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# Responding to family and sexual violence in Papua New Guinea to advance human rights

A submission to the inquiry of the Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade  
Joint Standing Committee into the human rights issues of  
women and girls in the Pacific

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## 1. Introduction

Given the wide scope of the terms of reference for this inquiry, we have chosen to focus our submission on addressing the family and sexual violence (FSV) epidemic in Papua New Guinea (PNG). This is an area that our research centre (the Development Policy Centre at The Australian National University) has been involved in through support for Femili PNG, as well as other research in-country with partners such as the University of Papua New Guinea and the

University of Technology Lae. Femili PNG is an NGO based in PNG that provides case management support to survivors of family and sexual violence.

The family and sexual violence epidemic represents a significant constraint on the rights of women and girls and is a barrier to achieving gender-equitable development in PNG. In line with the terms of reference of this inquiry, this submission will focus on the role of NGOs in implementing practical responses to gender-based violence, the effectiveness of Australian Official Development Assistance (ODA) in the fight against gender-based violence, and how the Pacific Step-up could provide support for critical NGO actors and other partners working in this space.

This submission was prepared by Ms Ashlee Betteridge, Centre Manager at the Development Policy Centre, The Australian National University, and Ms Fiona Gunn, Development Manager of Femili PNG and CEO of Friends of Femili PNG.

## **2. Summary of recommendations**

Our recommendations to the committee are as follows:

**Recommendation 1:** Family and sexual violence must be recognised as a long-term human rights problem that disproportionately affects women and girls, has multigenerational impacts, and is a constraint on development that requires sustained and serious engagement and investment from aid donors, including Australia, and from the PNG government.

**Recommendation 2:** Support and services for survivors of family and sexual violence are desperately needed. Integrated case management for survivors is largely absent across most of PNG and is an area of particular need, identified as such by both national and international organisations working on the ground. Long term investments by Australia and other donors, in partnership with the PNG Government, in the development and strengthening of services for survivors of family and sexual violence have the potential to provide direct, immediate and concrete outcomes.

**Recommendation 3:** There is a need to balance investment in government initiatives (i.e. the provision of health, legal and protection services by the government) with adequate investment in civil society and NGO initiatives that support survivors of violence. It is critical for Australia and other donors to support national NGOs and civil society in their service provision and advocacy roles alongside support to government.

**Recommendation 4:** The Australian government should increase core funding for Pacific organisations that provide services to survivors of family and sexual violence. This funding should be provided over a longer-term timeframe instead of a short-term project basis to improve effectiveness and continuity, and to build on success.

**Recommendation 5:** Supporting and strengthening technical and mentoring partnerships directly between organisations and individuals in Australia and PNG to tackle family and sexual violence has great potential, and should be further emphasised and supported through the Pacific Step-up. Innovative partnerships between the private sector and civil society can multiply the impacts of Australian government investments in the absence of substantive PNG government funding.

### **3. The family and sexual violence epidemic in PNG**

Family and sexual violence in Papua New Guinea is widespread, pervasive and highly damaging. It is a human rights issue — disproportionately affecting women and girls and posing a significant challenge to social, cultural, economic and institutional development. Gender-based violence is at unacceptable levels in PNG. Past studies (Fulu et al 2013) have found that up to 68% of women will experience violence at some stage in their lives.

PNG's latest *Demographic and Health Survey (2016-2018)* found that 56% of women aged 15-49 have experienced physical violence, and 28% have experienced sexual violence. A staggering 18% of women experienced violence during pregnancy. Sixty-three percent of married women have experienced spousal physical, sexual, or emotional violence. Out of these survivors, only 35% of women have sought help.

In many communities in PNG, people are not aware of the services available for survivors of family and sexual violence, the impact this type of violence can have on individuals, families, businesses and communities. Many people in PNG lack knowledge on recent family and sexual violence-related laws, particularly in rural or remote areas. They also lack access to information on support available to survivors of family and sexual violence.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> *Femili PNG Outreach and training reports for activities carried out in various districts in Morobe Province.*

### ***Flow-on effects of FSV and its impact on development, the economy and human rights***

PNG is facing severe development challenges. Its ranking on the [Human Development Index](#) has tumbled over the past three decades and as of 2018, it is ranked 155 out of 189 countries. It also performs extremely poorly on measures of gender equality, including the [Gender Inequality Index](#), where it ranked 161 out of 162 countries in 2018, with only Yemen performing worse.

