

Minerva Access is the Institutional Repository of The University of Melbourne

Author/s:

Minnegal, M;COX, J

Title:

When brokers fail, brokers proliferate! Generational change and the failure of development in remote Papua New Guinea

Date:

2026

Citation:

Minnegal, M. & COX, J. (2026). When brokers fail, brokers proliferate! Generational change and the failure of development in remote Papua New Guinea. The Australian Journal of Anthropology, pp.1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.70102>.

Persistent Link:

<https://hdl.handle.net/11343/371279>

License:

[CC BY-NC-ND](#)

When brokers fail, brokers proliferate! Generational change and the failure of development in remote Papua New Guinea

Monica Minnegal  | John Cox 

School of Social and Political Sciences,
University of Melbourne, Parkville,
Victoria, Australia

Correspondence

Monica Minnegal, SSPS, Rm W401, Level
4 John Medley (Building 191), University
of Melbourne, Parkville, VIC 3010,
Australia.

Email: mmam@unimelb.edu.au

Funding information

Australian Research Council, Grant/
Award Number: DP220101633

Abstract

Recent efforts to secure development by Febi and Kubo people in Papua New Guinea's Western Province reveal a patterned history of failing brokers, incomplete projects and wasted money. Within this longer trajectory, three overlapping waves of brokerage can be discerned, each emerging in response to the limitations of its predecessors. These waves differ in brokers' social positioning, the bases on which they claim representative legitimacy, and the forms of capital—material, social or symbolic—they seek to accumulate. Shifts in brokerage practice reflect generational change and increasing engagement with governance, financial management and service-delivery systems previously experienced as remote. Our analysis centres on the second wave, situating it between earlier and nascent formations. Taken cumulatively, these waves of brokerage mediate structural gaps and facilitate Febi and Kubo incorporation into provincial, national and global regimes that promise future advancement, even as they deepen entanglement in clientelistic relations.

KEYWORDS

brokerage, clientelism, development, empowerment, Papua New Guinea

This is an open access article under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivs](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) License, which permits use and distribution in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, the use is non-commercial and no modifications or adaptations are made.

© 2026 The Author(s). *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* published by John Wiley & Sons Australia, Ltd on behalf of Australian Anthropological Society.

1 | INTRODUCTION

At the centre of Soabi¹ village, in the remote northeast of Papua New Guinea's Western Province, two unfinished steel-framed buildings haunt the clearing where children gather for school, the sick and injured queue outside a dilapidated aidpost, and youths play sport (Figure 1). Initiated five years ago, no work has been done on either since 2021. The 'naked building', as local people refer to it, is the skeleton of a duplex classroom, erected but as yet unroofed and unwalled. The 'kunai haus' (Tok Pisin (TP): grass house), the frame of a planned modern health centre, had progressed further before money ran out; it is roofed but still lacks walls and is being swallowed by weeds.

These two skeletons were the public face of development when we visited Soabi in October 2022, and remained reminders of unrealised aspirations three years later. They are the physical remnants of multi-million Kina² infrastructure projects funded by income streams from the Papua New Guinea Liquid Natural Gas (PNG LNG) project, funding made available because Febi people—long associated with Soabi—have been recognised as owners of one of the gas fields comprising the project, and thus entitled to benefit from it.

Crucially, these were not failed initiatives by the consortium behind PNG LNG, by government departments or by non-government organisations. The projects were conceived, advocated for and managed (or mismanaged) by men from the local community. The role of local brokers in successfully accessing this funding on behalf of the community and then failing to implement the projects in satisfactory ways is the focus of this paper. The failure of brokerage represented by these incomplete buildings goes beyond the physical structures; the process of construction has damaged social relations in ways the brokers have not been able to mend, and which implicate them as morally suspect, as per much academic analysis of brokers (Bräuchler et al., 2021; Koster & van Leynseele, 2018; Lindquist, 2015).

To understand that failure and its consequences, we need to look backwards to an earlier wave of brokers from this area, as well as forwards to a third wave as people—in response to the failures that these buildings signify—seek new modes and loci of brokerage. First, however, we review how failure of brokers and brokerage can be conceptualised in terms other than dis/empowerment of entangled actors. We then introduce the setting and methodology of our study, before tracing three overlapping waves of brokers emerging from Soabi. We conclude by analysing how the different modes of brokerage deployed by these actors both respond to and transform the relational fields in which they are enacted.



FIGURE 1 Two failed projects at Soabi in 2023—the 'naked building' (planned duplex classroom) and the 'kunai haus' (planned new aidpost building).



2 | BROKERS, POWER, COMPETITION AND FAILURE

Resource developments like the PNG LNG project promise economic growth but, in practice, generate processes of social change that produce new inequalities of access to wealth and status. These dynamics are often imagined as clashes between the 'leviathans' of the nation-state and global corporations, on the one hand, and local communities on the other (Golub, 2014). Such encounters, however, are not simple stories of the powerful inexorably advancing their own interests. Brokers who emerge from among previously marginalised groups are central in negotiating complex agreements between members of their own community and representatives of the state, the companies and neighbouring communities.

Those brokers play a dual role: they facilitate projects of resource extraction and attempt to advance their communities' standing through these developments, while often accumulating prestige and material benefit from both sides. This renders them vulnerable to becoming complicit in structures of inequality that, initially, they sought to manage on behalf of their constituents. Brokers thus may contribute both to differentiating the domains they purport to bridge and to enhancing inequalities in their home communities. When brokerage fails, the consequences can involve violence (for PNG LNG, see Main, 2026; Main & Fletcher, 2018; Minnegal et al., 2018). But brokering is a process, and only by following how brokers shift strategies through time can the field of negotiation be grasped (Bräuchler et al., 2024).

As we show below, for Febi and Kubo people brokerage tends to be characterised not by community empowerment (cf. de Jong et al., 2023) but as a contest between aspiring brokers for social status and personal power. Successive waves of brokers attempt to address what local people perceive as the failure of earlier brokers to bring 'development' to their community. These endeavours are highly experimental, with new brokers testing alternative strategies for accessing available resources (Cox, 2018; Golub, 2014). Each project reflects what resources are on offer from state or private sector custodians, rather than a process of identifying community needs and seeking solutions to address them.³ Brokers continually shift attention in pursuit of new resources, with empowerment of the community far from their minds. And yet the community is not powerless in all this. While it may be left dependent on the outcome of these contests, community perceptions of brokers' failure to secure resources on their behalf become a platform for a new 'generation' of brokers to assert claims to having the knowledge and connections to do better.

