messaging, the establishment of non-political processes or 'pan-politics' and collaborations, and the use of the media platforms, state and private, are critical covariates of government responses to crisis and national discourses.³⁷

²⁷ Ibid note 29

²⁸ Supra note 7

²⁹ Reilley et al., 2014

³⁰ Weber, 1966

³¹ Simpson, 2018

³² Macintyre, 2018; Reilley et al., 2018

³³ Supra note 31

³⁴ Kelly-Haku, 2017; Wen, 2016

³⁵ Gupta et al., 2020

³⁶ Kurumop et al., 2013, Lee et al., 2016

³⁷ Rafter et al., 2022

By the following three broad notions, we seek to understand how trust, pan-politics, and media presence as social collaborative discourses, shape government communicative actions. This study followed the impact of communicative actions that informed the delivery of provincial services, during the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. With this background, the following specific objectives are envisaged for the study:

1. To examine what messaging strategies are used by the provincial government in the delivery of government services in Papua New Guinea.
2. To assess public experiences with existing communication structures in the delivery of provincial service delivery.
3. To identify communication bottlenecks and sustainable approaches to dealing with bottlenecks in public services delivery.

It is hoped that this study will contribute to knowledge and public and stakeholder understanding of bottlenecks in the delivery of provincial services to the constituents of Papua New Guinea.

Methods

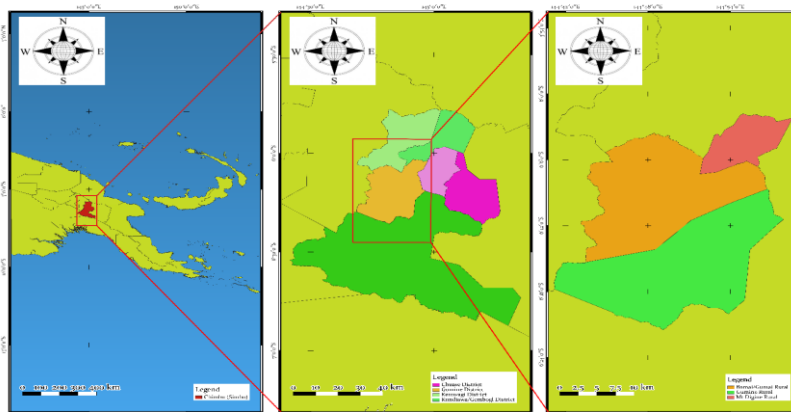
A cross-sectional, qualitative case study design was employed for this Study to achieve better results. Yin (1994, p.13) argues for the use of case studies in contexts where specific phenomena are not clearly defined nor examined. In line with Yin (1994), this Study examined the Chuave District as a pilot case for understanding of the impact of communication tools, such as provincial briefs and press statements, in provincial service delivery in Papua New Guinea.

The overall approach to the study was qualitative in nature, taking a participative, appreciative approach seeking and basing the exercise on the views of cross-sectional representation while acknowledging strengths and focused on finding improvements and recommendations rather than only seeking weaknesses.

Participants

A total number of 50 participants comprising Community leaders and local government officials were recruited from the Chuave District of the Simbu Province of Papua New Guinea for the study. Generally, the mountainous nature of the Chimbu Province makes it difficult for field research. Nonetheless, the district was selected based on its geographical accessibility by road and commerce. The location of Chuave is shown in Figure 1 below.

Fig. 1: a map of Chimbu Province showing the Chuave District



The target population was community leaders and local government officials. A purposive sampling technique was used to recruit the fifty participants for the study.

Materials

An in-depth interview guide was developed for the Study. The guide consisted of both open-ended and closed-ended questions, gathering participants' demographic information such as age, gender, ethnicity, and to engage participants on their views on the nature and efficacy of communication tools used to deploy provincial services within the participants' communities. Five (5) research assistants were recruited and trained to collect the data in the dominant languages of the participants. Interviews were recorded with a tape recorder and transcribed. Reflective journals were maintained to document nuances and other information that cannot be captured in the recordings.

Study Procedure and Diligence

Letters were sent to established community heads and opinion leaders, and to provincial offices to seek approval for the study. Following approval, data was collected from participants in their homes and workplaces. Participants were given information about the research and informed consent was a prerequisite of administering the questionnaire. All safety protocols were observed to ensure the safety of the researchers, enumerators, and the participants throughout the study.

