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Governance Is Not an Onomatopoeia — but It can be a "Shock"

Electrification, infrastructure vulnerability and institutional resilience in Papua New Guinea

By Laurentia Laracy

Foreword:

Papua New Guinea is often described as a land of paradox. One prevailing paradox is the country's immense natural and human resources, which sit uncomfortably aside its poor social development indicators, including for health and education, access to housing, and continued high rates of malnutrition and growing inequity. In this occasional paper, or essay, Laurentia Laracy (lawyer, and specialist in corporate governance and community affairs with long connection with PNG and the region) uses electrification as a metaphor for wider governance, highlighting the benefits that Papua New Guineans would enjoy, especially in a globalised world, from good governance, and notably from reliability and standards. These standards and accountability apply to the conduct of business or the management of public resources and delivery of public services, with the benefits accruing to current and future generations, including from the availability of reliable public infrastructure and utilities, especially power.

Paul Barker, Executive Director, INA

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By Laurentia Laracy

"Governance" is not a word that makes noise. It does not crack like a gunshot in a tribal fight, it does not roar like a crowd at a rugby league game at Boroko, it does not spark like a fallen power line. It does not command attention and yet, when governance is missing, the shock can travel from Hela to Bougainville and every place in between. In a country that lives with seismic reality, "shock" is not a metaphor but a word that Papua New Guineans understand and feel.

"Onomatopoeia" and "metaphor" belong to classrooms and crosswords. They are the language of literature and analysis - signs of advanced education. But when education systems weaken, the ability to recognise metaphor, to interpret implication and to connect cause and effect weakens as well. The absence of education is not merely the absence of certificates; it is the erosion of shared understanding. When shared understanding erodes, cohesion erodes with it - and cohesion matters profoundly in a country whose demographic structure is overwhelmingly young.

The 2024 National Population and Housing Census confirms that Papua New Guinea's population now exceeds ten million, with a substantial proportion under the age of twenty-five.[1] The United Nations Population Fund estimates that approximately 60 per cent of the population is under twenty-five, that this cohort will continue to grow rapidly, that one in six women gives birth before the age of eighteen and yet only one in three children completes basic education.[2] Violence against children and youth remains among the highest in the East Asia and Pacific region and fewer than 20 per cent of child victims access formal courts.[2] Even these figures sit within a broader context of uneven data systems and monitoring capacity.

Whether precise or indicative, the numbers describe structural pressure. A rapidly expanding youth population with uneven access to education, employment and justice places enormous strain on institutions. Youth energy is not destabilising by virtue of age; instability emerges when credible pathways are unclear or absent. When opportunity feels distant, frustration builds. In some communities, economic hardship has contributed to young men turning to opportunistic crime, sometimes violently, in the belief that immediate income is the only available option to support families. That desperate response is not simply behavioural - it is institutional. Institutions rely on systems and one of the most foundational of those systems is electricity.

Reliable power underpins schools, health centres, refrigeration for vaccines, small business activity, telecommunications and household stability. Even charging a phone - the simplest link to job information, remittances or mobile banking, depends on electricity. In many communities individuals operate small informal businesses charging others to recharge their phones - a few Kina for a battery top-up. What this simple transaction illuminates is that

electricity, in its most basic form, is already monetised because connection matters. That small exchange reveals a deeper truth, namely, that electricity equates to participation.

Participation itself is changing rapidly. Artificial intelligence is reshaping society and workplaces globally - drafting documents, translating languages, analysing data. But meaningful participation in an AI-enabled economy requires more than a handset. It requires stable electricity, reliable connectivity, literacy and foundational education. A charged phone allows access; a stable power system allows productivity; an educated mind allows application.

