

Chapter 8

Fundamental Humanitarian Sustainability Issues in Papua New Guinea: SDGs and Global Top-Downs to Fail Us Further on Biodiversity and Wilderness Conservation with an Indigenous Vision



Abstract Papua New Guinea (PNG) as a culture in that region has been around for over 47,000 years, and it has not harmed really the global community. However, when it comes to relevant modern metrics of progress and society, PNG looks poor. Here some of those metrics are discussed and put into context of earth and human history, and get shown how poor those ‘modern’ metrics perform. The ‘modern’ concept of the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is confronted with reality and get exposed as a wide failure to global mankind. PNG, with over 80% of the people living in bush communities and in the ‘Wantok’ tribal system is part of ‘Indigenization’ and it serves as a sustainability and governance role inspiration for any society really helping global mankind to survive.

Keywords Papua New Guinea (PNG) · International development aid · Humanitarian aid · Urbanization · Health metrics

8.1 Introduction

Compared with western nations, many people will find that Papua New Guinea (PNG) is characterized by rather odd-looking, often very tragic, humanitarian metrics; specifically when investigating the capitol of Port Moresby, many of the rural and mining hubs, or some remote areas in PNG, e.g. in the former Australian claim area. As a colonial nation, slavery is not new to PNG neither and it still exists in its modern-odd forms, e.g. Imbun (2006) for employment practices. However, PNG just abandoned its death penalty, as part of being a ‘Christian’ nation (<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2022/jan/21/papua-new-guinea-repeals-death-penalty-30-years-after-reintroduction>), a feat that other nations have not achieved, e.g. the U.S. but where many missionary actions are funded from.

Certainly on the human welfare side many socioeconomic metrics—the civil strife and as ‘valued by the west’ (Gosarevski, 2019)—can look pretty grim in PNG, e.g. regarding domestic abuse, crime rate, alcoholism and drugs, literacy rates, health and life expectancy (Table 8.1). It’s widely accepted and published, e.g. Matthiessen (1987), West (2006), Salak (2001). However, many aspects of those problems and

Table 8.1 Performance of Papua New Guinea in regards to some socio-economic metrics when compared globally (source WWW; these metrics are relatively robust over the last 3 years and across sources. The actual source matters less and that's why those public metrics serve well the argument presented here)

Metric	PNG	Globally	Comment
Average live expectancy	~ 64 years	~ 73 years	Note any gender differences, and the archeological record for Melanesia showing people's age well into the 70s
Average literacy rate	App 66%	App 86%	Literacy here means the western alphabet, which is an artefact and not always globally shared even
Crime rate (Homicide)	9.75 deaths per 100 k	6.60 deaths per 100 k	PNG stands better than Nicaragua for instance
GDP (2020)	23\$billion	84.71\$trillion	Very incomplete metric for nations like PNG where female labour plays a main role, and other currencies are used like betel nut or bartering
GDP per capita	\$2636	\$10,925	See above, also note the lack of registered citizens making a good computation of the base widely impossible
Estimated proportion of population living in modern slavery ^a	10.28/1000	NA	Humanity metrics, arguably unacceptably high
Government Response Rating ^a	C	NA	Hinting towards governance failure

^aSource <https://www.globallslaveryindex.org/2018/data/country-data/papua-new-guinea/>

sufferings are man-made and western-made, if not directly caused by Australia and its mining industry and with international aid services let loose onto PNG (examples of effort shown in Lasslett, 2012; Kirsch, 2014; Chan, 2016). A watchdog is needed to expose and halt the bad practices.

A good example for this is the refugee crisis rolling out in PNG territory, and that one is not new, nor a PNG problem only. For instance in 1988, thousands of Irian Jayan people crossed into the PNG province of East Awin, West Sepik. They escaped from Indonesia soldiers and then staying in PNG camps for their safety, and subsequently the UN had to engage and trying to resolve. The artificial border between PNG and Indonesia, essentially a straight line across same habitats and



Fig. 8.1 Village life in Papua New Guinea, cradle of a sustainable society and life for over 47,000 years; is this harmony as good as it can get?

tribes, creates refugees in the own land, so to speak. It's a border and line that was not approved by the local tribes and simply imposed from remote Europe onto them.

Many natural disasters are also adding to the tragedies. On January 21, 1951, a violent eruption in Higaturu, Popondetta killed over 2900 people; one of the greatest natural disasters in the recorded history of PNG. International efforts between Japan, Australia rebuild schools, roads and infrastructure with Prince Charles from the UK attending briefly the celebrations and re-openings. Those are always good PR stunts but hardly address the issues longer term. PNG remains widely in its state as before, and that is wanted that way.

