



Priorities of the Poor

IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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Introduction

Papua New Guinea (PNG), like many countries in the Pacific, is faced with a difficult economic situation that has caused a growing number of people to fall into poverty.

The Government of PNG is committed to addressing and reducing poverty by ensuring the active involvement of the people and communities most affected. As part of preparations for a new national development strategy, a series of community consultations, workshops, and interviews were held. This “Participatory Poverty Assessment” was done in 2001 in 18 communities. Twelve were located in the four provinces of Sandaun, Gulf, Madang, and East New Britain, and six were located in the National Capital District.

The Department of National Planning and Monitoring (now the Department of National Planning and Rural Development) led the effort. The purpose of the consultations was to promote involvement of communities in government policy and decision making, and identify common perceptions of poverty. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) financed the study.

Consultations

were held in

18 communities



Is Poverty Really a Problem in PNG?

**Modernization
has created the
need for cash**

Unfortunately, the answer is yes, according to those who participated in the consultations. It is difficult for people to admit that poverty exists in the country because the traditional social values and kin-based society focus on taking care of those in need. Those who have more have always helped those in need. But this traditional support system is breaking down. In many communities “those with more” do not have enough to share.

In modern-day PNG, life is very difficult for poor people. Poverty is robbing people of their dignity, their potential, and in some cases, their very lives.

The majority of Papua New Guineans are caught at a cross-road. Some remain in their villages and depend on subsistence farming, fishing, hunting, and other traditional practices. But

Settler on a Rubbish Dump, “Scavenger,” 38-Year-Old Female

“I was born in Dariau Station in the west of Gulf Province. I am the eldest of eight children. When I was four, my parents left the village and moved to Port Moresby. We lived in Baruni Village and then moved to 6 Mile (today Saraga Settlement). We were the first family to move here and we lived with the Saraga family. Back then, this place was all bush. Later on, more and more people came to settle here. Life is really no good... *ia dika roho roho*.

“Shortly after moving here, I met my husband who was then a Fletcher Morobe apprentice. We had five children. My eldest son is dead; the police shot him at the dump site last year. My second son is a widower—his wife and child died recently. My third child completed Grade 10 but we can’t afford to keep sending her to school. My younger children are in primary school. I still miss my eldest son very much. My husband had to resign so that we could do our

son’s feast recently. He is now unemployed and our suffering is even worse.

“We have been living off rubbish dump food. We—young men and old women—wait for the store trucks to dump ‘expired’ food. The truck drivers tell us to get what we want from the truck and then throw the rest away. People laugh at us because we eat rubbish food (*dumpa aniani*) but we do not get sick (*gorere lasi*). Sometimes, I have to beg for food for my children.

“Today my children did not go to school because there was no food. Life is very hard (*mauri be auka herea*). Candidates make promises, elections come and go, and still there is no change. People go hungry, young men go into ‘rascal’ activities and lose their lives. I would like to see changes for the better. There must be more work and lower school fees. Our life will not improve if the situation does not change.”

modernization has created the need for cash, which most people have difficulty obtaining. Most central government services do not reach rural communities, resulting in migration of people to urban areas and more stress on the resources and living space in the settlements and cities. Poverty is thus increasing in both rural and urban areas.

To solve this problem, it is necessary to first understand the problem from the people's point of view and get their recommendations.



Poverty is increasing in both rural and urban areas

People scavenging at the 6 Mile dump site



What Is Poverty?



Safe drinking water was the biggest need cited

During the consultations, community residents and leaders, church leaders, and government, nongovernment, and private sector workers were asked to define poverty. They said they believe poverty exists in both rural and urban areas of PNG when people have too little

- jobs and cash,
- land,
- education,
- services such as health care and water supply, and
- transport and roads.

The biggest problem people cited was the need for safe drinking water; the second was lack of usable roads. One interviewee from Taluat Sikut village said, “...just get us a road...and see what we can do.”

In addition, people cited the breakdown of the family as contributing to poverty through divorce, children's use of drugs, and criminal activity.

A house made of scrap materials



Settlement Communities

Those consulted described the poor in settlement communities as those who use waste materials to build their houses, who lack decent clothing, who fear for their personal security due to crime, and basically “have no money, no food, and are hardly surviving.”

