

The background of the cover is a photograph of a tropical village. In the foreground, a flagpole holds the flag of Western Province, Papua New Guinea, which is red with a black canton containing a yellow sun and a crescent moon. To the right, a tall palm tree stands against a pale sky. In the middle ground, several traditional wooden houses with thatched roofs are nestled among a dense grove of palm trees. The ground in the foreground is a mix of dirt and grass.

— EXECUTIVE SUMMARY:

LEADERSHIP BEYOND STATE LIMITS

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This project examined the political economy of informal and formal leadership within the villages of South Fly District, Western Province, Papua New Guinea, with a focus on the role of women leaders. In the absence or dysfunction of government funding and services, it explored how local leadership reorientates around other sources of finance, including aid projects. This executive summary and the three longer papers make recommendations for how local leadership can be harnessed and supported, looking at its potential to contest and reform pervasive patronage systems with a focus on women. It addresses the following five research questions:

1. How does formal and informal leadership interact, with a particular focus on women's leadership?
2. How do these types of leadership orientate around external funding opportunities?
3. How can village leaders and coalitions form transparent, effective and legitimate institutions, that contest and reform existing sub-national structures?
4. How can funding enter informal governance spaces, and strengthen rather than undermine informal leadership and governance structures?
5. What are the extent, scale, capabilities and aspirations of informal women's networks in South Fly, and their potential to facilitate development and reform?

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This research has been published in three papers. These are [‘The political economy of subnational leadership and governance’](#); [‘Women’s leadership in South Fly’](#) and [‘Case studies’](#).

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The research took place over a two-year period from mid-2020 to mid-2022. Researchers conducted a total of 53 key informant interviews, of which 21 (40%) were with women. All interviews went through a free and prior informed consent process. The researchers transcribed and manually coded more than 50 hours of qualitative data against 33 themes. The research team also worked with the Council of Women, World Vision and the PNG Department for Community Development, to enter key characteristics and position holders of informal women’s networks in Daru.

Considerable adaptation occurred to the research design due to COVID-19, leading to increased reliance on local research officers, and use of Zoom, WhatsApp, and direct calling, to allow for the Australian-based investigator to join.

Research significance can be measured both by both its location and scale. This research took place in the PNG-Australia Borderland, which is an area of historical neglect and rising geopolitical and strategic concern to both PNG and Australian governments. In terms of its scale, the research focused at the local level – on communities, informal networks, village committees, Ward and Local Level Government (LLG). This builds on prior research in PNG that has been more focused at higher national, provincial and district scales. In particular, it builds on David Craig’s ground-breaking work for the World Bank on the [‘Political Economy and Institutional Context of Sub-National Public Financial Management and Service Delivery in PNG’](#) which takes a political

economy lens and makes similar observations about incentives, fund flows and institutional structures.

At a village level, the Ward Development Committees (WDCs) are the formally legislated local level planning organisation, but they face many problems. They are intended to draw down funds for development plans through the Local Level Government (LLG) system, but in practice they are allocated little and only a small proportion reaches the village level. A considerable proportion is absorbed on ‘administration’ costs in the regional centre of Daru, including accommodation, travel, meals and meeting costs. Many WDCs do not have bank accounts, so what funds they have are disbursed as cash, materials or into the Ward Counsellors personal bank account.

The Ward Councillor often rewards his supporters with positions on the WDC, with a bias to his own village at the expense of other villages in the Ward. The legislated requirement for women representatives on the WDC is either ignored or tokenistic. There is little transparency and even less accountability back to the village community. The WDCs and the LLG more broadly are largely only a shell of government with a very fraught relation to their local constituents.

WDCs, however, represent only one part of the local governance system where decision making and leadership occurs. Other bodies with government responsibilities include school boards, village courts, and a range of special purpose committees, including

WASH, agriculture, health, and the Council of Women. In addition, there are a range of informal organisations including traditional clans, church fellowship groups, women's groups (including midwifery), fisher/farmer groups, banana boat cooperatives, sporting and youth groups. Few if any have regular meetings, officer bearers or bank accounts. The configuration of informal and formal organisations varies by place. Viewed as a whole, it is the plurality of these organisations and leadership that collectively define local governance.

While social accountability persists in village communities, it now sits alongside mutual and horizontal forms of local accountability that merge customary, formal, and informal institutions. It does not neatly align with development agencies' common perception that citizens can be empowered to hold governments to account. Rather than idealistic notions of 'good' governance whereby empowered citizens collectively hold their governments to account, [a more pragmatic notion is 'good enough' governance \(Menocal 2017, Executive Summary\).](#)

Informal governance structures, whether operating at a local community level or via broader networks, are under resourced and

often go unnoticed. While there is considerable opportunity to strengthen these networks, there is also a risk of instrumentalising, politicising and harming them. This is especially important for women's networks, most of which are extremely informal with no clear structure or process. While grants and funding of projects may well be needed, other forms of support could include capacity building, land access, economic opportunities, proposal writing, project management and coalition building.

