

This In Brief discusses Papua's New Guinea's (PNG's) developing National Research Agenda (NRA) and the changes that are likely to result to the conduct of research in PNG. The author participated in a [workshop](#) in Port Moresby, 5–7 May 2015 to finalise the drafting of the NRA.

The NRA is the initiative of the Secretariat of Research, Science and Technology (the Secretariat). The Secretariat was established following approval by the National Executive Council (NEC) in 2013 under the leadership of Professor Teatulohi Matainaho. The Secretariat currently has over 30 staff and is a statutory body that falls under the jurisdiction of the Ministry of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology. The functions and responsibilities of the Secretariat are set out in the [PNG Science and Technology Council Act of 1992](#). The Secretariat has been given the responsibility to oversee the establishment of the Science and Technology Council and the National Research, Science and Technology Strategic Plan as set out in the 1992 Act.

The establishment in 2014 of the Secretariat followed years of failure to implement the 1992 Act, and is the outcome of a recognition of the importance of science and technology for the development of PNG. In his opening remarks at the recent workshop, the Minister of Higher Education, Research, Science and Technology, Hon. Malakai Tabar, stated that research is now at the heart of many development plans in addressing societal issues related to poor health, food and water security, poverty, inequality, energy inefficiency, climate change and natural disasters. The development of the NRA is also a reflection of a widespread frustration about the current ad hoc and unco-ordinated nature of research in the country, the failure to translate research findings into positive changes for Papua New Guineans, and a perception that research conducted by foreign researchers has resulted in

much of the knowledge base about PNG being located outside of the country.

The drafting of the NRA follows NEC Decision no: 219/2013 to 'Re-align all Research Agencies and Statutory Bodies and prioritize research needs of the country and thus develop a Strategic Plan.' A start was made with a workshop in August 2013 and consultations with leaders of research institutes and universities in 2014 and 2015, which led to the development of the draft NRA that was the basis of discussions at the May 2015 workshop. The May 2015 workshop was attended by heads of government departments, policy-makers, scientists, engineers, educators, heads of research institutes, and others who responded to the call for participation that was circulated by the Secretariat through the national newspapers.

The NRA reflects the seven pillars of the 2009 [Papua New Guinea Vision 2050](#) — a long-term national development plan — and is also influenced by the more recent PNG National Strategy for Responsible and Sustainable Development 2014 (Department of National Planning and Monitoring). The strategy is a planning document that has the stated purpose of phasing out the existing reliance on mineral extraction and to replace it with development based on PNG's strategic assets including marine resources, river systems, rainforests, biodiversity, and cultural heritage. A number of other planning documents are also referenced in The NRA, including the [National Health and HIV Research Agenda 2012–2018](#) and the National Water, Sanitation and Hygiene Policy 2015–2030. The research focus and priorities corresponding to each of the seven pillars in the NRA are still being finalised by a technical committee that aims to have them completed by the end of May 2015. The final NRA will be reviewed in a future In Brief.

The NRA is intended to be accompanied by a range of supporting policies and mechanisms that include:

- a national code of conduct for ethical research
- a research infrastructure and investment plan
- a national research grant scheme
- a national research permit scheme
- a national policy on research and intellectual property and indigenous knowledge.

It is intended that the Secretariat will become a central repository for research findings and reports, and will develop mechanisms to support the dissemination and active use of research findings by key stakeholders and the community. One way this is currently being envisaged to occur is through the provision of small grants to facilitate the commercialisation of research findings. This reflects the inclusive approach that the NRA will encourage in regard to research, science, and technology. Professor Matainaho has expressed a desire to involve the population as a whole in strategies that will foster critical thinking, scientific enquiry, ethical codes of conduct, and innovation, rather than to focus exclusively upon academics and research institutions. This vision will be supported through the small grant program.

The way in which the establishment of the Secretariat and the associated new developments will impact upon the procedures for sectors to access government research funds is still being worked through, in conjunction with the Department of National Planning and Monitoring. A degree of uncertainty still exists over the amount of funding that the government will make available for research. Professor Matainaho has publicly called on the government to commit to research the five per cent of the public investment component of the annual Budget that is proposed in the *Vision 2050* plan.

Whilst these and other areas still require clarification, it is likely that the new arrangements will lead to significant changes in the way in

which research is conducted in PNG. In particular, all aspects of research, including research permits, are intended to be centralised within the Secretariat. Importantly, 'science' is interpreted by the Secretariat and the NRA as including the social sciences. It is also envisaged that the direct benefits to PNG promised by external researchers will be subject to much increased scrutiny and monitoring. The new arrangements also look likely to see significantly more investment by the PNG Government in research, science, and technology, and, in particular, in building the capacity of Papua New Guinean researchers through scholarships and grants. Donors and private industry will also be called upon to assist the government in this new policy direction.

A number of clear advantages exist in the new approach in addition to those outlined above. These include the facilitation of a co-ordinated approach to research, and, in particular, the ability of the Secretariat to facilitate cross-sectoral research collaboration for key policy issues such as food security and climate change. But a number of potential risks and challenges also occur in the establishment of a centralised administration of research, including the capacity of the Secretariat to deal effectively with the administrative demands that will fall upon it. If the Secretariat cannot meet the demands, a bottleneck could be created that will constrain research in the country, rather than increasing the quality and direction of research. As a participant in the workshop, and after hearing the presentations at the workshop by senior bureaucrats, scientists, educators, and others, I was struck by the pervasive mood of optimism about the potential of these new developments to move research in PNG in the right direction.

Author Notes

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