Evidence shows that family and sexual violence in PNG has a wide range of flow-on effects that are both consequences of and contributors to these low levels of human and economic development. Family and sexual violence also has serious impacts on the human rights of women and children.

On health, there have been demonstrated links between both intimate partner violence and child sexual abuse and rates of HIV in PNG, leading to an increasing 'feminisation' of HIV/AIDS (Lewis et al 2008; Lewis 2012). Gender-based violence impacts on the already low levels of maternal health in PNG, as demands and restrictions imposed on women and girls, as well as the threat of violence, limit their access to even the most basic of reproductive health services (Hinton and Earnest 2010). Such violence is of itself also a significant burden on an already overstretched health system, with one study finding more than 90% of female trauma admissions to a rural hospital were due to domestic violence (Fox 2011). During the recent COVID-19 pandemic lockdown in PNG, there were also reports of an increase in gender-based violence, driven by economic stressors, stay-at-home orders, and increased alcohol consumption within the home, as well as harassment related to social distancing enforcement (IWDA and partners 2020).

Fear of violence and sexual assault disproportionately keeps girls and young women out of school and other forms of education and training. Recent joint research by ANU and UPNG showed that in Lae, family violence led to school dropouts or reduced attendance, and for those children still attending, lower grades and lack of interest or motivation for study. Students frequently missing school due to FSV issues were also at risk of exclusion under schools' Behaviour Management Policy (Aisi et al 2018).

For the economy, gendered violence has impacts across both the informal and formal sectors. Unsafe public spaces, including markets and public transport, limit women's ability to participate in the economy, and many women face personal economic impacts from both staying in and leaving violent relationships (Kuir-Ayius et al 2018). In the formal sector, firms face disruption, additional direct and indirect costs, staff turnover and lost staff time due to family violence issues, with a 2015 ODI survey suggesting that on average staff in three PNG companies were each losing 10.8 days of work per year from FSV impacts (Darko, Smith & Walker 2015).

In addition to this, the poor quality and limited nature of health, legal and other services denies women and children their rights to security, justice, health, education, economic participation and dignity.

***Recommendation 1:*** *Family and sexual violence must be recognised as a long-term human rights problem that disproportionately affects women and girls, has multigenerational impacts, and is a constraint on development that requires sustained and serious engagement and investment from aid donors, including Australia, and from the PNG government.*

#### **4. A culture of impunity: limited access to justice, safety and services for survivors**

Survivors of FSV need a range of services, from emergency medical and psychosocial care to emergency shelter, police protection, legal recourse, and vocational training. With growing awareness and resourcing, there are more services now available (at least in some locations) for survivors. However, accessing these is complex, most services are not functioning properly and are under-resourced, and there is little case management. As a result, despite the heroic efforts of individual service providers in different sectors, the outcomes for survivors can be all too often tragic.

Prosecution of those charged with family and sexual violence is very low, and mechanisms in the policing and justice systems intended to protect survivors are not always used, or accessible. One area of long-term concern and complaint has been the issuing of interim protection orders, or IPOs. Introduced through the 2013 Family Protection Act, short term interim orders can be extended into longer term Protection Orders (POs), and breaches of the orders by perpetrators can incur significant criminal penalties. Yet survivors have reported lengthy delays in obtaining the orders and difficulty navigating the complex process and paperwork, among other challenges (Putt et al 2019).

Pilot research between ANU's Department of Pacific Affairs and Femili PNG has showed that in the case of IPOs, change and improvement has been possible through investments in services, provided by both government and NGOs/civil society.

