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PAPUA NEW GUINEA IS FACING THE DEVELOPMENT CHALLENGES OF POVERTY IN URBAN CENTRES

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Key Points

- In Papua New Guinea (PNG), poverty is perceived as a lack of access to economic and basic services.
- Poverty is robbing people of their dignity, potential, and in some cases, their very lives, in PNG.
- Traditional social values and kin-based practices of taking care of those in need are breaking down.
- Three groups mostly affected by poverty are children, youth, and women.
- The poverty situation in PNG is threatening the progress towards several national development targets and Sustainable Development Goals.
- To reduce poverty, one must understand the needs and views of the poor, then prioritise poverty reduction strategies. A collaborative approach led by the government, the church, the private sector, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and communities is required to help improve the lives of disadvantaged people.

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By Philip Kavan

Poverty is defined and measured in a multitude of ways. Poverty can be viewed in absolute and relative terms. Absolute poverty refers to subsistence below minimum, socially acceptable living conditions (Philip et al., 2004). This is usually established and based on nutritional requirements and other essential goods. On the other hand, relative poverty compares the lowest segments of a population with the upper segments, usually measured in income from lowest to highest (Philip et al., 2004).

Poverty is a real issue in Papua New Guinea (PNG) (ADB, 2002). Yet, it is difficult for people to admit that poverty exists in the country. This is simply because traditional social values and kin-based society take care of those in need. Those who have more always helped those in need. However, this traditional support system is breaking down. In some communities, those with more do not have enough to share. In this modern-day PNG, life is very difficult for poor people to survive day by day. Moreover, poverty is robbing people of their dignity, their potential, and in some cases, their very lives (ADB, 2002).

This study is informed by the findings from the Asian Development Bank (ADB) (2002) on the priorities of the poor, which may seem outdated, however, many contributing factors remain relevant. The focus is placed on urban poverty and proposes reduction strategies to cushion poverty in urban PNG.

Urban poverty is one of the most important development challenges facing PNG (Storey, 2010). Furthermore, it threatens progress towards several national development targets and Sustainable Development Goals (Morton et al., 2017) now that Millennium Development Goals are well over, and threatens the achievement of Vision 2050 (Storey, 2010).

Characteristics of urban poverty

Urban dwellers who took part in the 2002 Asian Development Bank (ADB) poverty study identified drivers and outcomes of poverty that were relevant to conditions in the PNG's towns and cities. These include lack of employment, inability to

access cheap building materials, lack of decent clothing, lack of food (hunger), and fear of personal security and crime. These brought fear, particularly, to women and young people living in informal settlements (Storey, 2010).

In addition, Storey (2010) also noted that urban poverty:

- Reflects limited control over economic resources such as land, income, and assets.
- Is related to a lack of access to critical services, for example, education, healthcare, water, sanitation, and information.
- Derives from and reinforces a lack of power, respect, dignity, and citizenship. It also stems from the failure of wantok and other safety nets. This particularly affects women and youth.
- Results from exclusion and marginalisation, including economic (informal sectors); spatial (marginalisation of "settlement"); and ethnic (the denial of or conflict over resources through ethnicity) dimensions; and
- Is compounded by crime, which affects the poor both directly but also indirectly through the stigmatisation of whole communities by police and planners.

It is evident from this initial reflection that the causes of urban poverty include the high cost of living. The prices of key goods and basic services such as water, housing, transportation, and food increase. The main urban centres throughout PNG, in recent years have seen an increase in prices of goods and services. The global pandemic (Covid-19) and Ukraine and Russia war has just further added to the already increased prices of goods and services in the country. Moreover, access to affordable land with proper title is difficult to obtain.

What causes poverty?

There are many interrelated causes of poverty, and it is a complex problem. The Asian Development Bank (2002) identified several important factors that drive poverty. These factors include:

- Lack of jobs and other ways to earn cash;
- Too little or no land for farming;
- No access to education, water supply, health care, transport, and markets;
- Lack of skills and training in small business management and better access to capital, credit, markets, and transport; and,
- Absence of a social care system for elders, single parents, disabled people, and other disadvantaged groups (GoPNG, 2002; Storey, 2010).

