

Natural disasters invariably involve complex social, political and economic systems that can make a bad situation worse. The 2015 El Niño drought in Papua New Guinea (PNG) has few precedents. Poor strategy in response could have serious implications. Rather than a centrally coordinated national disaster response, the PNG government has decided to provide drought relief through the controversial District Services Improvement Program (DSIP), coordinated by the recently introduced District Development Authorities (DDAs). Drawing on recent fieldwork in three drought-affected districts, this In Brief considers the risks of relying on politically controlled development funds to provide drought relief to communities that need it most.

Risks of Politically Driven Drought Assistance

The PNG government has not made any new allocations for drought relief efforts for 2015. Instead, it has allowed DDAs to use K2 million from existing allocations of the DSIP to provide relief (Kenneth 23/10/2015). The appeal of such a response, other than cost savings, is that districts represent the lowest level of bureaucracy in most provinces and should best understand the communities impacted by the drought. However, the DSIP is a Constituency Development Fund that is controlled by DDAs, which were only introduced in 2015. DDAs are chaired by the open electorate members of parliament (MPs) and their Boards are often stacked with their allies to give them more power over the allocation of development projects to their own political supporters (Wiltshire 13/1/2014). District administrators, who are responsible for implementing the decisions of DDAs, are also increasingly becoming political appointees.

When Finance Minister James Marape announced that DDAs would be responsible for drought relief efforts he urged his fellow MPs to 'leave politics aside' (Kero 23/10/2015). Based on recent fieldwork, it appears doubtful whether respective DDAs can remain politically impartial in their implementation of assistance efforts. Key

informant interviews, workshops and community focus groups have been conducted with over 200 participants who are either directly engaged in the management of DDAs or should benefit from them.

Our main finding is that communities that support their local MP have high expectations that they are due to receive DSIP projects based on their political support, whereas other communities, that did not support the MP, conceded that they fared little chance. This accurate assessment of preferential distribution of services was also made of disaster relief. At one village, which was not politically aligned with the MP, we were presented with a plaintive letter: 'The PNG Government are very, very slow and poor in their national disaster relief support. Please help us!' In the blunt words of a provincial staff member, 'supply goes to the stronghold'. Such concerns are echoed by the chair of PNG's National Committee on Drought and Frost Relief, who has warned that the politicisation of drought assistance is more likely to occur at district and local levels rather than at the national and provincial level (Radio Australia 2/10/2015).

Drought Relief on the Cheap?

Notably, the drought response allocates no new funds. DDAs could have previously funded drought assistance through the DSIP. In 2013, financial instructions were released that stipulated DSIP funds needed to be spent in specific proportions across service delivery sectors. However, these previously strict guidelines were relaxed in 2014 after the Department of Finance issued a circular stating that DSIP spending could be more discretionary. Our research has confirmed that DDA Boards largely determine prioritised sectors and DSIP expenditure often falls outside national guidelines.

In practice, the PNG government's announcement that DSIP funds can be allocated to drought relief is unlikely to have much impact. Districts are already overcommitted on projects that need to be funded. DSIP funding allocations for 2015 were expected to be K15 million per district. Yet as of

November 2015, with two months remaining in the financial year, it has been widely reported that districts have only received between K4 and K6 million so far (Kero 23/10/2015). The Leader of the Opposition, the Hon. Don Polye, has claimed that DSIP funds would have already been budgeted for other infrastructure priorities and that new allocations were needed for drought relief. This view is supported by our observations during fieldwork.

Do Districts Have the Capacity to Provide Fair Drought Relief?

Even if DDAs receive their full DSIP allocations, the capacity of districts to effectively deliver assistance is doubtful. Our research revealed that incomplete projects are becoming the norm. In particular, lack of contractor management raises serious issues about the effectiveness of DSIP expenditure. These findings are similar to previous reports from the PNG Auditor-General's Office (AGO 2014), which were highly critical of the DSIP and called for it to be abolished. The final report of the Promoting Effective Public Expenditure Project (Howes et al. 2014) also found many cases of incomplete projects and perceptions of unfair allocations at health clinics and schools.

A coordinated and fair response to drought relief is needed, which is likely to challenge newly established DDAs that are already overcommitted and complaining bitterly about the slow release of funds in 2015. While the 2016 budget includes the provision of an additional K50 million for drought assistance and disaster relief, the K2 million per district allocated through the DSIP totals K176 million. DDAs are able to 'allocate' these funds regardless of the local severity of the drought's impacts, which poses additional difficulties for the coordination of relief initiatives.

For instance, as a result of shortage of water and supplies, the Simbu Provincial Hospital in Kundiawa has limited available services to emergency cases only. The hospital posted a public notice that it would only operate for two days a week and that 'should the problem of limited water supply continue it would close completely'.

It requested financial support from the six MPs in Simbu Province from the DSIP to keep it operational. Compounding this problem is a serious shortage of basic medicines when they are most needed. The Simbu Hospital CEO was quoted as stating that the 'Area Medical Store in Mt Hagen and Kundiawa had run out of drugs four months ago', and as a consequence 'They have directed medical staff to substitute antibiotics and improvise with whatever was available' (Kero 23/10/2015).

The politicisation of DSIP spending and the public service through DDAs will make it difficult to ensure drought relief is delivered to communities equally across and within districts. It will mean that the most needy will not necessarily be the most aided. Finally, it can dissipate resources that must be aggregated to keep critical services operational. Our research echoes the views of many that there are serious causes for concern that a bad situation could be made worse by relying on politically controlled development funds to provide much needed drought relief.

Notes on Authors

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