And then there are also widely mis-labeled 'rural problems' with young 'rascals' getting pushed out of the villages (e.g. described for impacts in the capital city by Salak, 2001). Instead, these are colonial problems with the village structures and PNG fabrics breaking down as caused by western colonial nation cultures, so-called development aid, globalization and industrialized education. It's a feature seen anywhere where industry hits a landscape, and a nation (see Diamond, 2011a, 2011b; Hayan, 1990 for a PNG example). Those PNG metrics are not really a 'PNG cause' because tribal society actually has a record of long-proven family and social values and a certain safety net all embedded in nature (Baraka, 2001). At least it's a system that worked well for over 47,000 years (Figs. 8.1, 8.2, 8.3 and 8.4 for such and similar PNG looks), so why not now, last 50 years?



Fig. 8.2 Fieldworkers around a fire; a wrongly understood camp romance? Not as far as I can judge

Already the occurrence of big cities, of administrative units and of the actual ‘nation-state of PNG’ in a federal Westminster governance scheme and its international engagement are essentially artifacts that most western nations have not resolved well for themselves (see an example with the UK and its Brexit, or Northern Ireland and the independence of Scotland); the latter nations tend to run huge debts and spurious welfare metrics (see U.S. metrics as one of the richest nations in the world on depression, infant mortalities or lack of a 40h compensated work-week with a decent social welfare scheme, Twenge, 2020; Wilcox et al., 1995; see Grauwe et al., 2017 for the ongoing EU debt crisis). Clearly, the current PNG society is part of a design and *mélange* created from the outside (see Sullivan et al., 2011 for the EUROTHON zone; a dubious economic PNG-EU partnership centered around PNG *thuna* ‘for the EU’).

While PNG’s metrics in Table 8.1 appear relatively clear on the surface, those metrics deserve to be looked at more closer. These are not really PNG homebrews. There are clear discrepancies between UN metrics, the Australian Aid perspectives (<https://www.dfat.gov.au/geo/papua-new-guinea/development-assistance>) and The World Bank views (<https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/png>) when compared with local realities for PNG. It reads like a *deja vu* from Cammack (2002), but then it unfolds in a PNG landscape with a 47,000 years old civilization in the year 2022. Even more so, the SDGs for the world and for PNG are not aligning well here, and have not done so for a long time (see Rich, 1994 globally, and Gosarevski et al.,



Fig. 8.3 Grass dance at an airstrip, a handed-down tradition and festivity in Papua New Guinea meeting cultures and linking with the universe and part of the wider cosmology! It’s one of many rituals and ceremonies found in PNG (see Gillison, 2002 for other examples)

2019 for modern PNG). The SDGs are mismatching and make things worse for most people.

8.2 Human Metrics in PNG: A Quick Selection of Artefacts?

A few more detailed examples are provided on those metrics next:

National income: PNG has one of the lowest national incomes in the world; it thus is ranked ‘poor.’ This has many implications for the nation and the region. However, what is missing here is the notion of ‘subsistence lifestyle’ and which fuels the local economy and its markets for livelihood. Easily over 50% of the real GDP and its workforce are not accounted for because people are not registered well, while the industrial model does not include gardening and female family work/labor in a system where the schools are ineffective for that. Considering that in PNG pigs are valued as a bank and betel nut is a currency, equally or more valued than money, the national income is not so good of a metric, nor is the GDP and nor should such



Fig. 8.4 A Sunday afternoon stroll on the rugby field downtown/village

purely western measures really be pushed upon PNG. See Narokobi (1983 for the Melanesian way).

That's because most western nations are essentially bankrupt, certainly not sustainable, and the GDP is a relatively new construct in that scheme and world order which is known to fail for its meaning, certainly for sustainability and for nations such as PNG. 'Cash crops' are not so suitable for PNG really (Baraka, 2001) and are nothing to go by. Already the reasoning and justifications of poverty, and in PNG, remain dubious. CSIRO for instance states for the South Fly district in PNG "...It is one of the poorest places in the world, due to the minimal opportunities for livelihoods caused by isolation from markets and regulations which limit cross-border trade." (<https://research.csiro.au/laad/home/our-projects/>). Considering that PNG has vast biodiversity and marine resources, one in the best of the world, and it's relative closeness to Australia—quite a rich nation and global middle power—how can such a site be the poorest? Poverty is created here (Bougrine, 2016) and the Fly river region was a tightly run protectorate of Australia for almost a century with active missionary; now who is to blame? How many years does Australia need for its protectorate to turn it into an independent and sustainable nation that is not failing, and not poor?