On the above basis, a PNG Definition of Poverty was drafted (GoPNG, 2002) as “Lack of access to economic and financial growth opportunities and the inefficient delivery of, and lack of access to basic services”. The factors contributing to this definition of poverty include weak governance, weak social support systems, unsustainable use of natural resources, unequal distribution of resources, and a poorly maintained infrastructure network (GoPNG, 2002).

Groups affected by poverty

The effects of poverty are different for various groups. The three groups that are mostly affected by poverty are children, youth and women. Moreover, poverty affects people from all walks of life, including men.

- **Children:** They are affected by a lack of money and food which causes malnutrition. Furthermore, inadequate health facilities often cause children to suffer from treatable diseases such as scabies, skin fungus, and tuberculosis. Although the focus of this paper is on urban poverty, especially in rural areas, most children walk long distances to school, due to lack of transportation. They cannot attend school because they live too far away, or their parents are not able to provide them with school fees, clothes, or not enough food (ADB, 2002). These cause some parents to migrate to city to find easy access and better education for their children (Kavan, 2022). Moreover, the growing crisis of street children in our towns and cities in the country indicates that wantok and family systems have broken down.
- **Youth:** Inadequate education and skills are two major causes of joblessness and poverty among the youth. According to World Data Atlas (2022), the PNG youth unemployment rate for 2021 was 5.25 percent, a 0.25 percent increase from 2020. Many unemployed youths turn to crimes including car thefts, pickpocketing and break-ins. Consumption and sale of drugs like marijuana are common and young women engage in prostitution (ADB, 2002).

- **Women:** Research has shown that poverty is caused by a lack of cash, no or low education and skills, lack of services and transport, social pressures, breakdown of relationships, inequality, crime, and the demands of the extended family (ADB, 2002).

Poverty reduction strategies

Reducing poverty requires a better understanding of the needs and views of the poor. This would then inform the setting of priorities and what should be done to address these issues accordingly. The following priorities are identified as essential:

- **Jobs:** Create more jobs and other means for the youths to earn cash.
- **Land:** Provision of access to land for farming.
- **Basic services:** Access to education, water supply, health care, transport (roads and public transport services), and markets.
- **Skills training:** Provide skills training on small business management (examples: pig/poultry farms, small shops, and a support system including access to capital and credit).
- **Social care system:** Create a social care system for elders, single parents, people with disability, and other disadvantaged groups (ADB, 2002; Milano, 2020).

Poverty is a complex issue that needs many different solutions (ADB, 2002). Therefore, to be successful, activities cannot be developed and sustained by any one group alone. The government, church, private sector, non-governmental organisations, and communities, all have a role to play to help improve the lives of disadvantaged or poor people. This requires a collaborative approach led by the government to implement poverty reduction strategies. Table 1 below demonstrates the role of each stakeholder to participate in the reduction of poverty.

Table 1: Role of each stakeholder

Role/ Responsibility	Stakeholder
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create more jobs and means to earn cash 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government and private sector
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide technical and vocational training including training on small business management 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government, churches, NGOs, and private sector
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Basic services: access to education, water supply, health care, transport, and markets 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government, NGOs, and churches

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social care system for elders, single parents, people with disabilities, and other disadvantaged groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government, churches and NGOs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Access to land for farming 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Increase awareness of women's rights and the needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government, churches, and NGOs
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Strengthen existing law and order, and enforcement agencies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Government, NGOs, communities, and traditional leaders

Source: Adapted and modified from ADB (2002)

Conclusion

PNG is facing the development challenges of poverty in urban centres. Poverty is robbing people of their dignity, potential, and in some cases, their lives. Traditional social values and kin-based practices of taking care of those in need have broken down. The most important factors that cause poverty are lack of jobs, no land for farming, and no access to education, water supply, health care, transport, and markets. Children, youths, and women are most affected by poverty. Poverty reduction strategies must be informed by a better understanding of the needs, views, and priorities of the poor and implemented through a collaborative approach led by the government with the participation of churches, the private sector, NGOs, and communities.

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