It is increasingly common for families living in the settlements to have only one meal a day. They are the emerging landless class in PNG; because they do not have traditional land tenure, they have very little or no land to cultivate food. They are constantly faced with the threat of eviction from the landowners. The presence of the settlers also prevents the landowners from using their own land.

Urban settlers from the rural areas said that although living in the urban center is difficult, the situation is much worse in the rural areas where they must walk long distances to get to school, aid

They ... “have no money, no food, and are hardly surviving”

Jobless Youth, 20-Year-Old Male

“I was born in Tapini and lived in a one-room shanty with my family. In 1997, my family moved to Port Moresby but I remained in Tapini. In 1998, I left school—no school fees—and came to live in Tete Settlement with my family. The house was a small single room shack; apart from my mother, father, brothers and sister, a cousin and two of dad’s cousins also lived with us. Dad had work helping a local mechanic. Our family has a bush material house and gardens in Kurivu. We move between the two places bringing produce to Port Moresby for us to eat and sell. It used to cost K1.50 to get there by PMV; it now costs K4.00 each way.

“Between 1998 and 1999, I had no work and moved to Tapini, Karopa, and Port Moresby. I was in bad company in Tete; sometimes I accompanied boys on break and enter raids. I was always afraid. In 1999, I met a girl who was also from Gailala. She was 15 and her father did not approve of me. We had a baby who is now one-and-a-half years

old. The father now speaks to me and most nights, I stay at his house with my wife and baby. My family helped pay the bride price for my wife.

“I did have some paid work in 2000, as a security guard and then in a supermarket. However, I have no regular job and mostly sit around all day in the Gerehu market with my friends. Sometimes I still accompany friends on break and enter raids. I usually get a small share of the takings.

“I see a hard future ahead. I will continue to have no money for food, clothes, or travel. It is difficult to find work in the city. I have no skills and there is so much crime. Many of my friends have been killed in their struggle to survive, either by the police or in fights. My father-in-law and I have discussed the possibility of me getting a job in one of the mine sites. I want my daughter to go to school. This however will not happen unless my life changes.”

Poverty is

“much worse”

in rural areas

Men are likely to have more formal education than women

posts, and sell their produce. They believe going back to their villages in the rural areas will isolate them, cause them to miss out on services, and provide no means to earn cash.

Lack of Education

Most poor people have little formal education, difficulty reading and writing, and do not have training that would give them livelihood skills. Many, especially those raised in urban areas, also do not have traditional village survival skills such as fishing and hunting.

The average education level of people consulted was Grade 5. Young people often leave school before they are skilled enough to get jobs, and they also do not have the skills needed to be productive in the village.

Poor Service Delivery

The poor quality of services has led many people to harbor a sense of grievance against the government. Most poor people are unable to access markets and services, such as health and education, because they don't have access to transport. In both the rural and urban areas surveyed, most women and children have to walk long





Women are responsible for growing crops for the family and to earn cash

distances to sell goods, go to school, get to aid posts, and fetch water. One woman from Mussu Village, West Sepik, said she walked six hours to get to an aid post.

The living conditions in the settlements are often difficult as there is no on-site clean water, no electricity, poor housing, and crime.

Is it Getting Worse?

Most people in the communities consulted said that poverty has worsened in the last 5 years. The table below shows their views regarding the aspects of poverty that have worsened in the last 5 years.

Most people surveyed in both rural and urban areas said the lives of women have worsened over the last 5 years. This was said to be due to women being responsible for planting and selling the

garden produce as well as being responsible for the family’s food when men do not have jobs. And in situations where men are employed, women have taken over roles such as fishing and cutting sago palms—work that used to be done by men.

Perceived Poverty Trends	
Area	Aspects of Poverty
Urban	Prices of “store” foods have increased School fees are more expensive Many people are jobless Increased population Increased number of elders without support
Rural	Increased number of school leavers idle in the village Services and roads, school facilities, and aid posts have deteriorated

Some elderly people do not have financial support from their families





**Children who
live far from
school either
do not go, or
walk long
distances**

Who Is Poor?

It may be difficult to acknowledge, but there are poor people all around: men and women of all ages, living in the provinces, settlements, and towns. They are the people who eat only one meal a day, have no land to farm, and have little or no education or way to earn cash. One interviewee from Baismik village said, “In this village everyone is poor...no health services (and we are) all facing hardship.”

