The Implications of Not Involving Indigenous Leadership in the Local Level Government Structure in Papua New Guinea

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Abstract

This article argues that non involvement of indigenous leadership systems in the current Local Level Government (LLG) reformed structure is a barrier to development in the rural sector in PNG and suggests a structure to incorporate indigenous leadership systems in the LLG administrative functions. Tribal leaders are the influential figures at the village level and involving them in the LLG would facilitate effective participation of local people in the development process. The author hopes that the argument presented in this article stimulates further debate on the effectiveness and appropriateness of the current LLG reform structure in PNG with the implementation of the Organic Law (1995) on provincial and local level government reform in PNG.

Key words: Indigenous leadership, influential leadership, local level government (LLG), provincial and local government reform.

Introduction

In an article title 'redefining the role of tribal leadership in the contemporary governance systems in PNG' published in the Contemporary PNG Studies DWU Research Journal volume 7, 2007, the author (Ambang), suggested that there is a need to re-think the appropriate structure of the current Local Level Government (LLG) systems in PNG. In this paper, the author (Ambang) highlights the implications for not involving indigenous leadership systems (tribal leaders) in the current LLG structure in PNG   and proposed a LLG structure to incorporate indigenous leadership systems in the contemporary governance systems of PNG. Qualitative data in a form of interview transcripts abstracted from a study 'relations between indigenous and Western leadership systems at the LLG level in the contemporary governance systems of PNG', (Ambang, 2006) and literature review on leadership and governance in PNG was used to facilitate the discussions.

The term 'Western leadership system' in the context of this article refers to the governance structures, rules and formalities of electing or appointing leaders based on European values particularly the Westminster system of the British Commonwealth. The term 'indigenous leadership system' in the context of this study refers to the village governance systems based on indigenous people's culture and social structures, for example the tribal leadership in PNG.

The indigenous leadership (tribal leaders) was very effective during the colonial administration when colonial government administrators involved it in

the community development process (May & Regan, 1996). For example, they were recruited by the Kiaps as agents of the colonial administration to serve as village councillors and village court magistrates. They provided an important link between village people and colonial government administrations. In this process, colonial government administrators used village headmen to establish early local government councils in the villages. After independence in 1975, tribal leadership was not formally integrated into contemporary governance systems in PNG.

Leadership in the cross-cultural context

The world consists of different races, cultures and regions. Therefore, understanding leadership can be complex, particularly in a cross-cultural context where different views, opinions and perspectives are expressed (Yukl, 1994). While the phenomenon of leadership is widely considered to be universal across cultures, the way in which it operates is usually viewed as culturally (Lord & Maha, 1991). Cross-cultural research emphasizes that different cultural groups have different conceptions of leadership and each culture has its own distinct set of values, mindsets, habits, and priorities. Parry (2001) highlighted that in many indigenous societies, the nature of local leadership is linked with the local culture and social structures. These factors produce a context that limits what can and cannot be done in the realm of leadership and the use of authority. People in the indigenous societies might have different views and perspectives on what makes good leadership and how their governance systems should work to meet their development needs. Parry (2001) argued that these contextual variables must be understood and appreciated by anyone who seeks to lead and reform a group, community or nation. However, in many former British colonies, the tribal leadership systems were not included in the contemporary governance structure. For example PNG adopted the Westminster leadership model to structure its Local Level Government (Paeniu, 1995), where village councillors are elected through an election process.

Generally, there are two different types of leadership systems in PNG. They are Westminster and indigenous or tribal leadership. The formal governance systems are based on Westminster structure, which the country adopted after becoming independent in 1975 and the tribal leadership systems based on local peoples' social structure (Strathern & Godelier, 1991).
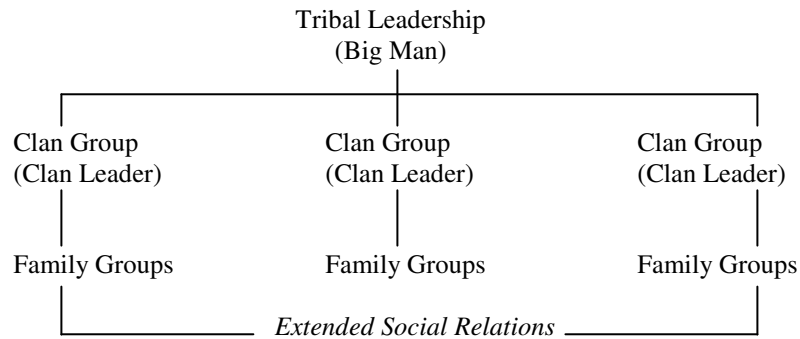
Indigenous leadership systems in PNG

