INDEPENDENCE MESSAGE

by PNG NRI Director, Dr. Osborne Sanida

On the Occasion of PNG Celebrating its 44th Independence Anniversary

Theme: “Translating Political Independence to real development through evidence-based decision-making”

The Collins English Dictionary defines a country’s Independence Day as “the day on which its people celebrate their independence from another country that ruled them in the past.” Monday 16 September 2019 marks 44 years since the Australian territories of Papua AND New Guinea were united to form the Independent State of Papua New Guinea (PNG). The formation of the nation state on 16 September 1975 marked the beginning of Political Independence for PNG.

“Being politically free is a cherished goal of many people. Pursuit of that goal has led to wars of political independence or liberation being fought over the ages” (Ahiakpor, 1990). In PNG’s case, no war was involved nor bloodshed to attain political independence. One can say that Independence was given to PNG on a golden plate. Having said, the “architects” of political independence, the likes of the Father of the Nation, Michael Somare (now Sir) and team can be said to have fought a “verbal war” for PNG to attain political independence.

Political independence means that PNG can take control of its political destiny and affairs through its systems of government that have been put in place (National, Provincial and Local Level Governments). Political independence means taking control of decision-making in the different spheres of the PNG society. All these have been done since 16 September 1975. Governments have changed over time and many decisions have been made over these years, as a nation. These are evidence of our political independence. So, in a sense, people have every right to celebrate the political freedom that PNG has had over the past 44 years and going forward.

The question we ask is “Has Political Independence translated into real development for the people?”. What is real development? I state simply that real development is about improvements in the lives of people, in different aspects of the society. In the context of political independence, real development is about realising or experiencing positive life outcomes or impacts as a result of the political freedom.

It has become a concern that despite the long period of political independence, PNG still struggles in achieving real development. Time and time again, there have been concerns raised about the low level of economic and social indicators, despite the large endowment of natural resources that PNG has. Why is this the case? We must make decisions such that our natural resource endowments must be translated into making real improvements in our social and economic indicators. These include, among others: higher incomes for the people and Government; increasing employment opportunities for the jobless; creating business opportunities for our entrepreneurs; making our communities safer; improving our education standards; building better infrastructure; reducing poverty; improving healthcare standards; and reducing the impact of pollution.

Improvements in living standards requires good decision-making. Good decision making requires good information or evidence, whereby a decision is made using relevant information about the advantages and disadvantages of all the possible courses of action, on the subject matter. In the context of public policy, informed decisions are about making the best decisions based on evidence to design good policies and effectively implement such policies for the improvement in the welfare of the people.

At the PNG NRI and like-minded policy/research think tanks throughout PNG, we champion the important role that research and analysis do in evidence-based decision-making. Research and analysis provide the relevant information based on evidence to assist the decision maker in making an informed decision. In public policy, research and analysis leads to informed decision-making in terms of sound policy design, effective policy implementation, and effective monitoring and evaluation of public policies for the betterment of people’s welfare.
Currently in PNG, there appears to be a gap between research and policy, hence a lack of evidence-based decision-making. On the supply side, there is limited local pool of human and financial resources which impedes/constrains the production of quality research. This in turn leads to limited institutional capacity to generate research to aid policy making. On the demand side, avenues for research to influence policy are often limited. A key reason for this is the bureaucratisation of policy making, whereby, researchers and research institutions are given only a minor role. Another reason is the decision-making and a policy-making culture that gives little importance to evidence-based research as an input into the policy making and implementation processes.

If PNG is to realise real development, political independence must not be taken at face value, but must play an effective role in creating an environment where policies are properly designed, effectively implemented and monitored and evaluated to improve the welfare of our people. Bridging the gap between research and policy will go a long way to achieving this outcome.

*Happy Independence and God Bless Papua New Guinea!*