From a summary of the research: "It is estimated that around a quarter of Femili PNG clients wanted an IPO. The trends in what happened to these clients over almost four years indicates there has been an increase in the number of IPOs issued, especially in 2017 compared to 2016,

and a decrease in the time it takes to obtain an IPO and convert such orders to the longer-term POs. Almost all of the Femili PNG clients were women (94 per cent) and aged in their 20s or 30s (74 per cent). The majority had been subjected to domestic violence by a partner or an ex-partner rather than a family member. As Femili PNG assists survivors assessed as being at high risk, it appears those most in need of protection are accessing protection orders. Factors that contributed to the increase in uptake and more efficient processing in Lae in 2017 included: greater understanding of the purpose and administration of the orders by key stakeholders and services; an increased capacity in the district court, with the appointment of more magistrates and the active support of a newly appointed senior provincial magistrate; and increased support for applicants during the process, with Femili PNG taking on a lead role in court advocacy by helping with paperwork and at court. The study showed there was a higher rate of conversion of IPOs to the longer-term POs when a survivor had the assistance of a Femili PNG case worker.” (Putt et al 2019b)

Investment is needed to achieve gains like those seen on IPO issuance in Lae, and the study highlighted that external donor support for service provision played a critical role in achieving many of the improvements (Putt et al 2019).

As the client story below also illustrates, effective service provision to achieve good outcomes for survivors is highly complex and individualised. Investment in services is crucial to create a system that can respond meaningfully and effectively to family and sexual violence, to end the culture of impunity that has for too long left women and children with few options to escape violent homes or relationships.

***Femili PNG stories of hope and change: Emily’s\* story***

Emily had been subject to ongoing intimate partner violence and sexual violence from her husband since the start of their marriage. All of her children showed physical signs of malnutrition and one was hospitalised.

When Emily decided to seek help, a Femili PNG caseworker arranged safe house accommodation for Emily and her children. The family stayed in the safe accommodation for seven weeks while waiting for the outcome of legal proceedings. Femili PNG supported Emily as she reported her case to the police. Her husband was arrested and charged, and the court ordered his employer to directly pay PGK 400 every fortnight into Emily’s bank account.

Femili PNG also coordinated with the Child Protection Officer of the Welfare Department to find another home for Emily and her children. Emily’s family lived in Port Moresby and she opted to be repatriated there, so Femili PNG worked with partner organisations trace her family and discuss her return.

The Child Protection Officer conducted further family assessment work in Port Moresby prior to the repatriation occurring, collected Emily and children at Jackson Airport and initiated re-integration with the family. Femili PNG provided a business start-up kit to assist Emily to start a small business in Port Moresby. Emily and her children are now safe and living with her family in Port Moresby.

*\* Survivor’s name changed to protect her identity*

**Recommendation 2:** *Support and services for survivors of family and sexual violence are desperately needed. Integrated case management for survivors is largely absent across most of PNG and is an area of particular need, identified as such by both national and international organisations working on the ground. Long term investments by Australia and other donors, in partnership with the PNG Government, in the development and strengthening of services for survivors of family and sexual violence have the potential to provide direct, immediate and concrete outcomes.*

## **5. Role of civil society in responding to FSV: the Femili PNG experience**

In a context of limited government leadership on FSV and low levels of female political representation, civil society is taking an important lead on coordination and response at the local, district and national levels.

Investment in civil society is particularly vital when addressing the rights of survivors of family and sexual violence. Rights are only meaningful if they are enforceable by those who hold them. Experience from many settings, in the Pacific and beyond, provides evidence that civil society supported services such as case management are essential in ensuring legislative and policy change to improve the status of women and girls subject to violence translates to meaningful rights in practice.

However, in PNG, much Australian support for survivors and for prosecution of offenders goes to government: to better equip police and legal officers, for example. While these are commendable initiatives, investments in government institutions need to be complemented by investments in non-government organisations that will work with the state, put pressure on the state to deliver, and, most importantly of all, will help survivors of family and sexual violence navigate the system and obtain the services they need.

### **Femili PNG**

*“Femili PNG supported me well, talked to me with respect as if I am special, with great care. Never experienced such before.”* — Femili PNG client