Indigenous leadership systems are based on local people's social structures, which anthropology literature seems to best describe as cultural aspects based on social exchange theory. In Melanesian indigenous societies, it is through a variety of social exchanges that an individual emerges as the leader of a group – i.e. *exchange of benefits or favours, either material, psychological, or both* (Strathern, 1971; Standish, 1978). Generally, there are two types of indigenous leadership systems in PNG as identified by Strathern, (1971). These are clan leadership and chief leadership. Clan leadership is practiced in many areas in

PNG, except few areas in the New Guinea Islands and Papua regions which have a chief leadership. When making distinction between these two, Strathern and Godelier, (1991), highlight that clan leadership is different from the chief system in which leadership is achieved by a member of a community through ownership of land, wealth and other resources and bravery achievements (i.e. one of the clan leaders or an influential member of the community can become a leader of the tribe or village). With the chief system, leadership is inherited (i.e. only the members of the chief family will become the leader of a tribe or village.

Clan leadership in PNG

Since clan leadership is common in PNG, it would be appropriate to examine its structure and social values. Lacey, (1981) highlight that the clan leadership system consists of clan leaders taking a leadership role within their specific clan groups and represents various units or subsections of a tribe. A village or a tribe is made up of clan groups, as illustrated in figure 1.

Tribal Leadership
(Big Man)

Clan Group	Clan Group	Clan Group
(Clan Leader)	(Clan Leader)	(Clan Leader)

Family Groups	Family Groups	Family Groups

Extended Social Relations

Strathern (1971

Figure 1. Social structure of a tribal leadership based on the clan system

In some areas, clan leaders form the tribal leadership of a tribe or a village while in other areas one dominant or influential figure within the clan group emerges as a leader of a tribe or village. Clan leadership in PNG also varies across regions. For example, leadership styles in communities in the highland regions are different from coastal communities depending on the cultural aspects, local economic and geographical situations. Figure 1 illustrates an example of a clan leadership structure. However, it may not reflect some communities in PNG because indigenous leadership systems vary across regions (i.e. clan systems, chief systems and others in between these two).

Clan leadership bases on big man theory

The big man is a term used by anthropologists who have written about the social structure of Melanesian societies to describe influential members of the community (Standish, 1978). It is now a common term in the concept of

Melanesian leadership. In order to become a big man (a leader) one must show exceptional, economic and political ability, set up many matrimonial alliances, increase the production of subsistence goods, and pigs (livestock), establish a vast network of commercial partners with whom to exchange goods and contribute more than any other member of the community towards gifts and counter-gifts accompanying marriage, war and making peace (Strathern, 1971). The big man thus becomes a symbol of the wealth and prestige of his group and the most active agent of his group's political superiority as well as the personification of its common interests.

During the pre-colonial era, big men were the clan leaders; chiefs, or village head men. Leadership in indigenous societies comes with time (i.e. a person has to be mature enough to claim leadership authority), with age (a young man can not claim leadership because elders are regarded as more wise in terms of cultural knowledge and wisdom), and accumulating wealth can take a great deal of time, courage and effort (i.e. through warfare, trade, batter systems, negotiating with other tribes and villages regarded as foreigners and enemies (Strathern, 1971). Therefore big men were not ordinary members of the community but people with status and influence.

Data analysis and discussions

Qualitative analysis was conducted on the data abstracted from a study 'relations between indigenous and Western leadership systems at the local level in the contemporary governance systems of PNG', (Ambang, 2006). Interviews transcripts, selected literature and media documents were examined using 'content analysis method' to identify the common themes and patters expressed in verbal discussions and written documents.

Election of LLG councillors in the current governance systems displacing the indigenous leadership systems

Westminster system of electing leaders at the local level is causing indigenous leadership authority and influence to decline. Because of the presence of councillors, indigenous leadership systems (tribal leaders) are often overlooked and the government's administrative responsibilities at the village level are carried out by LLG councillors and those in the provincial political leadership and public service authorities. When it comes to making important decisions for the community on development incentives, elected leaders at the LLG and provincial level are making decisions for the people. A participant (Julie)[1] a local officer within the Public sector said that:

> *Leaders in the LLG and provincial administrations make decisions*
> *on what they think is best for the people and the community. They*
> *claim overall leadership authority in the village and district they*

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[1] The real identity of the participants in this study was not revealed. For the purpose of the each participant was assigned a study. Participants were the local people from various sectors of the community.