An old English cautionary rhyme reminds us that "for want of a nail a kingdom was lost." In that ditty, the loss of a single horseshoe nail led to the loss of a horse, then a rider, then a battle, and ultimately an entire way of life - all because a small, predictable component failed. The lesson was not about horses; it was about dependency on stable systems. In Papua New Guinea's context the moral translates clearly: without electricity there is no digital participation, and without education there is no intelligent participation. Yet only a minority of Papua New Guinea's population has access to the central grid, and even those connected face unreliable and costly supply.

Davies and Lohberger, writing in 2025, estimated that only approximately 14 per cent of the population is grid-connected.[3] They suggest decentralised solar offers opportunity given PNG's abundant sunshine.[3] At the same time, they identify structural constraints - financially stressed utilities, fragmented oversight, regulatory uncertainty, complex land tenure, weak maintenance systems, foreign exchange limitations and procurement transparency gaps.[3]

Where grid supply falters, generators fill the gap. Across urban centres diesel generators hum behind supermarkets, banks and office buildings. They are treated as resilience. Yet generator reliance is not equivalent to grid stability; it is contingency rather than confidence. Diesel must be imported, transported, stored and paid for in foreign currency. Fuel price volatility transmits directly into operating costs. In effect, unreliable electricity shifts the cost of institutional weakness into fuel dependency. What appears to be adaptation is an expensive transfer of systemic risk. Over time, generator dependence signals fragility, not strength.

Public reporting shows how these constraints manifest.

On 2 February 2026, Radio New Zealand reported that New Zealand halted its NZ$6.7 million Enga Electrification Project due to ongoing violence around the project area.[4] The project aimed to connect thousands of households and its suspension illustrates that electrification is not merely wires and transformers - it depends upon security, legitimacy, coordination and institutional durability.

In September 2024, the Post-Courier reported PNG Power leadership warning that sabotage of the Ramu Grid threatened supply stability.[5] In December 2025, the same newspaper reported vandalism affecting power infrastructure in Hela.[6] In February 2026, vandalism of a telecommunications tower in Alotau disrupted Air Niugini booking and check-in systems.[7]

Then, on 17 February 2026, a Hela judge was forced to adjourn a court-sanctioned inquiry into tribal fighting because continuous power blackouts interrupted proceedings.[8] The court ordered PNG Power to explain the outages. When judicial processes are halted by electricity failure, infrastructure fragility becomes constitutional exposure. These are not isolated technical faults; they are moments where infrastructure vulnerability exposes institutional fragility.

Infrastructure damage cascades. When transmission lines fall, productivity drops. When telecommunications fail, aviation systems stall. When electrification projects halt, investment confidence contracts. In a country with pronounced law and order challenges, when courts go dark, justice pauses. What links these events is not simply hardware failure but the erosion of predictability - and predictability sustains something quieter than productivity, it sustains "hope".

"Hope" is not a soft word; it carries a quiet strength that shapes behaviour. When lights turn on consistently without diesel backup, when clinics function predictably and when telecommunications remain operational, communities internalise the expectation that systems work. That expectation influences whether students persist in study, whether traders invest in refrigeration and whether families commit to vocational pathways.

Papua New Guinea has confronted institutional shock before. In 2005, the Supreme Court asserted constitutional supremacy over aspects of the Enhanced Cooperation Program, holding elements inconsistent with the Constitution.[14] That decision was not rejection for its own sake; it was affirmation that sovereignty rests in institutional strength. Independence was not merely declared in 1975; it was defended through legal clarity. Electrification presents a comparable test. Infrastructure resilience, like constitutional resilience, depends on domestic institutional credibility.

Governance sits beneath that expectation. The Governance Institute of Australia defines governance as "the system by which organisations are directed and controlled, encompassing decision-making, accountability and risk management."[9] Applied to electricity, governance determines whether a solar installation installed today still functions five years from now, whether maintenance budgets are protected and whether infrastructure is safeguarded during dispute.