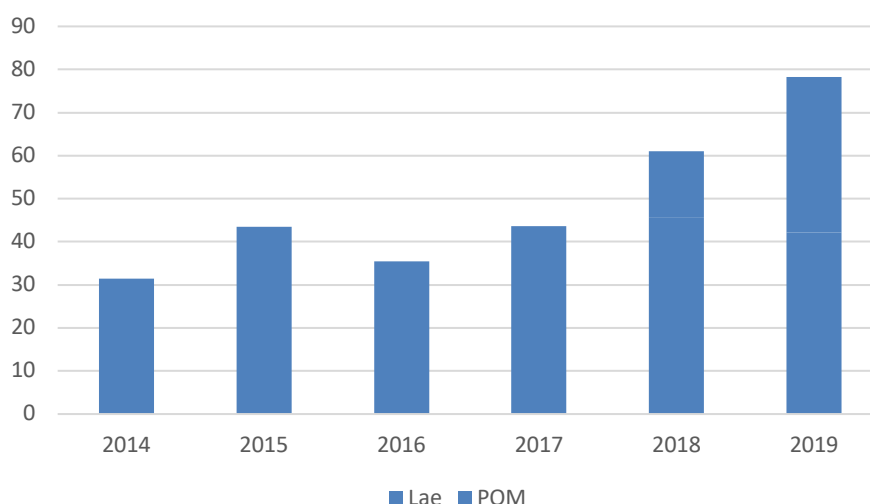
Femili PNG is a Papua New Guinean NGO that provides case management services for survivors of family and sexual violence in PNG. With case management centres (CMCs) in Lae and Port Moresby and a Safe House in Port Moresby, Femili PNG caseworkers assist survivors to access services such as safe accommodation, medical assistance, welfare support, and law and justice

interventions. Employing 49 staff (48 of whom are PNGeans), Femili PNG is committed to ensuring the sustainability and quality of its services.

Femili PNG currently obtains operational funding from the Australian Government through the Pacific Women funding mechanism managed by Cardno. Additional in-kind and financial support is provided by individuals, foundations and businesses in Australia and PNG, including Mundango Abroad, Digicel Foundation, and Oil Search Foundation, to name a few.

Since operations began in Lae in 2014, Femili PNG has provided services to 3,500 survivors of family and sexual violence. Figure 1 below shows steady demand in its first few years of operations, and an increase in monthly client intakes since 2017. This increase in client numbers has been due to the opening of the CMC in Port Moresby in September 2018 (as part of the Bel isi PNG Initiative, a public-private-civil society partnership) and greater numbers of walk-in clients accessing our services in Lae.

*Figure 1: Femili PNG Average Monthly Client Intake – Lae and Port Moresby combined*



The majority of survivors who access Femili PNG’s case management services are female at 93% of total clients (refer Table 1 below). The high rate of female clients reflects the broader demographics which demonstrate that family violence disproportionately affects women and girls in PNG.

*Table 1: Femili PNG client breakdown percentage, by gender and age*

<b>Female Adult</b>	<b>Male Adult</b>	<b>Female Child</b>	<b>Male Child</b>
82%	3%	11%	4%



Overwhelmingly, clients present to Femili PNG as a result of intimate partner violence (82%) and child abuse (14%). Sorcery accusation-related violence (SARV) accounts for a low percentage of Femili PNG clients. However, SARV cases (along with child abuse cases) are by far the most complex cases to manage as SARV survivors generally require multiple interventions by Femili PNG. These multiple interventions can include long term medical treatment due to severity of injuries, protracted police and court interactions as there is a low conviction rate in sorcery cases, and family tracing and repatriation, as SARV survivors are often rejected by their family and community and need to be rehoused. There is also additional danger for SARV survivors once relocated – if their history of sorcery accusation becomes known in their new community, they are at risk of being ostracised, losing their property or subject to new violent attacks. Unfortunately, support services for SARV survivors in PNG are very limited.

*Table 2: Femili PNG client breakdown percentage, by type of violence*

<b>Intimate Partner Violence (IPV)</b>	<b>Child abuse</b>	<b>Sorcery accusation-related violence (SARV)</b>	<b>Sexual Violence (not IPV)</b>
<b>81%</b>	14%	1%	4%

*“It was hard accessing services before. But now with Femili PNG, everything is easier.”*

— Femili PNG client

Femili PNG fulfils a vital role in the referral pathway for survivors of family and sexual violence. In Lae, almost half of Femili PNG’s clients are walk-ins, and a quarter of clients in Port Moresby are referred by the Bel isi subscribing businesses (read more on Bel isi in Section 7). The remaining referrals come from health facilities, police, safe houses, courts, other NGOs and community leaders. In turn, Femili PNG refers clients to access safe house services, medical assistance, police and courts. Femili PNG caseworkers assist in advocating for clients within this referral pathway to achieve short-term and long-term outcomes.

