

Opening Remarks

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On behalf of AusAID, it is a pleasure to participate in this project, particularly given that I had the opportunity to work on the Southern Highlands for a short period following the 2002 elections, long enough to realise how much there is to learn about its potential, its complexities and challenges. The Southern Highlands is the economic engine of Papua New Guinea, delivering close to 15 per cent of the country's GDP. It is culturally rich and spectacularly beautiful. It has numerous tribal groups and languages. Tribal fighting is commonplace and complicated by an alarming number of firearms. As in much of Papua New Guinea, there is a growing problem with HIV/AIDS. Southern Highlands is one of the richest provinces in Papua New Guinea if you look at the provincial coffers, but one of the poorest if you consider how resources are spread amongst the population: service delivery is poor, with basic services not reaching a high proportion of the people.

My colleagues and I look forward to learning more about the potential challenges facing the Southern Highlands. We are especially keen to discuss issues of conflict and conflict prevention. Conflict in the Southern Highlands is of concern to Australia for a number of reasons. It has contributed (and has the potential to further contribute) to failed service delivery, and more generally threatens good development outcomes; violence after the 2002 elections, for example, resulted in the closing of schools, hospitals, banks, and trade stores; telephones were down and many roads impassable. There is a potential for conflict to spill over into other areas of Papua New Guinea. Conflict threatens key mineral resource projects that are vital to Papua New Guinea's already cash-strapped national economy.

To date, the Australian aid program has provided assistance to the Southern Highlands largely through national programs, including programs in health, education and law and justice. In 2003, in close consultation and cooperation with the Papua New Guinea government, Australia contributed \$A1.4 million to assist with the management of the Southern Highlands supplementary elections. And, at the request of Sir Peter Barter, then Minister for Inter-Government Relations, Australia provided two-way radios in a number of hospitals and aid posts to assist with communications. As the aid program evolves to look at more innovative and effective ways to deliver assistance, we are exploring how we can work more directly at the provincial level, especially in the area of good governance.

We welcome frank discussion on the role the aid program can play in conflict prevention, and more generally in achieving development outcomes. However,

in any such discussion it is important to be realistic and remember that the responsibility for achieving positive results ultimately rests with the government of Papua New Guinea and the people of the Southern Highlands.

In writing these opening remarks, I was reminded of a story from my childhood. The local school board refused to accept the introduction of a foreign language into the primary school curriculum because of its concern about undermining cultural values. The primary school children were, at best, the victims of a missed opportunity to expand their horizons and develop a new skill. Worse, they were subjected to a narrow-minded and misinformed cultural view that might have had negative repercussions on the role they would eventually play in a global society.

What is the moral of this story to us today? It reminds me of the importance for donors and other stakeholders of coming to understand the challenges facing the Southern Highlands with an open mind that includes an acceptance and understanding of culture and an attitude that a 'different way of doing things' is quite possibly the 'right way of doing them'. It is also important that before any action is taken there is a thorough understanding of the dynamics of the situation and how donor programs/activities/decisions can, if not well understood and thought through, become part of the problem, rather than the solution.

In this context AusAID welcomes this project, as we continue to develop our approach to addressing issues in the Southern Highlands, and Papua New Guinea more generally.