> *come from. They don't consult village leaders when making*
> *decisions on development needs.*

The current situation with the LLG leadership structure links to the changes during decolonisation in PNG when Westminster system was considered as an alternative governance system for the local level. Dorney (1999) highlights that when the Australian colonial administration left, they did not leave behind full functional governance systems. Today LLG systems at the village level seem more problematic because of the presence of European leadership structures and institutions in a society where social structures are predominantly based on traditional social structures and values.

Leadership in the current LLG administrative structure only involve leaders elected through the election process (political leadership) and those appointed by the government in the public service (public service leadership). If tribal leaders want to hold a leadership position in the current government systems, they have to contest with other candidates. However, through their traditional rights as the head of a clan group or a tribe, or a dominant land owner, they are leaders. Unfortunately, many tribal leaders cannot hold leadership positions because of Westminster system have changed the traditional values relating to leadership, people's attitudes and ways of thinking. A participant (Mr. Abada) a government officer working in Western Province said that:

> *During election campaigns intending candidates give out cash and*
> *other material goods to influence people to vote for them. When*
> *intending candidates persuade people with money and material*
> *goods, people vote for the person thinking he/she is a good person*
> *and will help them when elected.*

Money is used as an influential factor by intending candidates to persuade people to vote for them. Dorney (1999) claims that this is a common practice in PNG's modern politics when there is stiff competition between rival candidates. Such an approach is enabling people without influential status and leadership qualities to become leaders simply because they have money. The consequence is that leadership in the modern governance systems is only going to be for those with money. A participant (Mr. Kande), an officer in the government sector said that:

> *An intending candidate may not possess good leadership qualities*
> *but if he has the money can be elected. He can use money and*
> *material goods to influence people or promise them certain things*
> *to vote for him.*

Western leadership system is also changing traditional values of leadership in villages. For example, young people are becoming councillors and, as a result, the influential leadership necessary to actively mobilise people in community development incentive is lacking at the local level. A participant (Mr. Kukurai) said that:

> *The Western governance system gave freedom of choice for the people to elect their leaders in a new system known as 'election'. Many young educated local people are now holding leadership position and supported government they become councillors at the village level too. If a village chief or a clan leader wants to hold a leadership position, he/she must stand for the election. Many tribal leaders could not hold leadership position because European introduced systems have changed the traditional mind set and values of leadership.*

Electing leaders through election process is impacting on indigenous ways and values relating to leadership and also changing people's thinking and views on leadership. This is enabling people without influential status to become leaders at the local level and having a negative impact on the development process. Development policies are implemented at the local level where the bulk of the population live, and on the land owned by the people. Therefore, it is important to maintain influential leadership at the local level. Because of a lack of influential leadership, community involvement in the development process appears not to be effective in the villages.

Lack of effective community participation in the development process

Although tribal leaders are not involved in current governance systems, they still maintain their status in their respective villages and communities through informal village social structures (informal in a sense that they are not part of the formal governance systems). As head of the clan and tribe, they controlled the use of the land including the resources on the land, so they have a major influence on village affairs and the development process. A participant (Mr. Kukurai) commented that:

> *Because of the non involvement of the tribal leaders, people are not allowing their land for development and demanding compensation for the use of their land used. Traditionally land is under clan ownership so tribal leaders have the authority to make decisions about whether to release or hold back the land.*

Kuluach (1985) cited in King et al. (pp.235) highlights that 'it is important to take note that ninety five percent of the land in PNG is under customary ownership and land compensation is a big issue in the development process.' To improve some of the problems affecting development, the government of PNG introduced provincial and local level governance reform via the Provincial and Local Level Reform Act, 1995. The reform aimed to decentralise administrative powers to the local level (Lamour, 1998). This meant people could make decisions on their development needs through bottom-up planning. The bottom-up approach encourages planning to start at the village level. However, the process of bottom-up planning does not specify the role of village tribal leaders in the governance process. It generally emphasises the involvement of local people, particularly the resource owners in the planning process (Lamour, 1999). This interpretation indicates that tribal

leaders are considered as resource owners with no authority in village governance.