Literacy rate: PNG's literacy rate is rather low, officially. But in reality, it is difficult to measure in a meaningful way for PNG, as a nation with a rural economy where reading and writing matters less but over 700 languages are spoken! As PNG

features those 700 languages most citizens speak at least 4 and can operate in PNG overall. Written language is less relevant for a garden society; that is certainly the case for Pisin English. Expressing literacy in Moto, Pisin English or English creates a certain artifact which is of little value in a ‘Wantok’ system overall where local issues and bartering dominate.

Domestic violence: Domestic violence is fueled by poverty, and usually by lack of a healthy social structure, including education and values. Modern poverty and violence, in most parts, is created (e.g. Bougrine, 2016). Measured by starvation or happiness, PNG as a megadiversity nation—and with pigs and fisheries—was never poor; natural regrowing resources existed throughout the history of PNG. Conceptually, tropical nations are not, and cannot really be, poor as they are living in such an effluent ecosystem, ‘*kissed by the sun*’ it’s one of the wealthiest areas in the world that way; that must easily be true for the geological riches, and for forestry, gardening and for fisheries. PNG remains a garden provisioning for virtually all human needs; PNG was never any other the last 47,000 years.

While this question remains a complex topic for many people to comprehend (Diamond 2011a, b), the PNG society living in tribal networks has little modern-style poverty; at least it has a stable fabric to go by. Having a dishwasher, or lacking one, is a no real issue in rural villages, same applies to laundry machines, hair dryer or central heating, or even cars and GPS navigation. People of PNG are mostly linked-in, and associated with, tribal village communities and their lives, living in sophisticated adobe-style housings embedded in nature. If it rains, it will dry; move on. In villages, there is a social network either way. The concept of humans economically and socially expelled from the villages and pushed into cities, and subsequent gang crime (rascal’ism), is more of a modern colonial phenomenon. Port Moresby is its dominant outlet for that. People living in tribal and village bands instead have certain rules of treatments and taboos to be sustainable. Group crime was not much allowed, while the ‘original’ society was ‘raw’ and usually male-dominated. That can include female and child cruelty in the initial human sense. However, whoever was in such tribal villages know that these have been pretty happy societies and full of issues of humanity; much more than any industrial society I know of.

Gang violence: As stated, the rascals formed in cities due to expelled youngsters from the villages and their communities. It’s widely recognized and described as a problem for long times (e.g. Harris, 1990), but not resolved whatsoever.

Arguably, PNG has a modern court and policing problem. Australia frequently comes in trying to fix and resolve the problems—‘Aussi’ style (Lasslett, 2012; Gorovetsky et al., 2019)—but it widely fails long term (Smith, 1974; the Australian missions always keep coming back to PNG and POM, simply because problems are not solved longtime). Whatever they plan, do and build from the outside is not lasting nor is it sustainable in PNG. Neither the ‘modern’ actions nor the vision really work, people and the environment pay the price (Henton & Flowers, 2007; Kirsch, 2014 for examples).

And in reality, PNG is there not so much different than the global discussions elsewhere, namely U.S., Brazil, South Africa or Russia. The global economic framework runs *havoc* (Stiglitz, 1993). PNG indeed suffers from an instable and unsuitable

legal system and its funding and missing reality feedbacks, anything far from the Australian role model imposed onto PNG (Chan, 2016 for first-hand account). PNG nation-making was a rushed job and one that creates problems along the way while the PNG actually forms (Gorevsky et al., 2019) (Fig. 8.5).

8.3 Complex Lives, Complex Habitats, Urbanization and Being Embedded in the Ring of Terror from Abroad

Like with many other so-called third-world nations, the list of socioeconomic metrics where PNG ranks internationally low is long, and it is a rather complex one indeed. Is PNG just a misfit? But then, ask yourself why PNG is part of the Australian Arc of Instability and Terror (Henton & Flower, 2007; May, 2016) and what fueled it and



Fig. 8.5 This landscape view shows the north coast of Papua New Guinea's Huon Peninsula, down from the mountains to the ocean in the far distance. For most parts it has been virtually occupied by humans for over 47,000 years but remained in a relatively 'untouched' benign state.



Fig. 8.6 Ancient and sustainable flow of things; where does it lead to?

where does much of the expertise come from, using what underlying governance model? (Fig. 8.6).

Urbanization and its business model are clearly on the rise, anywhere (e.g. Davis, 2004); but that speaks strongly against wilderness and PNG's rural lifestyle. Urbanization cannot provide for proper wilderness conservation, regardless of what is claimed and hoped (Sanderson et al., 2018). It's best to further strengthen the rural lifestyle instead, and trying to avoid moving into more slums and decayed suburbs. Going with a blended indigenous approach might be the answer.

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