3 | ETHNOGRAPHIC SETTING

Kubo and Febi people live in a remote corner of Western Province, at the interface of plain and mountains (Figure 2). Soabi village was established as a mission station in the 1980s by American Evangelical missionaries and has served as a hub for Christian worship and teaching, health services and elementary education for both the Kubo people on whose land its airstrip was built and their Febi neighbours to the north (Minnegal & Dwyer, 2017). The seven 'corners' of Soabi reflect clusters of related landowning groups—three dominated by Kubo people, two by Febi people and one by Bedamuni people—on either side of the Baiya River. The seventh corner is the mission station itself, which includes an airstrip, aid post and primary school, as well as housing for several families from distant areas, many of them Febi, invited to live there so they could form part of the new Christian community.

The Evangelical Church of PNG has survived the departure of the missionaries 20 years ago, but that departure continues to be mourned; missionaries were effective brokers between Kubo

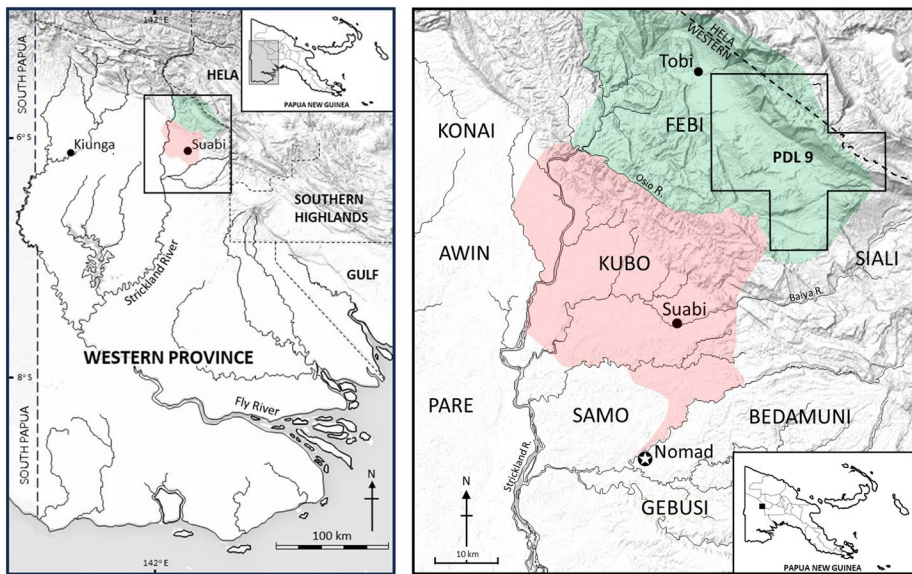


FIGURE 2 Western Province of PNG, and enlargement of focal area, showing key sites mentioned in text; coloured shading indicates lands of Kubo- and Febi-speaking people respectively.

people and the outside world, bringing key health and education services to Soabi. The airstrip receives little use now, and the school and aidpost are often unstaffed.⁴ There are no trade stores in the community; subsistence agriculture and hunting remain central to people's lives. The nearest government offices are 100 kilometres away at Kiunga, a town of 20,000 that is the capital of North Fly District and centre of much administration for Western Province.⁵ There are no connecting roads and, even if someone had money to pay for a flight, planes are increasingly rare. Those who wish to negotiate with government must walk for five days; three days if they have money to pay for a canoe down the Baiya and Elevala rivers. Mobile phones work intermittently at best, usually only at dawn and dusk.

Soabi airstrip, however, is also the gateway to the (as yet untapped) Juha gas field, in the mountains to the northeast, within Petroleum Development Licence 9 (PDL9). PNG LNG has long dominated Febi and Kubo imaginings of development and how it might occur (Minnegal & Dwyer, 2017). Gas-extraction projects like PNG LNG hold out the promise of multi-billion-dollar payouts to landowners. But accessing that money is far from straightforward. There is an exhaustive process to identify who the real landowners are (see also Hani & Cox, 2026); an initial Social Mapping and Landowner Identification (SMLI) study was conducted for Juha in 2008, by the consortium seeking to develop the project, followed by clan vetting by the government in 2013, and finally a landowner beneficiary identification (LOBID) exercise held at Kiunga in 2019. Equally complex steps are entailed in accessing funds designated for development of recognised landowner communities: business development grants (BDGs), infrastructure development grants (IDGs) and development levies (DL). Each step necessitates brokering relationships.

The research on which this article draws is part of a broader study into the loci of brokerage and identity of brokers at Soabi, the demand for and competing interests that coalesce around brokerage in this community, and the social dynamics that emerge as a result. While grounded in 40 years of prior work with Kubo people by the primary author, we draw here on ethnographic fieldwork during several visits of two to four weeks to Soabi, Kiunga and Port Moresby (Moresby) between 2022 and 2025, which included semi-structured interviews with key brokers, focused



on life histories and recent endeavours. We also monitored public discussions on Facebook and in Soabi-focused WhatsApp groups, and were kept informed of events through regular texts and calls from key informants. Regular visits to the field enabled these communications to be triangulated with wider community interpretations. Many of those we interviewed were youths when the history of PNG LNG began to unfold 40 years ago, and all have lived through the negotiations and transformations of the past two decades.

4 | FIRST WAVE: ESTABLISHING CLAIMS—BROKERING RECOGNITION

As colonial authorities first ventured into their lands in the second half of last century, often accompanied by geologists exploring for gold or gas and followed by missionaries in search of souls, Kubo and Febi people became aware that they were on the periphery of a larger world, with sources of power and wealth located elsewhere. The need to engage with those distant centres of power became imperative as the PNG LNG project took shape. If Febi people were to receive a share of the anticipated benefits, they needed to be heard in the places where decisions about distribution of benefits would be made. The first wave of brokers therefore travelled out from local communities, first to the highlands, where Huli had long negotiated with the ‘leviathan’ extracting gas for electricity to power the Porgera mine, and eventually to Moresby, the national capital.