Government needs land for development and much of the land in PNG is under customary ownership. To encourage people's participation and involvement, it is important to formally include tribal leadership as part of the local level government system at the village level and to provide the leadership that is lacking to achieve effective community mobilisation and participation in the development process.

Declining traditional values

The decline of indigenous leadership systems is also having a negative impact on cultural values because tribal leaders are the authorities that promote and maintain cultural values. In communities where tribal leaders have little influence, there are social disorder and law and order problems because there is no influential leadership to control the community. In the past when tribal leaders had authority and influence, people listened to them because they were respected people in the community. Tribal leaders upheld traditional values and effectively enforced these values to maintain peace and order in society. For example, when there was a problem or dispute people followed cultural systems to solve their problems. Narakobi (1991) describes this as 'the Melanesian ways of doing things.' Cultural values have significant standing in society and cultural values promote people's identity and a sense of unity where people live and associate with others (Godelier, 1999). A participant (Mr. Lumus) commented that:

> *The authority of tribal leadership is declining. Tribal leaders enforce traditional values and since their leadership, authority and influence is declining, there no influential figures to control and maintain the society like it used to be in the past. Through tribal leadership's influence, law and order in the village was maintained, because people listen to them. In the current governance systems, if a councillor talks people don't listen to them, unless they are clan leaders. Breakdown of traditional values has lots of negative impact on the society.*

Impact on the development at the local level

Compensation demands: One of the major problems experienced in the development process in PNG is the issue of land compensation. Sir Peter Barter, the regional member for Madang Province in the national parliament and the Minister of Inter Government Relations in the Somare Government (2002-2005), when raising concerns about compensation payment in PNG (National News, PNG, 28/02/2005) said that:

> *I can tell you that in PNG today the fastest growing industry is compensation. Everywhere in PNG we have this problem. All kinds of compensation being demanded by people in all parts of the*

> *country and if the kind of compensation being demanded today does not cease, PNG could end up being very poor despite its vast resources so these demands for compensation has to stop.*

Land ownership and land compensation are important issues in PNG and land compensation is becoming a growing industry that has the potential to bankrupt the country. The consequence of compensation demands is that ninety five percent of land in PNG is under customary ownership and compensation demands are preventing development in the country. A participant (Mr. Manu) said that:

> *Land is a big thing for the people in PNG because people own the land. Land is also the main source of many tribal conflicts in PNG. Land ownership and ethnic diversity contributes a lot to lack of development in PNG.*

Lack of development indicates lack of good leadership at the village and community level. Kuluach (1985) cited in King et al. (pp.235) claimed that land compensation demands signal people's frustration with the uneven distribution of goods and services and a lack of social and economic improvements. The uneven and exploitative development leads landowners, whose land has been alienated without receiving any of the benefits of developments, to demand compensation. Land compensation demands are indications of frustrations resulting from the process of development itself, coupled with false promises by the government and the leaders, drive people to demand compensation as a means of obtaining a share of financial resources.

Leaders are elected to facilitate development projects that will improve social and economic standards and people's well-being. However, many leaders fail to perform to expectations in the current governance systems. Goods and service delivery is uneven based on leaders choices of who should receive them. A participant (Mr. Dawan) said that:

> *Our elected national parliament leader distributed fishing equipments, outboard motor dinghies and school materials to few villages this year. Only certain villages benefited and not the whole district. How would this sort of goods distribution will help and develop the district the leader was elected to represent. Distributing few things to certain group of people and villages is not a development but rather providing free handouts to the people who voted for the leader.*

Elected leaders often serve in areas that benefit them. Their priority is to serve those who vote them into power and the villages and communities who will support them in the next election. A participant, Mr. Kukurai, commented that:

> *Political leaders only serve those people who vote them to the power because in modern government systems, leadership is determined by the ballot box so elected leaders know which people*

(i.e. clan groups, villages or districts wards) vote for him and who did not vote for him. Once a leader gets into the power, his first priority is to reward those people who vote him so these people will continue vote for him.

When leaders serve to fulfil their election promises, they encourage the mentality of free handouts – i.e. where people see leaders' roles as being to provide all the necessary resources people need for their survival.

