Keeping an eye on the road forward

Poor road infrastructure can seriously hinder development. Peter Davis spoke with an engineer who is helping establish the road forward in PNG.

In some parts of PNG a 50-kilometre road journey might take five hours in a four-wheel drive. The journey will involve numerous and somewhat precarious river crossings and it will almost certainly play havoc with even the sturdiest of vehicles (not to mention the driver and passengers).

‘This type of motoring might be a form of recreation in Australia but here in PNG it’s a serious burden,’ says Bob Beaman. ‘When you’re trying to transport essential materials, medical supplies or a sick family member, the quality of the road can make a difference between life and death. A bad road can also mean higher prices for basic goods. In a developing country, that can be a real problem.’

Nobody knows roads like Bob Beaman. As we drive along a newly sealed stretch of the Bundi Highway north of Madang, he comments on every pothole that used to exist. ‘This was a shocking stretch,’ he says. At one stage pulls his ute over to the side of the road, gets out and runs his hand gently along the new surface. ‘It’s holding up well’ he says. ‘They’ve done a good job here.’

Bob is the Senior Works Supervisor of the Australian Government-funded National Roads Regravelling and Sealing Project. This project is one of many under the Australian aid program-supported infrastructure strengthening program in PNG.

Bob doesn’t hesitate when asked what’s the biggest challenge involved in constructing roads in PNG. ‘Instability’ he says. ‘I mean geological rather than political instability,’ he adds with a grin. ‘This land is still geologically very new. They really should wait another five million years before they start building roads. The place really needs to settle down a bit.

‘We build these roads to last about 20 years depending on usage. Hopefully, they’ll outlast me. After that, it’s up to the government of PNG. There are some highly skilled road builders in PNG now so that shouldn’t really be a problem.’

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