In addition to these people, the consultations revealed an emerging group of disadvantaged people in the communities. They are

- elderly people and widows whose children cannot support them,
- single mothers,
- orphans and abandoned children, and
- disabled people.

**Many families
have only one
meal a day**

These people are called *Turangi lain* (*Tok Pisin*) and *Ogogami Taudia* (*Motu*). Both terms translate to “people who are poor or in a bad situation.” They are considered to be at the bottom of the economic ladder

Coping Strategies

To cope with the worsening economic situation, some people have turned to relatives for help. Some reported asking local government authorities for help, but to no avail. Others have resigned themselves to the situation while a few said they tried to adjust to the new circumstances.

“Con Meri,” 28-Year-Old Female

“I was born in Port Moresby. I never knew my father. I didn’t go to school and cannot read or write. I grew up in the settlement and my life was very hard. My mother collected and sold scrap metal from the 6 Mile rubbish dump and helped her aunty grow some food, but we had very little land. When I was 11 or 12 years old, I joined my cousin brothers (male cousins) in stealing from people on the street. My eldest cousin and his friends raped me when I was 13. I told my mother and she bashed me up and told me not to tell lies; otherwise, we would be thrown out of the house. I continued to go around with my cousin brother’s gang and charged the boys K2 to have sex with me.

“When I was 17, I had a baby girl. My mother arranged to have her adopted by a family in Gerehu. I never saw my firstborn again. When I was 19, I had a serious sex disease and got treatment at the hospital in Port Moresby. During this time, I had another baby girl and I was allowed to keep her. My baby was weak and I needed to buy medicine and food for her. My family was unable to help.

“Later, I started going to dances and discos; sometimes going home with

expatriate men. Most nights I got very drunk. The men gave me money to buy medicine and food for my baby, but I often spent the money gambling on pokies. I am still a ‘disco’ or ‘con girl’ as people call me. However, I find it difficult now to find men at the clubs. I still drink and smoke a lot of pot. Sometimes I sell it to expatriate men. Often I take my young cousin sisters and friends out with me and they give me money if they go home with a man. Sometimes we take Papua New Guinean men back to Saraga and the boys there hold them up, bash them, and take their money.

“I used to dream of marrying a white man who would take my daughter and myself overseas. I, however, see no real future for myself. I know that it is going to be harder and harder for me to win men and the only other way I know how to earn money is to collect scraps from the dump. I want to make sure that my daughter will have a good life, but she has not started school yet and is running wild in the settlement. There are many criminal youths in the village and it is going to be difficult for me to keep her away from crime. I feel very sorry for her.”

The following coping strategies for those living in rural and urban settlements were described by those consulted.

Rural Areas

Women and children walk long distances to get water, and some boil it to make it safe.

When sick, some have to stay at home to recuperate because they have no access to aid posts. More than half said they walked to town or to the traditional healer for assistance.

Those surveyed said when children live far from school, half decide not to go to school and half walk; a three-hour walk is not uncommon. Some children stay with relatives in town while attending school.

Urban Areas

Most urban settlers get their water from the tap outside their settlement or ask favors from households outside their settlement. As a certification of water connections is needed to get a power line connected, most houses in the settlement areas do not have power. Therefore, people commonly use gas lamps for light in the evenings.

Most families cannot afford to buy housing materials, so they either live with their relatives or build houses using scrap materials, collected mainly from dump sites.

Some settlement dwellers sell betel nut and mutrus (locally made cigarettes) to earn cash. “Breaking and entering,” selling drugs, being a “con meri,” eating only once a day, and begging and collecting food from rubbish dumps were other coping strategies mentioned.



What Causes Poverty?

Poverty is a complex problem with many interrelated causes. But when asked what causes poverty in PNG, the people consulted identified the most important factors as follows:

- lack of jobs and other opportunities to earn cash,
- too little or no land to cultivate food crops,
- no access to education,
- lack of access to services and poor living conditions, and
- breakdown of family life.



**Women
shoulder the
burden of
raising the
children**

The causes of poverty are different for different groups in society. The three groups that are most affected by poverty are children, youth, and women, although poverty affects people from all walks of life, including men.

Children

Lack of money and food causes malnutrition in children, and inadequate health facilities often cause children to suffer from treatable diseases like scabies, skin fungus, and tuberculosis. Most children must walk long distances to school due to the absence of transportation. Others cannot attend school because they live too far away, or their parents cannot provide them with school fees, clothes, or enough food.



