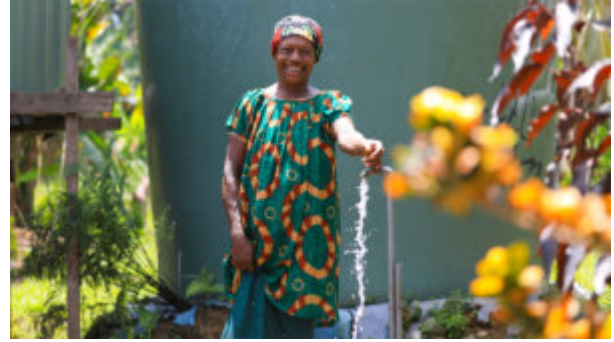


From potential to progress in PNG: water access is key

by Saroj Kumar Jha

11 April 2025



Mrs Kausa, a teacher at the Bialla Primary School, is one of 5,000 people now accessing clean running water following a World Bank-supported project

Photo Credit: World Bank/Jeremy Mark

Papua New Guinea is a land of extraordinary potential. With vast natural resources, rich biodiversity and a young and growing population of approximately 12 million people, the country stands poised for progress. And yet, an invisible barrier is holding back millions of people: the lack of access to clean water and sanitation. Despite being one of the most water-rich countries in the world, PNG has the lowest rate of access to improved water sources globally and recent trends indicate that access is declining rather than improving.

While nearly all residents of the National Capital District have access to basic drinking water, in provinces like the Southern Highlands, access drops to just 14%. Sanitation coverage is similarly uneven, with some regions exceeding 50% while others fall as low as 10%. Research finds that there is a direct correlation between lack of access to safe sanitation and increased levels of gender-based violence, as experienced in PNG. That there is such limited access to clean drinking water and safe sanitation in a country with a substantial water endowment is not just a missed opportunity — it is an urgent development challenge.

Water access is critical for PNG's economic sectors, including agriculture and industry, yet inadequate governance and infrastructure constrain sustainable growth and productivity. More critically, water and sanitation-related diseases are among the leading causes of death for children under five. Nearly half of children **suffer from stunting** — one of the highest rates globally. Stunting not only affects physical growth but also hinders cognitive development and economic prospects, limiting opportunities for future generations.

The effects extend beyond health. Inadequate water and sanitation disproportionately impact girls, who frequently miss school to collect water or due to a lack of proper sanitation facilities. This exacerbates PNG's low literacy rates — only 28% of 10-year-old girls can read an age-appropriate text — hindering future opportunities and deepening gender disparities in education.

Overcoming PNG's water crisis requires bold leadership and a strategic vision. The government's National WaSH Policy (2015–2030) laid an important foundation, setting ambitious targets to provide 70% of the population with improved water and sanitation services by 2030. However, progress has been slow, and urgent action is needed to accelerate implementation.

The establishment of a water taskforce and development of a national time-bound action plan for delivering universal access to clean water and sanitation in PNG could provide the necessary governance framework to drive reforms, unlock financing and ensure more effective service delivery.

Beyond policy, long-term financing is critical. Water infrastructure in PNG is ageing, with many systems running at nearly full capacity and suffering from high levels of non-revenue water (that is, water supplied but not billed to customers). Sustained investment is needed to expand and upgrade services, particularly in underserved rural areas, and to curb the level of illegal connections.

The private sector has a vital role to play. There is encouraging potential for Water PNG, the state-owned utility, to improve operational and financial performance and access private finance with the help of the World Bank Group. Beyond financing, the private sector can also bring innovation and efficiency to water service delivery. In countries like Fiji and Indonesia, public-private partnerships have successfully expanded water services, providing models for PNG to learn from.

No single entity can solve PNG's water crisis alone. Development partners, including the World Bank and Australia's Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), are already supporting efforts to improve water access through the [Global Water Security and Sanitation Partnership](#) (GWSP).

The [Water Supply and Sanitation Development Project](#) (WSSDP), supported by a \$70 million International Development Association credit, has been an important initial engagement in the water sector in PNG. In the district centre of Bialla in West New Britain Province, the WSSDP built a new water system, which increased access to clean drinking water for 5,000 people. According to local health authorities, access to clean drinking water led to a drastic reduction in the occurrence of waterborne diseases. Simultaneously, school authorities reported that school attendance increased by 100%.

But the challenge extends beyond PNG. Across the Pacific, only 60% of people have access to at least basic water supply, and just 33% have access to basic sanitation. The World Bank's engagement in this sector in the Pacific region has expanded significantly in recent years, with \$134.5 million in investment financing

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across PNG, Solomon Islands and Kiribati. DFAT has been instrumental in increasing financing and policy engagement, contributing nearly \$26 million to GWSP and advocating for resilience and social inclusion in water sector investments. Looking ahead, addressing these challenges requires a coordinated regional approach that leverages global expertise, strengthens governance and mobilises financial resources.

Water is not just a basic service; it is the foundation for economic growth, human development and resilience. Unlocking PNG's potential means ensuring that every household, school, and health facility has reliable access to clean water and sanitation. It means breaking the cycle of stunting and disease that holds communities back. It means creating opportunities for businesses to thrive, for children to learn, and for the country to reach its full potential.

By strengthening leadership, mobilising financing and fostering partnerships, PNG and its development partners can turn water from a constraint into a catalyst for progress. The potential is immense. What is needed is the commitment to make it a reality.

Disclosures:

The World Bank's work in the Pacific is supported by the Australian and New Zealand governments through the Papua New Guinea and Pacific Islands Umbrella Facility (PPIUF).

Author/s:

Saroj Kumar Jha

Saroj Kumar Jha is the Global Water Director for the World Bank.

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