Initially, at least, these men were what Meehan and Plonski (2017) term ‘embedded’ brokers, having ‘close ties with and influence over ... the marginal community’ that sought development (de Jong et al., 2023, p. 389). They were men recognised by both local people and company-designated social mappers as having authority to speak for others. They knew the boundaries of land and the histories of people, and had grown up living on, working and walking the land of their parents. None had any formal schooling, but they were men of renown, men who, in the past, might have been charged with negotiating with the denizens of the spirit world on behalf of their communities (Gérard, 2017; Minnegal & Dwyer, 2022). These ‘chiefs’, as they have come to be known,⁶ now sought to mediate relations with company and government, to ensure that their communities were recognised as owners of the land from which gas would be extracted.⁷

This first wave of brokers was epitomised by the man Minnegal and Dwyer (2022) named ‘Bob Reza’,⁸ who presented himself to Febi as the only one who could render them visible to the state and bring wealth and development, while presenting himself to state and corporation as the only one able to negotiate conditions under which ‘his people’ would agree to extraction. Bob was, he and others declared, the ‘Chief of Chiefs’.

Under Bob’s leadership the Febi chiefs did eventually succeed in brokering formal recognition from the government that their people were primary landowners of the Juha gas fields.⁹ But this brokerage role required that Bob and his fellow chiefs live far from their own land. Nearly all the many millions received between 2008 and 2018—primarily from BDGs—was consumed sustaining life in Moresby so they could continue to seek more. Little if any of the money reached people who remained in their villages (Cox & Minnegal, 2026). While first-wave brokers successfully altered how the state saw the people for whom they spoke, and thus established nominal access to PNG LNG funding, they failed to deliver wealth and development to their communities. This failure increasingly began to be called out (Minnegal & Dwyer, 2022).

5 | SECOND WAVE: ACCESSING FUNDS—FROM BROKERING ‘RECOGNITION’ TO BROKERING ‘PROJECTS’

A new wave of brokering followed, focused on negotiating with government to be conduits for delivery of PNG LNG-funded infrastructure and services. From working together to fight for inclusion, Febi and Kubo brokers began to compete for the income streams enabled by beneficiary recognition. These actors aspired to be brokers in the original sense proposed by Boissevain (1974), controlling ‘second-order resources, that is the access to holders of first-order resources’ (Bierschenk, 2021, p. 419)—in this case, access to those in charge of disbursing money for development projects.

The chiefs sought to dominate this space too, but new players were also entering the field, younger than the first-wave brokers and with more formal education. While both groups sought access to the same funding schemes, they differed in where they focused attention and how they deployed the monies they were granted.

5.1 | Chiefs: Distribution on the resource frontier at Tobi

As their ‘work’ in Moresby came to an end with gazettal of their people as ‘beneficiary clans’, and with it the rationale for consuming funds to support that work, Bob and his fellow chiefs moved back to Kiunga. They did not return to their own lands; after too many years in town, they were no longer interested or able to walk the mountains and forests of their origins. In effect, through their long sojourn in Moresby, these originally ‘embedded’ brokers had become disembedded from their communities and *ples* (TP: origin place). Yet they remained defined by, and focused on developing, that *ples*—Juha.

From rented houses in Kiunga, their gaze turned to Tobi, the northernmost Febi village and strategically located close to PDL 9. The projects they nominated were ambitious: a city to be built in/as the heart of their place; an international airport to bring the world to their place; a sealed road, to connect their place to the wider district, the province, the nation. But the *ples* they were supposedly developing was imaginary, seen now from outside, not within (Minnegal & Dwyer, 2024). The Tobi area is sparsely populated, with no more than 500 people living in and around the village.

While Bob and two other chiefs have been granted at least K8,000,000 for these projects since 2019, none have moved beyond clearing trees from an old unfinished airstrip, from the planned city site, and along the proposed road. Five years later there is not even a skeleton building to show for all that money.

Much of the money received was spent sustaining houses and offices in Kiunga, hosting meetings with officials, flights to Moresby, and helicopters so that the chiefs could be photographed in the clearings that briefly appeared near Tobi (Minnegal & Dwyer, 2024, pp. 4–5). At least some money, however, was widely dispersed among men and women from Soabi who walked three days into the mountains to do the clearing. This was unskilled labour, familiar to everyone, and the few hundred kina each received paid school fees for many children. It was appreciated, legitimising the chiefs as men who share resources fairly.

The chiefs appear to have pivoted successfully from their original goals. Facilitated, at least in part, by connections established and experience accumulated over their years of negotiating with lawyers and government officers in Moresby, they have secured large amounts of money for projects to develop their *ples*, projects that have enabled a trickle of money into the community

on whose behalf they purport to act. But their efforts have produced little substantive change in that *ples* or for that community. This failure has not gone unrecognised by their patrons, the provincial administrators charged with disbursing PNG LNG funds; those officers have expressed increasing frustration with the lack of impact and issued increasingly stern demands for acquittal of funds provided—to little effect. It seems that the legitimacy of the chiefs, in the eyes of both patrons and clients, is at risk.

Threats to withhold further grants to the chiefs may, at least in part, be designed to elicit kickbacks to government officers, but they have encouraged the chiefs to redirect much of their effort to pursuing structural change. They are now seeking to wrest control of PNG LNG funds from government and corporate officers (cf. Bouard et al., 2026) and vest it in their Landowner Association. Only that Association, they insist, should be able to decide where the money goes. In effect, then, they are seeking to set themselves up as patrons, rather than merely brokers.

5.2 | The new educated brokers: Construction in the service centre at Soabi

The new brokers were young, educated Kubo and Febi men, sent out to distant places to bring back not resources but knowledge—modern knowledge, western knowledge, and the skills that this knowledge conferred to engage outside authorities on their own terms. They see themselves as members of the ‘educated elite’ who, having left behind the past, hold the keys to change.¹⁰

These young men have grown up far from their own lands, at schools in distant towns. Despite their kinship connections, they are not clearly embedded in their client community; they do not know the stories of place and histories of people that underpin the authority of chiefs. Nor are they closely aligned with external authorities. They spend inordinate amounts of time cultivating relationships with government officials, or with one or more of the Juha chiefs, hoping their face, their name, will become known and their applications for project funding not pushed to the bottom of the pile.

It is here that the ‘naked building’ and ‘kunai haus’ become relevant. Unlike the chiefs, these young ‘elite’ men are not focused on developing their own *ples*. Their focus is on Soabi, not Tobi—on the place where most Kubo and Febi live, and where politicians seeking votes therefore focus attention. They may have broad community interests in mind, but their talk is of specific projects: a classroom, an aidpost, a church or market house—buildings that they argue will enhance service delivery.