Free handout mentality: Leaders' attitudes of providing free handouts to fulfill their election campaign promises have cultivated the free handout mentality in many communities in PNG. This attitude is changing people's perspectives on the role of leadership because of the precedent set over the years. A participant, (Mr. Kukurai), commented that:

I think it is not correct to say free handout mentality is our traditional culture because in the past, people do not ask village chiefs and leaders for food and material things they need to support their living. People work hard to survive. Sharing goods and wealth and helping others are our traditional culture. It is not a free handout but a traditional system that encourages equal distribution of goods and it is good for the society because it helps people to have things they need. In the current governance systems, political leaders are the ones encouraging free handouts mentality because during the election many intending candidates give out money and material goods to influence people to vote for them during their election campaigns and promise people free handouts, such things like trucks, outboard motor dinghies, and cash if they vote for them to get into power. When a candidate wins and gets into power, people will then demand to receive things the leader promised.

Free handout mentality seems to be a culture of modern politics in PNG and it not a good system for society because it has a negative impact on people's perspectives, attitudes, mentality and their effort in community development. Instead of becoming self-reliant to develop the resources that they have (i.e. land they own), people tend to depend more on leaders and the government to provide resources for their development needs and this affecting the process of development in PNG.

Ineffectiveness of the LLG in service delivery in the development process

The key development agent that is not performing up to expectations is local level government. Provincial and local government reform was supposed to improve the functions and the operations of LLGs. However, many LLGs are having management problems that hinder them in functioning effectively. A participant (Lucy) commented that:

> *LLGs are supposed to receive development grants from the national government and the provincial administration. If they are getting these funds, why are they not delivering services in the district? We don see them funding projects, they don't involve us in the district development programs. They suppose to provide funding to the district administration to provide services.*

During the colonial administrations and after independence (1975) up until the mid-1980s, government administration at the local level was functioning effectively (Pokawin, 1999). Local level government councils were receiving money for projects and delivering services, and government officers were conducting patrols and visiting rural areas. The LLGs had powers to manage, control and implement government development policies, and they had powers to collect tax and enforce government rules (e.g. council by- laws) at the village and local level. Mr. Kande, said that:

> *During the colonial administration and years after the independence up till the mid 1980s, the government administrative systems were effective. Government officers conduct patrols right to the villages even though most of the areas were not access to reliable transport systems. Nowadays we don't see government officials visiting villages.*

The common situation frustrating LLGs is the lack of an adequate budget allocation from the national government and the provincial administration so as to enable them to deliver services. Mr. Paul Wak, a clan leader and a two-time council member from the Nebilyer LLG in the Western Highlands Province, when expressing his frustrations about the lack of funds for LLGs in the country (National News PNG, 09/03/2005), claimed that the LLG system in the reform is not serving their purposes and called on the national government to abolish the system in PNG. He further commented that the current LLG system was costing the government a lot of money on operations and achieved nothing in the development of the rural areas. Mr. Paul Wak said that:

> *I was not allocated ward grants to deliver services and this has been for the case for the last seven years of my term as an elected councillor. People I represent have too much expectation about the position I hold and I continuously disappointed them.*

The abolition of the provincial government parliamentary systems in PNG in 1995 aimed to enhance the LLGs so they could function effectively but the evidence from people's complaints and frustrations indicates that not been much improvement was achieved in the current provincial and local level government reform.

Local Level Government leadership structure based on indigenous social structures

The most significant factor maintaining the indigenous leadership system at the local level is the complex extended family ties, clan and tribal social structures and the ownership of land and resources by people through clan and tribal leadership. With ninety five percent of the land under customary ownership, the development process through Western values at the village and local level remains a difficult process.