The careers of local leaders are defined by their ability to attract and control public finances, but in the absence of PNG government funding and services, other forms of external finances have also become prominent, including aid projects, mining benefits, domestic market value chains, or mobility and trade across the Indonesian and Australian borders. Regardless of the intent of this external funding and other influence, there is an inadvertent political economy to how it impacts local leadership. When funds, materials or a project reach a village, local politics quickly reorientates around the money, displacing endogenous governance systems. At best, external funds can strengthen capacity and collaboration, at worst, they destabilise and incite conflict.

— IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 1

Given the extent of regional variation across PNG, aid investment at the village level should be preceded by a participatory analysis to understand the local governance context across the plurality of informal and formal organisations. A 'do no harm' principle is essential, including delaying of disbursements of any money to the end of the process.

— IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 2

Aid programming should support and incentivise a cadre of professional community development facilitators, who are able to broker between informal and formal organisations. Facilitators should ideally not work in their own community, given their potential to compete with local leaders.

PNG is a federal monarchy, with a constitution and legislation that is inclusive and empowering of its citizens, but in practice subnational public finance allocations are strongly determined by pervasive patronage networks. These are multi-tiered, with competitive patron-client relationships and exclusive client-bases.

Powerful patronage and resourcing pacts permeate the local public finance system. Deal making and pact formation cross political and administration lines and are most active during election campaigns. Elected leaders go on to reward their supporters with preferential disbursements, often directly to individuals and households. Despite the many examples of initiative and capability among local leaders, most feel powerless in the face of these systemic structural obstacles.

Given both the political gains and risks involved, community leaders have pragmatically adopted a stated preference for funding to arrive in 'project form', with project management and institutional support from an outside organisation that wraps around community priority setting, including technical appraisals, project documentation, procurement, and financial reporting.

The experience of School Boards shows that this support can be provided through the PNG government system, but strong systems are needed to build capability and to guard against patronage politics. Support from a development agency may be required, including institutional incentives and capacity building to allow for a staged handover. Different organisations share similar ideas for community development and micro enterprise, so they might be encouraged to collaborate and form associations or compacts. In preparation of a project selection round, leaders and entrepreneurs from different organisations could undergo training in planning and proposal writing, with an additional aim of encouraging collaboration.

— IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 3

Decentralised funding schemes to support village organisations should arrive in 'project form' in ways that strengthen leadership and governance. This should be based on a structured process of training, participatory planning, and implementation, with strong external project management support.

Training of community leaders should be formalised and integrated into the local government structure, so they are better positioned to negotiate the system and to network across organisations and localities. Selection criteria should include local legitimacy to a constituency, community participation, gendered leadership, in-kind contributions, and collaboration and networking between organisations.

It is unreasonable to expect local organisations to reform patronage politics, corruption and systemic dysfunction through 'good governance' aid projects that catalyse social accountability, improved transparency and legitimacy. Nor is it possible to isolate or protect village governance from the intrusion of patronage politics. Indeed, there is risk of making the situation worse, as aid finances can attract patronage networks into areas previously of little interest. Local leaders were aware of the potential to organise through bottom-up coalitions to counter them, but felt powerless to act.

There are no clear-cut universal approaches for how development assistance can intervene effectively here. Local organisations and supporting social accountability can be a part of the solution to mitigate the excess of patronage politics, but approaches need to first understand the socio-political

configuration of local leadership and governance, which varies by context.

Drawing on existing strengths, aid agencies and churches could play a role in joining-up coalitions to seek out multileveled brokered and gendered alternatives. The reform priority could focus on increasing the proportion of government funding and services that reach citizens at a village level. Any attempt to innovate in politically informed ways to grow 'coalitions for change' should be carefully monitored and adapted based on learnings and problems that emerge. The potential for reform will, however, remain low until structural reform is possible at the national level, especially untied constituency funding which are disbursed at the discretion of MPs under the Service Improvement Program.

— IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 4

Local organisations might not be able to reform patronage politics and corruption, but they can be a part of the solution and could help mitigate the worst excesses of patronage politics. There is an opportunity to explore new politically informed programs that build 'coalitions for change', towards multileveled brokered and gendered alternatives. The priority outcome for reform could be an increase in the proportion of allocated budgets that actually reach the intended beneficiaries. Any attempt should be carefully monitored and adapted, according to a 'do no harm' principle.

As their career develops and their networks grow, women leaders tend to not engage in patronage politics, and place greater emphasis on transparency. When given the opportunity to allocate discretionary finances,

they perform well, prioritising community development projects, SME, and resource centres. This suggests women leaders have the potential to challenge or at least create an alternative to male-dominated patronage systems. Their influence is increasing, but there has only ever been one female Ward Councillor elected to Daru Urban LLG in the history of the District. While women are building solidarity through the Council of Women, they are still well short of having the numbers to challenge male dominated structures. As they have not yet had control over public finance allocations in South Fly, the question of whether they will reject, modify or sustain patronage politics remains unknown, but it can be assumed that they will be disruptive.

— IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 5

Efforts to strengthen the subnational governance and finance system should be accompanied by funding to women leaders and their organisations to select and manage projects, including building women's resource centres, market development and management, SME development, and tackling GBV. This should proceed according to a 'do no harm' principle, with careful monitoring of progress and risks.

The locus of capability for women's leadership in South Fly District is clearly Daru Urban. Women in rural areas, in comparison, face more resistance from their husbands if they attempt to fill leadership roles, and are more vulnerable to gender-based violence. There is a clear opportunity for Daru women to be active as role models, counselling and mentoring rural women and their husbands. Daru Market is a focus for women leaders and interaction

across South Fly District, which could be expanded to sub-district market development.

— **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 6**

Drawing on the success of the women leaders in Daru, and the nascent Council of Women structure across the District, use a combination of mentoring, training, and sub-district market development to reach women in rural areas, and so grow the reach of women's network to a district wide level. A partnership should also be formalised between the Council of Women and the CMCA Women's Structure, as their combined networks would take the network from district to provincial level.

An unexpected finding of this research was the capability sitting within informal women's networks. A total of 33 groups were identified in Daru, half of which were church based, and a quarter of which were organised around microenterprises. The groups are typically small, disconnected, highly dynamic, not immediately visible, and generally not taken seriously, even by the women members themselves. When interviewed, many women leaders were surprised by the questioning, thinking that their network or group was nothing out of the ordinary, a natural common-day part of their culture. The networks tend to operate quietly in the background, behind male-dominated public decision-making processes.

Women's group do not appear to form along language or tribal lines, which underscores their importance for attempts at building trans-local alliances. While their capability may be limited in an informal sense, they collectively have considerable reach across the female population. The political careers

of women's leaders are built on these informal networks, helping to establish their support base.

In addition to building a representative structure across South Fly District, the Council of Women is actively working to affiliate these informal women's groups. This nascent and growing network can be considered a 'coalition for change'. Building solidarity across it could lead to more women candidates running for elections and advocacy for reforms to subnational governance. But there is a risk aid support could harm the network, so any approach needs to be monitored and sequenced.

— **IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 7**

Aid agencies should consider women's networks as a 'coalition for change' and a bottom-up approach to growing capabilities, delivering programs, and reaching women in rural areas. They should also find ways to support women candidates for nominated committee roles and LLG elections, towards building their political career, as a steppingstone towards National General Elections.

Nominated women's representatives hold little power with the LLG system, but their appointment can provide them with important inside knowledge on how the system works, including the confidential workings and excesses of patronage politics. These appointments offer a steppingstone for women's political careers and to formalise connections with women's organisations including the Council of Women. The fact that many Ward Members do not bother to fill the legislated positions for women representatives

on their WDC is a matter of concern, which funding agencies could seek to influence.

— IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 8

WDCs could be invited to apply for funding of village projects, conditional on their compliance under existing PNG government legislations for the WDC to have at least two female members, who are nominated by the Council of Women.

The research has validated existing research by Pacific Women, on the importance of economic empowerment and gendered programming initiatives. Family-based programming, where men and women work together to challenge gendered norms around household subsistence and income generating agriculture, [leads to more male and female champions of gender equality](#). Economic empowerment programs work with men to generate income for their families and communities, which allows women to demonstrate leadership at the village level.

— IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 9

Gendered programming approaches should continue to be mainstreamed across all aid activities, with supportive training, extension work, family-based programming, economic empowerment initiatives, and market development. These should have a focus on men and women working together to challenge gendered norms, allowing more male and female champions of gender equality to emerge.

Further research and development is needed to better understand informal women's networks in South Fly, to continue to record key position holders and characteristics, but also to explore the region's sociocultural dynamics, including an inclusive social network analysis, and to establish a baseline to ensure it is not harmed. More attention is needed to highlight people with disabilities and the engagement of young people, especially given the 'youth bulge' occurring in PNG. Given that almost half of women's networks are faith based, additional research could explore the role the church plays in shaping gender norms, values and ideas. There could also be value in undertaking social network analysis to better understand the relationships and interactions, and to determine the degree that women sit in multiple networks and how much individual groups are networked with each other.

— IMPLICATION FOR PRACTICE 10

A research institution should continue to populate the database on the characteristics and membership of informal women's networks, with additional analysis on underlying customs, people with disabilities, youth, and the role of the church. This research should also establish a baseline, to allow monitoring of the network's development, and to ensure that it is not harmed by efforts to support it.

A review of the available literature suggests that generalisation of the findings to other parts of PNG is possible. However, this should be preceded by a process of contextualisation, as South Fly District is in many respects unique within PNG, due to its history, remoteness, and external border influences.

The research and its implications have been embedded with DFAT's current programming efforts occurring in PNG in South Fly, under Western Province Strategy signed by the Western Province Governor and Australian High Commissioner in late 2022. The research also suggests that career pathways of women into national politics, could be better supported by aid agencies through facilitating bottom-up steppingstones, including informal women's networks, nominated committee roles, and LLG elections.



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