

A journey worth reflecting on – growing up in PNG

by Aquila Warai

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Aquila Warai and cousins in the Eastern Highlands province

People have different perceptions of what life in Papua New Guinea is like. Politicians would say PNG is a land of untapped potential. Geologists would say PNG is an island of gold floating on a sea of oil, powered by gas. A preacher who preaches the gospel of prosperity would say PNG is the land of milk and honey. But it all depends on what lens one uses. Growing up in Kainantu, a small town on the side of the Highlands Highway, has enabled me to see PNG quite differently.

I was born in 2002. When I was 7 years old, I was enrolled in elementary school. The school was great. However, the school fees were a problem. I remember one time the principal called me to his office and told me that, out of all the students, I was the one with the highest outstanding fees. I went home that afternoon and told my mother. My mother said nothing, she just stared out the kitchen window, thinking. I did not understand why she did that at the time.

Looking back though, at that moment I began to understand that even scraping together a small amount of money to pay the school fees would be a big problem. My mother spent sleepless nights sewing women's garments (meri-blaus) so we could have food on the table the next day. My dad, a house-husband, occasionally got part-time jobs at supermarkets to provide extra money.

In addition to poverty, family dependency is an issue for many PNG families. All the members of an extended family often live under the same roof, depending on one person to pay for food, water, and electricity. Such was the family setting I grew up in. Having too many mouths to feed, with less money available, priorities had to be set. My parents' priority was my education. Even though we did not have much, my parents made sure that they did everything they could to support my education.

In my immediate family, there are just two siblings – my older sister and me. We lived in an extended family setting that included my eldest paternal uncle and his wife plus their five boys and my grandmother. My second uncle lived with his

second wife in Obura Wanarana district, but his three kids lived with us. We only had a two-bedroom house so we had to build a small additional house from scrap material. I usually slept in the living room with my two male cousins.

Ensuring I could remain at school was not easy. When I was in Grade 6, there was one time when there were no trousers to be found in the suitcase where I stored my clothes. My mom took me to a nearby Chinese store and bought one pair of shorts and a belt. The shorts were too big for me, even with the belt on. My mom looked me in the eye and told me that she would buy me new trousers whenever she got extra money. Soon after, she bought me another two pairs of shorts. I wore these three pairs of shorts for four years, until Grade 9.

Apart from not having clothes, food was also a problem. There were times where I had to walk to school without having had any breakfast to eat. I was usually given fifty toea or one kina for lunch but did not want to spend this hard-earned money and returned home with an empty stomach. Despite not being able to have breakfast, dinner was always made available. For dinner, once in a week we would have chicken. For the rest of the week, we normally ate boiled rice and cabbage with canned fish.

It wasn't until 2019 that things got better. I was accepted to continue my studies at Aiyura National High School in Eastern Highlands Province, one of six government-run national "schools of excellence" established around PNG for Grade 11 and 12 students. The school fees were paid in full by my parents thanks to my dad gaining work at that time.

My parents were able to financially support my education from Grade 11 onwards. This year I will complete my fourth and final year of a Bachelor of Business and Management (Public Policy Management) at the University of Papua New Guinea.

I have not written about my experience for readers to pity me, but because it is the story of a Papua New Guinean man. It reflects the way of life lived by many Papua New Guineans, still today. There are many people on the streets who have stories similar to mine.

Growing up in a country described as endowed with natural resources does not guarantee any sort of prosperity, especially for those, like me, whose basic needs have not been met due to their social status. Through this lens, PNG is seen as a nation where survival of the fittest is becoming a norm — particularly survival without adequate and reliable government services. Despite politicians' promises of a better PNG through inclusive development, there are still many people excluded from development.

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When I first arrived in Australia for the ANU-UPNG Summer School, I did not see Canberra as a well-planned city with tall structures and bicycle paths. Instead, what I saw was the outcome of a strategically coordinated, well-defined and more inclusive public policy development and implementation process. However, it is also an individualistic society, compared to PNG. The question is, what is the cost of such individualism?

The answer to this question was visible enough to me. It is homelessness. Despite being advanced in so many areas, Australia has people sleeping on the streets. PNG, on the other hand, has many issues but homelessness is not high among them, even if it is an emerging issue.

Papua New Guineans might often be poor, illiterate or violent, but one good thing about Papua New Guineans is that they usually keep the smallest unit of their society – the family – intact. Despite their governments providing only rudimentary basic services, people survive because they can generally rely on their immediate and extended families. They have a home to sleep in even if they do not have adequate housing. They have food to eat even if they do not have money to buy it themselves. PNG might not be inclusive when it comes to national development, but it's very inclusive when it comes to social and family structures.

*This blog was written as part of the annual Summer School funded by **the ANU-UPNG Partnership**. The Summer School allows the top ten students from the University of Papua New Guinea in the Economics and Public Policy Management streams to undertake a month-long program at ANU to further their academic and analytical skills.*

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