In 2018-19, these outcomes included:

- 221 interim protection orders were granted to survivors of family and sexual violence and 112 were converted to permanent protection orders.
- 174 clients received medical assistance including injury treatment, medical reports and counselling.
- 93 individuals were repatriated / relocated to safety, made up of 66 clients and 27 accompanying dependents and siblings.

- Business start-up kits were provided to 33 clients, allowing them to become financially independent.

*“I am very satisfied with the service because my caseworker is very helpful and is understanding and I feel at peace, because I am in a safe place and in safe hands.”*

— Femili PNG client

Femili PNG surveys a sample of clients whose cases have been closed. Across five years, 98% of clients have indicated that they were satisfied with Femili PNG services. Ninety per cent indicated satisfaction with other service providers in the sector.

*“Because many are in my situation, being abused but do not come out. But now with [Femili PNG], helps us to come out and seek services like court.”* — Femili PNG client

*“When accessing other services directly, everything is delayed, and I'm usually sent back and advised to come the next day. But with Femili PNG, I access these services quickly.”* — Femili PNG client

While there are generally high levels of satisfaction with services (when Femili PNG is assisting survivors to access these), there are slightly lower levels of satisfaction with court, police and welfare services. Femili PNG supports these core service providers to assist survivors of family and sexual violence by organising case conferences, hosting quarterly core service providers meetings and providing resources where possible. However, as noted in Section 4, many service providers are under-resourced and struggle to keep up with demand.

*“I am really grateful for Femili PNG because for ladies like us facing hard times like this we don't know where to get help and they are still struggling out there. As for myself I am thankful that I have come to know about Femili PNG and they have helped me within a very short period of time.”*

— Femili PNG client

***Recommendation 3:*** *There is a need to balance investment in government initiatives (i.e. the provision of health, legal and protection services by the government) with adequate investment in civil society and NGO initiatives that support survivors of violence. It is critical for Australia and other donors to support national NGOs and civil society in their service provision and advocacy roles alongside support to government.*

## **6. Effectiveness of Australian ODA in the fight against FSV in PNG**

The 2019 DFAT Office of Development Effectiveness evaluation of Australia's development assistance for ending violence against women and girls (EVAWG) included a specific focus on PNG, among other Pacific countries. The evaluation noted Australia's high level of support for gender equality and the strengthening of its approach to gender-based violence programming over the past decade, yet warned that the gains achieved so far could be lost without continued and concerted effort. (Elsberg et al 2019)

Long term core support to organisations like Femili PNG and the Fiji Women's Crisis Centre (FWCC) was seen as a particularly effective investment strategy, that should be built upon and expanded. Highlighting the importance of this, the very first recommendation of the evaluation notes the Australian government should support and strengthen fragile gains on EVAWG by "maintaining core funding where it exists, and expanding where it does not exist, to local women's organisations to strengthen their critical and catalytic work".

"The evaluation team noted the catalytic effect that long-term, core capacity funding to key CSOs supporting women's rights has had on EVAWG policy commitments and service delivery, with services aligning to best practice in EVAWG. In settings with rising conservatism, where space for civil society may be shrinking, Australia's support is likely to become increasingly relevant." (Elsberg et al 2019 p. 32)

The evaluation also highlighted the impact of the regional Pacific Women program in assisting smaller organisations in-country to access critical and flexible funding when they may not have the capacity to apply for international grant programs, and in providing longer-term funding to more established organisations.

The authors of this submission strongly support this recommendation on core and long-term funding, and are pleased that DFAT agreed to it in its institutional response to the evaluation. As demonstrated in the evaluation, the long-term nature of the funding to Fiji Women's Crisis Centre, for example, has been noted as part of its success. Given this and the prolonged challenge of EVAWG, we would advocate for more core long-term funding for similar organisations in the region.

Femili PNG was also highlighted by the evaluation as an example of best practice, and in the third recommendation of the evaluation, the importance of supporting and strengthening case

management services — such as those offered by Femili PNG — was highlighted.

“Femili PNG’s innovative approach focuses on survivors rather than services. Its effectiveness is predicated on strong partnerships with existing services, additional resources and/or support provided as needed. This allows it to successfully take on high-risk cases that would normally fall through bureaucratic cracks. Femili PNG has been referred to as ‘The glue between the police force, courts, health systems and women’s shelters.’ Many stakeholders referred to Femili PNG as ‘best practice’ because it has developed protocols and strategies for improving coordination among services.”  
(Elsberg et al 2019 p. 50)

The evaluation team also noted that Australian work to engage the private sector on EVAWG, such as the Bel isi initiative of which Femili PNG is part, is promising and could be expanded.