Youth

Inadequate education and skills are two major causes of joblessness and poverty among the youth. When young men cannot find jobs, many turn to crime. Crimes mostly include car thefts, pickpocketing, and break-ins. Drug and alcohol addiction are growing family and community concerns. Most drug users smoke and sell marijuana. Young women in many areas are turning to prostitution. According to young women interviewed, “prostitution does not require specific skills or educational level to engage in.”

Women

According to the women interviewed, poverty is caused by 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. Low educational attainment prevents women from being elected to committee and ward level decision-making positions. Most women cited the lack of self-help programs that would help them improve their livelihoods.

Women shoulder the burden of raising the children, particularly when abandoned by husbands who give no financial support. Moreover, most women said that domestic violence is part of married life.

Need for Help

Almost all the people interviewed felt that the current issues and concerns were beyond their capacity to address; therefore, they require help. But most said they receive no help from the local or national government; they depend mainly on relatives and close friends. Most people said they were not aware of any government or other poverty reduction programs. Only a few people mentioned programs run by a logging company (JANT), World Wildlife Fund, World Vision, and Peace Foundation.

**Domestic
violence is part
of married life
for many
women.**

**Most said they
receive no help
from the
government**

What Can Be Done?

The information presented in this booklet shows the seriousness and urgency of solving the poverty problem in PNG. But what can be done? First, there is a need to listen carefully and understand the needs and the views of the poor. Then, prioritize what should be done and address these priorities together with the poor.

Community Priorities

The communities identified the following priorities for future poverty reduction programs:

Settler, "Head of Family," 28-Year-Old Male

"I was born in a village in Simbu province in 1973. My father died in 1975 and I was brought up by my paternal uncle and his wife. I did not attend school. In 1983 I came to Port Moresby and lived with my older brother in a one-room house with four other people. I worked as a street vendor selling betel nuts and cigarettes.

"In 1992, I built my own shack and got married. My wife joined me in the street-selling business and that is how we have earned our living since then. In 1996 my aunt (who brought me up) died but I could not afford to go to the village for the funeral. I was very upset. In 1998 my biological mother died and again I could not afford to go to the funeral.

"My wife and I are equal partners in all our business activities. On a Friday or holiday we can make as much as K8 profit, but on most days it is between K4-6. We spend K2 a day on food, buying some greens, a coconut, and tapioca. Sometimes we buy fish, soap, smokes, and betel nut for our own use.

"My home has no water or electricity. We get water from other people's taps and sometimes they chase us away. I have dug a pit that we use as a toilet and have candles for light at night. We cook on an open fire in the garden. When I have the opportunity, I cut trees in town, dry the wood and sometimes have enough to sell as firewood at the market.

"I look to a brighter future and hope for prosperity by 2005. The Big Man (God or Bill Skate) will see to this. I want to have a big house and car.

"I see our youth as having a bleak future. Broken promises lead too often to frustration and violence. Crime is the only avenue for many youth. A lack of parental concern, love, and protection leave the youth very vulnerable. The Church offers the only hope against despair as long as people can believe that this is God's will and that He will look after us."

- access to jobs and other ways to earn cash;
- access to land for farming;
- education, water supply, health care, transport (roads and public transport services), and markets;
- skills training on small business management (e.g., pig/poultry farms; small shops; boatbuilding, repair, and maintenance) and a support system including access to capital, credit, markets, and transport; and
- a social care system for elders, single parents, disabled people, and other disadvantaged groups.



There is a demand for training on small business management

**Everyone has a
role to play**

The government, church, private sector, NGOs, and communities each have a role to play to help improve the lives of the poor. Successful activities cannot be developed and sustained by any one group alone, because poverty is a complex problem that requires many different solutions.

Although various government departments are responsible for most of the community priorities listed above, other groups have important roles to play.

The people surveyed suggested the following roles for these groups.

Roles	
Activities	Groups
Expand technical and vocational training	Churches, NGOs, Private Sector
Increase information sharing	Churches, NGOs, Private Sector, Donors
Strengthen existing law and order and enforcement agencies	Community and Traditional Leaders
Invest in value-added products and downstream processing to encourage local entrepreneurship	Private Sector
Increase awareness of women’s rights and needs of vulnerable and disadvantaged groups	Churches, NGOs



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