Asnah and Alex established Landowner Companies to tender for available project funds. Both were born in Soabi and attended community school there but had been sent away to complete their schooling and, in recent years, spent increasing amounts of time in Kiunga. Neither had strong kinship connections to the first-wave brokers; both were from clans at the fringes of PDL 9.

Asnah started small. He applied for and secured money to build a basic classroom, then was awarded a contract to build a new church and, before that was finished, a K500,000 contract to build a duplex classroom. The first classroom was completed, though money from the church contract had to be diverted to pay workers. As a result, payment for work on the church could not be finalised until nearly two years after completion in 2022; the door remained chained and padlocked shut until mid-2024. Money for the duplex classroom—with some diverted to pay for work on the church—ran out long before all necessary materials were delivered, and the ‘naked building’ was left as a reminder of that failure.

Alex started big, applying for and receiving K500,000 to build a new aid post. His training and experience as a community health worker may have seemed relevant, but he had no construction or project management experience. To provide that expertise, he employed a consultant from a distant province who had little knowledge of Soabi or other rural contexts. That man charged significant fees and additional amounts for travel and accommodation. Again, the money ran out before the final materials were delivered, the 'kunai haus' a lasting reminder of what was promised but not accomplished.

The community expressed great frustration over these failed projects. COVID-19 played a part in what happened: material and labour costs rose, planes were grounded, and chartering transport into this remote place blew budgets further. Money was also mismanaged, used to meet social obligations rather than business objectives. The consultant Alex employed had looked after him through his school years; when he became ill, Alex used project funds to fly him to Moresby for treatment and, when he died, to fly his body to Morobe and fund the haus krai. Asnah used project funds to fly clan brothers to the highlands and to Moresby. The new educated brokers had no experience handling project money and underestimated the challenge of managing budgets and community expectations.

People at Soabi were not necessarily accusing Asnah and Alex of keeping the money for themselves, although this complaint was sometimes heard. Rather, they complained that these men failed to consult with community members, refused to listen to local advice, and failed to ensure local people were employed on the projects. With most materials sourced elsewhere, little local labour was needed and those few Kubo and Febi employed to oversee work were flown in from Kiunga rather than recruited locally. In contrast to the projects organised by the chiefs, local people saw no benefit flowing to them.

Mark, a former teaching assistant and parent, pointed to the broader effects of these projects, in terms not of incomplete buildings but of damaged relationships. Reflecting on the communal labour that built and maintained the Evangelical Church of Papua New Guinea (ECPNG) station at Soabi, he bemoaned the fact that young people no longer contributed in this way:

Our parents were very hard-working. They always cut the grass and dig the toilets for the teachers. But, when it comes to our time, only a few have a heart for it. Otherwise, they just go to the bush or go to the garden.

In Mark's analysis, this loss of communal morale reflects not simply a change in intergenerational values or movement into urban areas but is an effect of new infusions of money and shifting expectations of how money should be distributed and labour valued:

But in our time, the Seismic company comes in and stays for half a year or a year. And they have seen the colour of the money. And they gave up doing schoolwork to work for the project. This money has just come in and changed their mind to something other. They were just doing volunteer work, but this has changed. I'll give an example of [Asnah's] incomplete building there. If such projects come as a school project, in the first place, and they don't employ plenty of casuals to take part in the project, then those unemployed people will come up with comments and say, "Oh you haven't employed us, so who's going to do the work on the school? You've only employed a few men. If you want us to work on the school, I'm not interested because you didn't employ us earlier in the project to gain incomes. I'm not going to work for anyone like a slave". That mentality builds up in people's mind and they

lose interest in working at the school, in cutting grass on the aid post and all those things.

The community resentment arising from unfair distributions of casual labour, and the associated decline in communal morale, reflects not only the moral ambiguity of brokers (Bräuchler et al., 2021) but also limitations of the mode of leadership that second-wave brokers like Asnah and Alex assumed. In contrast to the chiefs, who played to the community by offering (unskilled) work to all who wished to participate, Alex and Asnah were focused on their respective projects. Management of community expectations was treated as a second-order priority.

Both men have established lives in Kiunga now, and are reluctant to return to Soabi because of unresolved tensions. Both regard the solution to reputational damage as finding more money to complete works and pay outstanding dues. Asnah locked the new church as a sign that it would not open until he had paid workers, which he envisaged would come from another grant. In 2023, Alex described the process of seeking further funds:

Then the election came last year, so the project couldn't continue. There is only PGK11,000 left now. The materials are here in Kiunga. They are in a container: all the inside and outside walls. I was told to resubmit. I was supporting the Governor during his campaign, and he told me, "When I come back, I'll see to you". But I haven't seen him since then (laughs). He is staying at the Cassowary [Kiunga's most expensive hotel]. I sent all the relevant documents to the Governor and to the Provincial Administration. Last week I got a call from the Governor's office. They said, "Come and see us. We want to finish the building and the staff house. Come in every week and visit". So, I will check every week, every Tuesday and Thursday. They are the days for clients. The Provincial Administrator knows.

While Alex does not use the term 'client' in the sense of clientelism, his role as a broker is now fundamentally about being a political client, and one with little influence on decision-makers.

It seems, however, that both men have lost the trust of their patrons as well as the clients on whose behalf they purport to be working. Some provincial and district officers have told us that Asnah and Alex, and the landowner companies they head, will not receive further grants, though others were less sure. But the views of people at Soabi were stronger, as a letter sent to the Provincial Administrator and District Planner in 2023 makes clear:

As Health Chairman of Soabi Aidpost, I want to express my concern that the funds allocated to the aidpost be used effectively. **I do not want the funds to be mis-used by external contractors or local contractors who do not live in the community and have not consulted with the community about their needs.** Previously, funds have been allocated to Soabi for aidpost construction, but the building remains incomplete three years after work started, and the site was not appropriate. (Emphasis added.)

That letter flags the emergence of a third wave of brokers at Soabi. The incomplete buildings were, it seems, a final straw, with people confronted daily by evidence of the failure of previous efforts to develop their community and draw in resources promised by PNG LNG, the state and the church.