***Recommendation 4:*** *The Australian government should increase core funding for Pacific organisations that provide services to survivors of family and sexual violence. This funding should be provided over a longer-term timeframe instead of a short-term project basis to improve effectiveness and continuity, and to build on success.*

## **7. The Pacific Step-up: supporting partnerships and innovation**

The Australian government has placed a significant focus on scaling up our relationships with the Pacific region in recent years through its ‘Pacific Step-up’ policy, which has led to aid to the Pacific growing as a proportion of the overall aid program, as well as coordination on defence and security.

While security discussions in the Step-up focus on high-level geopolitical concerns, the lack of security and safety for women and children in their homes and communities has a real and tangible impact on day-to-day lives. Supporting Pacific NGOs and civil society on this critical development issue has the potential to create lasting change, increase social and economic stability, and build goodwill. This is also a shared challenge, with Australia facing its own continuing issues on gender-based and domestic violence. Combatting gender-based violence is also identified as a key area of DFAT’s COVID-19 development response, which also emphasises partnership.

There is scope for learning and collaboration between service providers, government and other stakeholders in addressing FSV. These collaborations — such as our research partnerships

between The Australian National University, PNG universities and organisations such as Femili PNG — are one example of the relationship-building that should be supported through the Step-up. Throughout its establishment and scaling-up of services, Femili PNG has also worked with service providers in Australia, such as the ACT’s Domestic Violence Crisis Service among others, to share best practice and learning.

Another promising area for further innovation and collaboration are the connections between the private sector and NGOs/civil society. Australian businesses are active across the region, and in PNG operate across a wide range of sectors including mining and natural resources, finance, construction, trade and services.

As noted in Section 3, businesses shoulder a significant cost from the impacts of family and sexual violence, with almost 10% of staff time taken up by FSV and substantial indirect costs from termination, recruitment, retraining and medical costs (Darko, Smith & Walker 2015). The stress on employees who are supporting family and community members experiencing FSV is also significant and can impact their performance at work. Because of this, there is increasing interest from business in supporting staff and contributing to solutions and interventions on FSV.

One promising example of collaboration across the private sector, public sector and civil society is [Bel isi PNG](#), which aims to “galvanise the private sector in partnership with government and civil society, to play a transformational leadership role in changing attitudes towards family and sexual violence and improving services for survivors”.



**Bel isi PNG: a public-private partnership to address family and sexual violence**

Bel isi PNG ([www.belisipng.org.pg](http://www.belisipng.org.pg)) is a partnership between the National Capital District Commission, Oil Search Foundation, Femili PNG, Business Coalition for Women, and private sector companies to address family and sexual violence in Port Moresby.

The program has grown from the recognition that violence has both a social and an economic cost for companies. Businesses subscribe on the basis that by paying an annual subscription fee to support improved services, as well as by developing strong policies within their organisation, they should see economic benefits for their company.

The Steering Committee for Bel isi PNG selected Femili PNG to operate case management services and crisis accommodation for subscribing businesses and the public. It is a five-year program, and is unique in PNG in that the private sector will underwrite the majority of project funding. Significant funding has also been provided by the Australian Government in partnership with the Government of Papua New Guinea.

The Bel isi CMC, operated by Femili PNG, opened in September 2018 and the Safe House opened in October 2018.

Since the opening of these facilities, Femili PNG has worked hand-in-hand with Port Moresby service providers in assisting survivors — both from subscribing companies as well as public clients — access services that range from emergency shelter, legal advice, police intervention, courts and welfare. Femili PNG also works with clients on longer-term outcomes: protection orders, repatriations and provision of business start-up kits.

***Recommendation 5:** Supporting and strengthening technical and mentoring partnerships directly between organisations and individuals in Australia and PNG to tackle family and sexual violence has great potential, and should be further emphasised and supported through the Pacific Step-up. Innovative partnerships between the private sector and civil society can multiply the impacts of Australian government investments in the absence of substantive PNG government funding.*

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