This also becomes more difficult when effective and influential leadership is lacking at the local level (i.e. non-existence of influential figures who can mobilise the community for development incentives and to facilitate social and economic developments in traditional oriented societies). One way to solve the current leadership problems at the village and local level is to involve tribal leaders (the village big men) in the current governance systems (i.e. in the LLG) as demonstrated in figure 2.
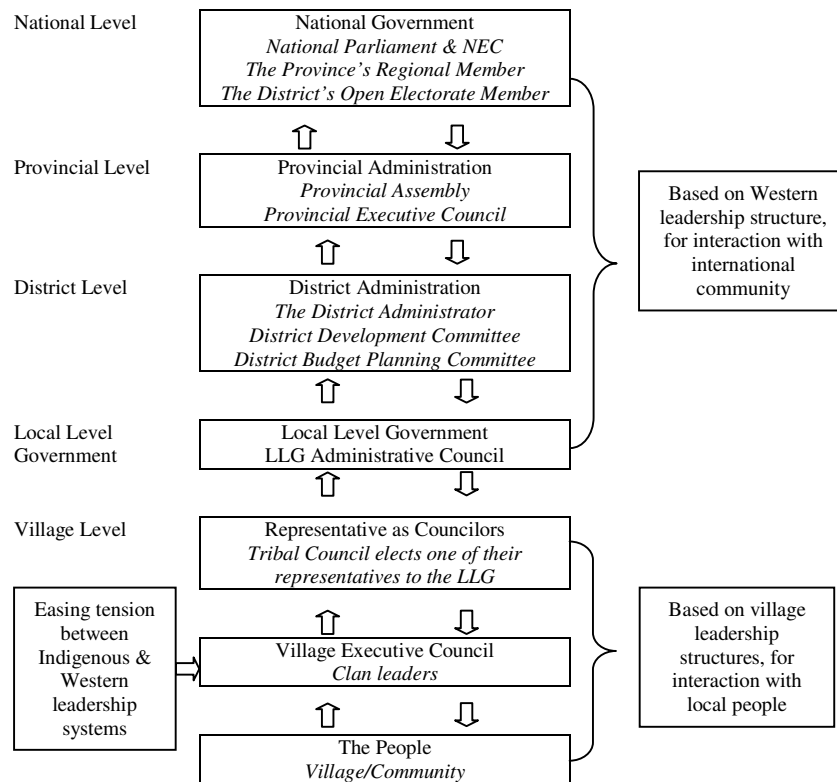
Figure 2. The proposed leadership structure at the LLG level and how it should link with leadership at the higher levels of the government in the current governance systems in PNG

Tribal leaders should be made responsible for governing their respective villages and tribes. The concern about this that some in PNG would raise is that PNG is a diverse society with so many different cultures and ethnic groups. Consequently, it would be difficult for a standard village governance model to be practical across cultures. The fact is that every community in PNG has some form of indigenous village governance system, either a clan leadership system or a chief system. Therefore it is possible for village governance to be structured according to local situations to suit the needs of the people in that region

Tribal leaders stay with the people and interact face-to-face with them daily. They are the appropriate authority at the village level to carry the social and economic burden of the community. Leaders at the higher levels of the governance system (provincial and national level) mainly deal with administrative issues and often communicate with the people indirectly through government administrative structures and systems at the provincial and LLG. It is important to allow influential people at the village level to be formally included in local level governance system. Such an approach would ease tensions between the indigenous leadership and Western leadership systems at the local level.

Leadership at the LLG level should follow indigenous leadership structures in which clan leaders in a LLG ward would participate in a village governance system. The clan leaders should elect their representative to the LLG to replace the councilors (those elected through the election process). The village people would not be directly involved in the election process so this would also ease problems caused by elections in PNG. The election process would be only appropriate for leadership at the national and provincial level. In such system, elections in the provinces will be reduced down to main constituencies for the national parliament seat (i.e. for provincial and open seats for the National parliament).

A significant problem with the current governance system at the local level is that there are so many elections in the districts because of the number of constituencies in the LLG (apart from the current four seats for the national parliament). Election process creates stiff competition for the leadership post between villages, clans, tribes and ethnic groups which often lead to tensions and conflicts between rival parties. When there are many candidates for a single electorate, a leader is elected with less than a quarter of the electorate voting for them. Most often wining candidates gets the majority of their votes from their own tribes and villages. Hence a leader is elected to represent one particular group and this also has a negative impact on the development process when the elected leader only serves people voted him.

Conclusion

It is important to highlight that ethnic and cultural diversity could pose problems for structuring a standard model. Therefore leadership structure should be based on a contingency approach (i.e. design to suit the needs of the

local situation depending on the type of local indigenous leadership system e.g. clan systems or a chief system).

The discussion in this article argues that current LLG leadership structure in PNG is having a negative impact on the development process. The most significant impact is the declining authority, leadership and influence of tribal leadership, resulting in a lack of influential leadership at the village level. This is identified as a barrier to development because ninety five percent of the land in PNG is under customary ownership and the non-involvement of village tribal leaders is limiting people's participation and involvement in the development process. What is required is influential leadership that mobilises the community in the development process. Western (European) governance structure through elections systems at the local level is not providing opportunities for effective leadership to be maintained. Therefore there is a need to improve LLG systems in PNG to ensure local leadership systems are included to facilitate effective development at the local level.

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