6 | THIRD WAVE: PRODUCING OUTCOMES—FROM BROKERING ‘PROJECTS’ TO BROKERING ‘CHANGE’

A new set of brokers has emerged at Soabi in the past five years, focused less on securing contracts to deliver a project—with all the benefits that the contract-holder stands to gain—than on securing outcomes for the community in which they live. They want new classrooms for the school their children attend, a new aid post for their children and parents, and they want the community to share in the money supposedly available for providing these.

These brokers, too, are educated, graduating from high schools in distant towns. Unlike Alex and Asnah, however, they chose to return to the village, have established houses and families and gardens to make a living there. Their children were still young, and these families had not yet had to decide whether to go to town in search of education and a future. They still had hope that a future could be established in their own place.

These young people (mainly, but not exclusively, men) have taken over the School Committee, the Health Committee and the local council Ward. Rather than looking to outsiders, brokering deals with government institutions or Juha chiefs to secure money for development, they are brokering agreements between people of different corners of Soabi, and between different clans, to contribute labour in exchange for services. Since 2023, the community has built four classrooms and houses for four new teachers.¹¹ All have been constructed from bush materials—with the only external contribution being 24 nails given by someone at Mougulu—and all have been built using voluntary labour. The school grounds have been drained, sports fields have been improved, paths have been paved with white river stones and shade-houses have been built (Figure 3). Land has been cleared to relocate the Soabi health centre, with a maternity ward and staff houses planned. Again, all this work has been done by volunteers.

Those leading these initiatives know large sums of money are available for such projects and are also applying for these funds. But they are doing so differently from the second-wave brokers. Rather than establishing companies of their own and competing for contracts in their own name, they are seeking partnerships with civil society and non-government organisations who can oversee financial arrangements. Rather than focusing all attention on Juha funds, they are seeking money from provincial and district budgets, aid agencies and churches. And they are insisting that construction materials should, as much as possible, be sourced locally so monies are spent locally rather than on steel frames imported at great expense from Moresby or further afield.

It remains to be seen how sustainable the efforts of this new wave of brokers will be. The political and economic structures that shape wider dynamics may prove insurmountable; in competition for funds, those based in towns, with established networks of patronage, have a distinct



FIGURE 3 Photos of small, thatched lunch shelters and pathways of white stones constructed by volunteer labour at Soabi Primary School.



advantage over aspiring brokers in remote communities like Soabi. And if the Juha chiefs succeed in wresting control of Juha funds from government, Soabi-based brokers may lose access to those funds. But some of the third-wave brokers are also striving to change that landscape, pushing for clearer guidelines to govern how Juha funds should be distributed and acquitted so that less effort is wasted on competition for control. A proposal drafted by the Provincial Planning Office in response to lobbying from Soabi was submitted for consideration by the provincial government in 2024, though no outcome has yet been announced. Other Febi men are working to establish a Special Purposes Authority to govern disbursement of Juha funds, brokering negotiations between the Nomad LLG and the national Department of Provincial and Local Government Affairs. Yet others are seeking to broker new transport and communications systems in the Nomad area, seeking to change the structures that underpin marginalisation at Soabi, and with the Middle Fly District headquarters moving to Nomad in 2025, direct access to government systems should be much easier.

7 | DISCUSSION

A recent collection of papers on brokers and empowerment (de Jong et al., 2023) investigates the role of brokers in terms of community empowerment:

Especially in situations of inequality and power hierarchies, brokers often connect relatively marginalised communities with those in power—be it the state, private enterprises or international organisations. But do they actually benefit the position of the marginalised? Or do they rather, as Meehan and Plonski (2017, p. 43) suggest, serve to entrench their disempowerment? (de Jong et al., 2023, p. 385)

Empowerment, however, is itself a term that has emerged within neoliberal discourses of development (e.g., Cornwall, 2018; Sa'Ar, 2016). It presupposes a liberal polity where citizens participate in decision-making through political and bureaucratic systems that hear and acknowledge their preferences. This privileging of voice and choice is problematic because it does not reflect the lived experience of many in marginalised communities. Melanesia, for instance, is known to be a region of highly clientelist political systems that capture state resources and reduce citizens to the clients of powerful political patrons (Cox, 2009). The contributors to de Jong et al. (2023) are not naïve to such contexts but, in our view, empowerment is not a framing that sheds light on the specific social role of brokers or the agency of community members observed in our fieldwork.

The men involved in the three waves of brokerage were differently positioned in relation to the community they purported to serve, asserted a legitimate right to act on behalf of the community in different ways, and sought to accumulate different forms of capital in return for their services. The chiefs of the first wave, for example, were deeply embedded within, and worked together on behalf of, the communities from which they emerged, legitimised by the cultural capital they had previously accumulated there. Initially, at least, these men also worked within, rather than against, the political and economic structures that marginalised the communities they sought to represent; the gaps they sought to bridge were between entities that were highly asymmetrical in power and wealth, their brokerage functioning 'as a force for order rather than transformation' (de Jong et al., 2023, p. 385). Over time, however, they became disembedded from their communities and then 'co-opted'—'deriving authority primarily from their links to



the hegemonic party' (de Jong et al., 2023, p. 389). Their long sojourn in Moresby also meant they increasingly became the only men with whom the Department of Petroleum and Energy Project Consultant communicated. That status, grounded in the symbolic capital of being 'Chief', conferred significant influence over outcomes, but sustaining privileged access became an end in itself (and, indeed, involves a reciprocal process whereby government agents become co-opted into seeing the Juha project solely through the eyes of these brokers).

As the discursive endeavours of chiefs reified the 'clans' they purported to lead, the social landscape of Febi became 'entified' (Church, 2025; Ernst, 1999), and the chiefs turned to brokering relations between equivalent entities, competing with peers in an increasingly fragmented brokerage space (de Jong et al., 2023, p. 392ff). The shift from brokering recognition to brokering access to income streams pitted the chiefs against each other, encouraging ever-smaller groups to assert clan status and designate their own chiefs. Efforts to establish an umbrella Landowner Association recognised by government can be seen as an attempt to defragment, to establish a monopoly on brokerage, and effectively to become the patron whom community members must petition as clients. But the competition over which association to recognise, and over leadership of and roles within that association, has been fierce (Minnegal & Dwyer, 2022; see Church, 2025, for similar dynamics elsewhere in PNG).