Governance is also communicative. Papua New Guinea is one of the most linguistically diverse countries in the world. Instructions regarding asset management, safety zones and land agreements must be intelligible if they are to be legitimate. Yet electrification projects must also comply with complex international standards relating to procurement integrity, environmental safeguards and anti-corruption controls, reflected in the Sustainable Development Goals and global financial monitoring regimes.[10] [11]

Here tension emerges. Compliance language demonstrates accountability. Yet infrastructure that serves communities must be understood by those communities if it is to be protected. Electricity enables physical connection; language enables cognitive connection — and both require governance. Language also offers a human reminder. In Australia and New Zealand, a

“sparky” is an electrician - a trained tradesperson responsible for safe wiring and system integrity. In Papua New Guinea, “Sparkman” colloquially refers to something entirely different - a drunk man. The contrast is light-hearted, but it is instructive. As electrification expands, PNG will require sparkies of the tradesman variety: skilled electricians and technicians capable not only of installation but of long-term stewardship. Infrastructure, after all, is only as strong as the people and institutions behind it. Wires and transformers do not maintain themselves.

History offers cautionary parallels. In Zambia’s Copperbelt, economic restructuring and global market shifts following mine privatisation reshaped expectations almost overnight. Communities that had revolved around copper did not simply contract economically; they were reoriented socially.

Ferguson’s analysis of the Copperbelt goes further than economics; he argues that economic contraction reshaped social meaning itself.[12] When stable mining employment declined, it was not only wages that disappeared but the expectation of predictable futures. Modernity - once equated with steady work, urban growth and institutional order — became uncertain. The loss was therefore not merely material; it was psychological and relational. When systems that once structured daily life weaken, people do not simply lose income; they lose orientation.

Fraser and Lungu similarly document how governance transitions and labour restructuring altered local stability and trust in institutions.[13] What had appeared permanent -employment, services and civic order-proved contingent. The lesson is not that development fails, but that when institutional reliability falters, confidence contracts. Technological and economic change can therefore connect and disconnect simultaneously.

Electrification in PNG carries similar dual potential. Expanded access can unlock education, enterprise and digital participation for a young population. But if the systems surrounding that infrastructure - maintenance regimes, enforcement mechanisms, transparent financial management -are fragile, the same infrastructure can amplify frustration rather than opportunity. The issue is not electricity alone; it is institutional steadiness.

That duality is not confined to physical systems. Papua New Guinea’s placement on the Financial Action Task Force grey list in February 2026 underscores that governance pressures extend beyond power lines and transformers.[11] Grey listing is not an assessment of banking collapse; it is a structured call for institutional strengthening. The Government has endorsed an Action Plan and committed to measurable progress.[11] In other words, the issue is not insolvency but credibility.

Sovereignty in the twenty-first century is exercised within global systems, not outside them. Participation in international finance, trade and technology brings opportunity — but it also brings standards. External scrutiny does not replace domestic responsibility; it intensifies it. Just as unreliable electricity erodes confidence in local systems, international monitoring reflects how institutional credibility is assessed beyond national borders. In both cases, the underlying variable is the same: predictability.

Where systems are predictable, investment — whether financial, educational or social — becomes rational. Parents invest in schooling. Traders invest in refrigeration. Banks extend credit. Businesses commit capital. Where predictability weakens, caution replaces commitment.

The Sustainable Development Goals articulate the interdependence of affordable energy, decent work and strong institutions.[10] These frameworks do not enforce themselves. Solar panels do not maintain themselves. Maintenance budgets do not protect themselves. Infrastructure without enforceable accountability does not produce resilience; it produces temporary functionality.

Governance may not be an onomatopoeia. It does not roar or spark. Yet when connections fail, shock travels. When the wiring holds, current flows and hope stabilises.

Papua New Guinea's development challenge is not simply electrification. It is ensuring that the governance systems surrounding electrification are strong enough to protect assets, clarify expectations, sustain communication and convert connectivity into institutional resilience. Governance may not make noise, but when it functions it creates something more enduring than spectacle: the expectation that tomorrow will "work" and that young Papua New Guinean sparkies will have jobs, not just spark.

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