The researchers maintained a reflective diary throughout the period of the Study to record their evolving personal assumptions and decision-making processes that might impact the Study. Further, collecting data from participants with varying backgrounds (i.e., community leaders and provincial officials) triangulated and validated the findings. Using a thematic analytical tool helped produce findings that reflect the true narratives of the participants and therefore making the study more credible.

Data Analysis

A thematic analytic framework was developed and used to analyse the data. Recorded data was transcribed and translated into English before being analyzed. Emerging themes were identified and grouped into concepts. These concepts provided 'semantic' information that facilitated a more 'latent' analysis to examine "the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualisations – and ideologies - that are theorised as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data"³⁸ The findings of the analysis are presented and supported with direct quotes and relevant literature.

Findings and Discussions

This section presents and discusses summarized findings from the study. The Study was conducted within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. Participants were asked to reflect on the effectiveness of governmental communication strategies in engaging local communities during the Covid-19 pandemic. This was critical to addressing the research objectives and to understanding what communication tools were best deployed during the Covid-19 pandemic. The Study's findings established that the PNG government employed a comprehensive communication strategy to control infections in communities. It provided concise messaging

³⁸ Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.84

to ensure local communities adhered to Covid-19 protocols such as hand washing, social distancing, masking up and vaccinating.

Further, the findings show that the government collaborated with other agencies to enhance its messaging efforts during the pandemic. For example, GoPNG and PNG National Health Department created awareness, set up vaccine centers, and supplied hand washing basins in schools and public areas of towns and cities. The departments of health, education, other government, and corporate bodies were responsive to directives issued from the central government. This collaboration showed a strong trust in the provincial government's communication strategies.

The findings also showed the deployment of bipartisan messaging during the pandemic. The government's communication strategies were devoid of blame speech but called for concerted efforts to minimize the spread of the Covid-19 virus in communities. The participants revealed how the government worked comprehensively with its opponents and critics during the pandemic for the public good. Thus, the government provided platforms, physically and through the mass media, to ensure equal participation, burden sharing, and cooperation across all sectors of the province.

The use of mass media was critical to the government's messaging strategies. The study established that the PNG government used the media effectively to communicate essential information on the Covid-19 pandemic. This was done to showcase the importance of wearing face masks, social distancing, washing hands, and vaccination.

The Study revealed no significant difference between private and public mass media in relation to their messaging during the pandemic. This was due to collaborative efforts to ensure that the same messages were coordinated across all media platforms and targeted at local communities. Covid-19 related messages were disseminated across the three widely spoken languages of Pidgin, Motu, and English. Further translated interpretations were carried out in all local languages. Thus, government messaging was targeted to create equal participation for all locals within the province.

The Study reveals positive government-public engagement. As such, public figures responded in a timely and positive manner in response to the messaging strategies deployed by the provincial government to curtail the spread of the Covid-19 virus. The public accepted and participated in preventive measures such as hand washing, wearing of face masks, social distancing, and getting vaccine jabs. The main challenge in the government's communication strategy was the rate of absorption of its messaging by the locals. Absorption rates were impeded by cultural beliefs in relation to the pandemic and the potential of the virus to disrupt lives. This potentially slowed the rate at which the vaccines became acceptable as an epidemic control measure within the province.

Conclusions and Recommendations

The findings of this preliminary study demonstrate government communication as a critical tool in the fight against the Covid-19 pandemic. Timely dissemination of information, devoid of blame speech across private and public media platforms as well as community engagements were important provincial government communication tools. Furthermore, trust in government, coupled with its collaborative efforts, was a key driver in the provincial government's communication strategies.

It is therefore recommended that the government continues to build trust in its governance through collective participation as a critical tool for mitigating future social, economic, and

political disruptions. Indeed, a communication policy framework can be developed to guide communications, especially in the context of pandemics and lockdowns, invasions, and civil unrest. Future studies should examine structures within the government's messaging architecture, such as bureaucracy, and how they impact the dissemination of information and public trust.

Acknowledgements

We acknowledge Willie Doaemo of the Morobe Foundation Inc, New Papua Guinea for his immense contribution to the development of this paper. We also acknowledge the support provided by Morobe Development Foundation Inc.

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