Many Febi and Kubo people feel abandoned by their chiefs, recognise that these men are no longer embedded within the community, and lament their failure to reproduce social relationships through marriage of their children to community members. More importantly, others argue that the very factors that conferred authority on chiefs in brokering recognition now limit their legitimacy as brokers in the new space they thus enabled. Knowing 'the boundaries of land and histories of people' is of little relevance when what matters is understanding PNG LNG timelines and knowing how to manage money. As one man expressed it, chiefs like Bob did important work but 'his time is past', he is old now and his people are 'still waiting'.¹²

That frustration underpinned the emergence of a new generation of brokers, ones who lack the cultural and symbolic capital of the chiefs but draw authority instead from their formal education, consequent literacy and knowledge of modern systems. Cross-cutting the fragmentation into a world of distinct clans competing for access to PNG LNG funds, this new generation emphasises individual ability and ambition. Whereas the chiefs emphasise development of place, young men like Asnah and Alex emphasise specific projects from which they could extract material capital to maintain their urban way of life.¹³

These new brokers do appeal to their position within the social landscape of Febi and Kubo in asserting a legitimate right to compete for Juha-related grants, but that assertion is directed to government officers and chiefs; it has little relevance in negotiations with the community, who are more concerned with their literacy and knowledge of modern systems. Yet the skeletal buildings left behind have shown this knowledge to be incomplete, its practice insufficiently integrated with local expectations and cultural norms.

To those who pass them each day, those buildings convey frustrated hopes. The late arrival of colonisers and missionaries to this remote region means that there is little, at Soabi, of the historical layering of infrastructural development that is to be found elsewhere in PNG (Street, 2012; see also Demian, 2021). The colonial government built nothing, the ECPNG church funded staffing by teachers and health workers but not buildings, and the PNG state and NGOs have paid little attention to the region. And yet the bush material classrooms and medical aidpost buildings that were constructed by the community in the past have been allowed to decay long past the state where, previously, they would have been replaced, as people waited for the permanent structures Juha-funded development was supposed to bring. Those hopes were fed by brokers celebrating



the award of contracts and the arrival of planes bearing ‘modern’ building materials, only to be frustrated as projects stalled.

The hopes were not unrealistic: in 2018, partly in response to the massive earthquake that hit the region early that year, a team from ExxonMobil constructed a duplex classroom at Soabi; Fly River Forum¹⁴ on Facebook regularly features stories about new classrooms completed elsewhere in the province; and in 2026 a young Febi broker oversaw completion of a health centre building at Testabi, the village of his Kubo wife, several hours walk to the south of Soabi. The failed projects at Soabi thus cannot be attributed simply to an absent state, to disfunction in government departments, or to a lack of attention by external authorities. Rather, it seems, the asserted ability of local brokers to access Juha funds—money to which the community is entitled, they have been told, and control over which should lie in their hands—has shaped the ecology of brokerage in this place as one characterised by competition between brokers who, while ‘local’, have little experience in managing projects.

The field of brokerage fragmented further as aspiring brokers proliferated, and local people became uncertain how to evaluate competing assertions about capacity to broker development promulgated by Kiunga-based kin. Physical distance also underpinned a growing sense of inequity among people at Soabi. The brokers had mobility and access to modern commodities that those in the village could only dream of. They, it seemed, were benefiting more from the grants they secured than the village residents whose wellbeing those funds were intended to enhance.

One response at Soabi has been to refuse the dependence on outsiders promulgated by first- and second-wave brokers, turning instead to a discourse of self-reliance (cf. Maclean, 1994). This has not removed the need for brokerage but shifted it to a local level. Rather than mediate between entities defined by a fundamental asymmetry in power—local communities on the one hand, and distant state and corporate institutions controlling access to resources on the other—the third wave of brokers has sought to mediate relations between symmetrically positioned residential corners at Soabi and mobilise locally generated resources. These men might be considered activists, or simply grass-roots organisers, working on behalf of their community by challenging existing assumptions about how development may be accomplished. The intense work of negotiation between competing parties, however, renders their characterisation as brokers apt. Their focus is on brokering horizontal relationships, not the vertical relationships that concerned first- and second-wave brokers, but they, too, stand to benefit personally from their activities though prestige and influence if not in material ways.

The third wave of brokers lack access to the symbolic capital that chiefs accumulated, and opportunities to extract and deploy material capital like town-based brokers. Their authority and legitimacy is grounded in social capital within the community—as children, spouses and parents—and the political prowess they demonstrate may yet prove valuable in attracting supporters.

But structural symmetry does not preclude suspicion and distrust, or the fear that differential distribution of benefits and costs may undermine the equality framing negotiations (cf. Boiko, 2024, writing of internal brokerage in a very different context).

8 | CONCLUSION

The promise of development—release from the unproductive labour of continually replacing bush-material structures and the uncertainties of subsistence gardening and hunting, and freedom to engage with the wider world through mobility and education—has long captured the imagination of Febi and Kubo people. The PNG LNG project has fed these hopes through the past

two decades, as resource-extraction projects have done in much of PNG. However, the brokers who emerged from the community with the promise of realising that imagined future for their kin, while accumulating much material capital for themselves, have yet to make much difference to local lives.

The experience of different waves of brokerage among Febi and Kubo people can be seen as a history of failing brokers, unrealistic or incomplete projects, and wasted money; in short, as a tragedy. However, there are two further underlying dynamics that indicate generational change and a growing familiarity with state and private sector systems of governance, financial management and service delivery that historically have been alien and distant. In bridging gaps in social and economic structures (de Jong et al., 2023; Stovel et al., 2011), these various brokers play a cumulative role in facilitating incorporation of Febi and Kubo into provincial, national and global systems that still seem to offer possibilities for future advancement, even if at the cost of further entanglement in clientelistic relations.

Many of the brokers discussed sought to minimise vulnerability within a highly asymmetric socioeconomic field by strengthening relations with powerful outsiders, becoming dis-embedded from local interests and obligations, co-opted by the powers-that-be in the outside realm—whether state, corporate, religious or spiritual. But some sought to go further, to change structural conditions by establishing formal institutions separate from—though nominally identified with—the communities they purport to serve, institutions that positioned them as patrons with control over the resources for which they previously had to bargain with outside authorities. New brokers have emerged as a result, to mediate relationships between community interests and these newly empowered patrons. This proliferation of brokers is a response, then, not only to failure of previous efforts but also to successes that have changed the ecology of brokerage (Stead, 2026).

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thanks to the many Febi and Kubo people at Soabi and Kiunga who have spoken so freely with us over the past four years in person, by mobile telephone, Facebook, Facebook Messenger and WhatsApp. They have been generous teachers. Thanks also to the Association of Social Anthropology in Oceania, for hosting the informal and working sessions, and the final symposium, that resulted in this special issue. We have benefited greatly from the insightful engagement with our ideas by all participants in those sessions. Our thanks, too, to Peter Dwyer whose long involvement with Kubo and Febi people before his death in 2023 continues to inform our thinking. Open access publishing facilitated by The University of Melbourne, as part of the Wiley - The University of Melbourne agreement via the Council of Australasian University Librarians.

FUNDING INFORMATION

This research has been supported by an Australian Research Council grant (DP220101633), and by support for conference attendance from the University of Melbourne.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

ORCID

Monica Minnegal  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-5008-3770>

John Cox  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4028-5149>



Endnotes

- ¹ The name of the village has been spelled Suabi in much earlier writing and government documents (see Minnegal & Dwyer, 2017), but local people have now settled on Soabi as the preferred spelling.
- ² In late 2025, 1 PGK = 0.36 AUD/0.24 USD.
- ³ In this they reflect the weaknesses that See et al. (2025) identify with most development programs in Western Province, with minimal community engagement in identification of needs and design of interventions.
- ⁴ This has changed somewhat since 2023, influenced by the emerging third wave of brokers, with appointment of a qualified headmaster prepared to remain in that post for the next few years, along with his health-worker wife. Lack of transport, however, means that even these committed staff are often away from the village, unable to return to their posts in a timely manner.
- ⁵ Again, this is changing, with plans in train to establish headquarters for the newly designated Middle Fly District at Nomad, a mere 20 kilometres to the south of Soabi. By May 2025, however, though a 'Treasury' building had been opened at Nomad (<https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1SKANjgKjB/>) it was not yet able to support even basic government services. People from the area still had to visit Kiunga to open bank accounts, register associations or obtain ID cards.
- ⁶ The status of 'chief' is not traditional in much of PNG, and the referent of this term for Febi and Kubo remains unclear. It has become an honorific used to indicate respect for someone recognised to be speaking on behalf of others, but those others may comprise a single lineage, a subclan or a major clan. How one is singled out as Chief, however, is not simply a matter of seniority and is not uncontested. Among Febi, 'men traditionally achieved authority ... through being an intelligent persuasive person, whose ideas and organisational abilities were highly respected. He was seen as a person concerned with the welfare of the community' and recognised by being someone 'whose opinion is normally accepted with silent assent in discussions' (Ernst, 2008, p. 66). See also Kelly (1993), writing more generally about the construction of inequality among men of the Strickland-Bosavi people, including Kubo and Febi.
- ⁷ Their work mattered; Huli people from the north—with a much longer history of engagement with government and corporations—were declaring that they were the true owners of PDL 9, claims that needed to be challenged if they were not to be written into law. These claims by Huli continued to be pursued in late 2025, even after ministerial gazettal of beneficiary clans for PDL9 and their respective rights to benefits; see <https://twan.com.pg/news/6725> and responses at <https://www.facebook.com/share/p/1HVSbhXTCC/>.
- ⁸ In this paper, too, we use pseudonyms when referring to Febi and Kubo actors; where continuity matters, as with 'Bob Reza', we deploy the same names as used in earlier publications but in other cases we use different names to further protect identities.
- ⁹ Gazettal of beneficiary clans in Western Province occurred in 2022 (PNG National Gazette G148, 3 March 2022) after 14 years of mapping and negotiation and three years after the LOBID meeting that nominated those clans. It took another three years before percentage allocation of royalties among beneficiary clans was gazetted (PNG National Gazettes G1086, G1087, G1088, 28 October 2025).
- ¹⁰ The term 'educated elite' is widespread in PNG media and popular discourse, and has been so since before Independence in 1975 (Cox, 2018). It is not always used as a compliment, however; the sense of being an 'elite' may be seen as a problem for, not the solution to, addressing the challenges facing the nation (Joe, 2025).
- ¹¹ For early commentary on these initiatives, and on the failures that prompted them, see <https://www.facebook.com/jowisugu.siamo/posts/pfbid0AEipMBNFG7QiHUghAGpyXchNu3CYg3NDfXRB6io4mgqqmy76S2qWvEugpCJAzMjol>.
- ¹² In this, we observe the same transition that Bainton (2008) describes occurring much earlier on Lihir, in the context of a major resource extraction project, away from status being grounded not just in political prowess but also in holding esoteric knowledge of place and affinity with place-based spirit beings.
- ¹³ Asnah and Alex were not alone. Other young men based in Kiunga were developing proposals to build a market-house at Soabi, to build a women's resource centre at Soabi, to undertake major renovations of the Soabi airstrip, and to establish a community cocoa plantation near Soabi. In each case, the same laments

about lack of community consultation and inequitable distribution of funds within the community were heard.

¹⁴<https://www.facebook.com/groups/flyriverforum>.

REFERENCES

- Bainton, N. A. 2008. "Men of *Kastom* and the Customs of Men: Status, Legitimacy and Persistent Values in Lihir, Papua New Guinea." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 19(2): 194–212. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1835-9310.2008.tb00122.x>.
- Bierschenk, T. 2021. "Afterword: Brokerage as Social Practice." *Cultural Dynamics* 33(4): 418–425. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09213740211034060>.
- Boiko, A. 2024. "Suspicion, Trust, and Brokerage Among Contemporary Don Cossacks in Rostov Oblast of Russia." *Laboratorium: Russian Review of Social Research* 16(1): 51–74. <https://doi.org/10.25285/2078-1938-2024-16-1-51-74>.
- Boissevain, J. 1974. *Friends of Friends: Networks, Manipulators and Coalitions*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Bouard, S., V. Boudjema, and P.-Y. Le Meur. 2026. "CSR Agents as Heterodox Brokers in Kanaky New-Caledonia: Travelling Models and Spatialising Effects." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 37(2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.70107>.
- Bräuchler, B., N. Arambewela-Colley, and K. Knodel. 2024. "Conceptualizing Crisis Brokerage: Brokering Crisis or Brokers in Crisis." *Cultural Studies* 39(2): 1–28. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2024.2437428>.
- Bräuchler, B., K. Knodel, and U. Röschenhaler. 2021. "Brokerage From Within: A Conceptual Framework." *Cultural Dynamics* 33(4): 281–297. <https://doi.org/10.1177/09213740211011202>.
- Church, W. 2025. *Ink and Land: Documenting Factionalism Around a Prospective Mine in Papua New Guinea*. Canberra: ANU Press. <https://doi.org/10.22459/IL.2025>.
- Cornwall, A. 2018. "Beyond 'Empowerment Lite': Women's Empowerment, Neoliberal Development and Global Justice." *Cadernos Pagu* 52: e185202. <https://doi.org/10.1590/18094449201800520002>.
- Cox, J. 2009. "Active Citizenship or Passive Clientelism? Accountability and Development in Solomon Islands." *Development in Practice* 19(8): 964–980. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09614520903220784>.
- Cox, J. 2018. *Fast Money Schemes: Hope and Deception in Papua New Guinea*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press.
- Cox, J., and M. Minnegal. 2026. "Brokerage, Bridewealth and Benefits on a Papua New Guinea Resource Frontier." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 37(2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.70101>.
- de Jong, S., W. Berenschot, D. Ehrhardt, and O. Walton. 2023. "Agents of Order? Brokerage and Empowerment in Development and Conflict." *Journal of International Development* 35(3): 385–400. <https://doi.org/10.1002/jid.3759>.
- Demian, M. 2021. *In Memory of Times to Come: Ironies of History in Southeastern Papua New Guinea*. New York, Oxford: Berghahn Books. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781800731172>.
- Ernst, T. 2008. Full-scale Social Mapping and Landowner Identification Study of PRL02. Report to ExxonMobil Corporation, Papua New Guinea Liquefied Natural Gas Project
- Ernst, T. M. 1999. "Land, Stories, and Resources: Discourse and Entification in Onabasulu Modernity." *American Anthropologist* 101(1): 88–97. <https://doi.org/10.1525/aa.1999.101.1.88>.
- Gérard, A. 2017. *Procuring Game, Procuring Money: Dilemmas of Relationality with Outsiders Among Febi People, Western Province, Papua New Guinea*. Unpublished PhD thesis. Melbourne: University of Melbourne. <http://hdl.handle.net/11343/198374>.
- Golub, A. 2014. *Leviathans at the Gold Mine: Creating Indigenous and Corporate Actors in Papua New Guinea*. Durham: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1215/9780822377399>.
- Hani, Y., and J. Cox. 2026. "Brokers, Benefits and Betrayal: Becoming a Cultural Broker in Papua New Guinea." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 37(2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.70104>.
- Joe, N. 2025. "Koim: Educated Elites Cause of Downfall." *Post Courier*, January 17. <https://www.postcourier.com.pg/koim-educated-elites-cause-of-downfall/>
- Kelly, R. C. 1993. *Constructing Inequality: The Fabrication of a Hierarchy of Virtue Among the Etoro*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.

- Koster, M., and Y. van Leynseele. 2018. "Brokers as Assemblers: Studying Development Through the Lens of Brokerage." *Ethnos* 83(5): 803–813. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00141844.2017.1362451>.
- Lindquist, J. 2015. "Of Figures and Types: Brokering Knowledge and Migration in Indonesia and Beyond." *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 21(S1): 162–177. <https://doi.org/10.1111/1467-9655.12172>.
- Maclean, N. 1994. "Freedom or Autonomy: A Modern Melanesian Dilemma." *Man* 29(3): 667–688. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2804348>.
- Main, M. 2026. "'Who Here is a Volunteer?' Brokering the Moral Failure of the Global Peacebuilding Industry in Papua New Guinea." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 37(2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.70099>.
- Main, M., and L. Fletcher. 2018. *On Shaky Ground: PNG LNG and the Consequences of Development Failure*. Sydney: Jubilee Australia Research Centre. <https://www.jubileeaustralia.org/resources/publications/shaky-ground-report-png>.
- Meehan, P., and S. Plonski. 2017. *Brokering the Margins: A Review of Concepts and Methods* (Vol. Borderlands, Brokers and Peacebuilding Project, Working Paper No. 1). London: SOAS eprints. <https://eprints.soas.ac.uk/25820/>.
- Minnegal, M., and P. D. Dwyer. 2017. *Navigating the Future: An Ethnography of Change in Papua New Guinea*, Vol 11. Canberra: ANU Press. <https://doi.org/10.22459/NTF.06.2017>.
- Minnegal, M., and P. D. Dwyer. 2022. "The Broker: Inequality, Loss and the PNG LNG Project." In *Capital and Inequality in Rural Papua New Guinea*, edited by B. Beer and T. Schwoerer, 101–124. Canberra: ANU Press. <https://doi.org/10.22459/CIRPNG.2022.04>.
- Minnegal, M., and P. D. Dwyer. 2024. "Imagining the City in Remote Papua New Guinea: Relational and Categorical Modes of 'Belonging'." *Cities* 153: 105249. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.cities.2024.105249>.
- Minnegal, M., M. Main, and P. D. Dwyer. 2018. "From Business Development to Protection Money: Landowners and the PNG LNG Project." *DevPolicy Blog*. <http://www.devpolicy.org/landowners-png-lng-project-20180704/>
- Sa'Ar, A. 2016. *Economic Citizenship: Neoliberal Paradoxes of Empowerment*. Oxford, New York: Berghahn Books. <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctvr6966d>.
- See, J., K. McKinnon, and P. Placino. 2025. "The Strengths, Gender, and Place Framework: A New Tool for Assessing Community Engagement." *Community Development Journal* 61(1): 44–63. <https://doi.org/10.1093/cdj/bsaf026>.
- Stead, V. 2026. "Brokering Pacific Labour Mobility: Relation, Constraint and Aspiration at the Interstices of Supply Chain Capitalism." *The Australian Journal of Anthropology* 37(2). <https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.70103>.
- Stovel, K., B. Golub, and E. M. M. Milgrom. 2011. "Stabilizing Brokerage." *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America* 108(supplement 4): 21326–21332. <https://doi.org/10.1073/pnas.1100920108>.
- Street, A. 2012. "Affective Infrastructure: Hospital Landscapes of Hope and Failure." *Space and Culture* 15(1): 44–56. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1206331211426061>.

How to cite this article: Minnegal, M. & Cox, J. (2026) When brokers fail, brokers proliferate! Generational change and the failure of development in remote Papua New Guinea. *The Australian Journal of Anthropology*, 00, 1–17. Available from: <https://doi.org/10.1111/taja.70102>