



Ground realities: a case study of a remote secondary school in the PNG highlands

Rex Kupil

SUMMARY

- This is an in-depth study of a remote boarding school in Jiwaka Province, Papua New Guinea, that gives insights into the problems and challenges faced by PNG's many rural and remote schools.
- Due to non-completion of projects, infrastructure spending at the school has been wasted. Three new buildings have been constructed in recent years, each one funded by a different source: four new classrooms by the Jimi District Development Authority, a science lab by the national government and a school library by the school's own funds. However, none of these buildings have been completed and none of them are in use.
- Other buildings remain badly in need of maintenance, and some are in such a bad state that they require rehabilitation or a rebuild. There are not enough houses for teachers, there is no electricity for classrooms or school housing, the school's generator barely functions and there are hardly any textbooks.
- Expenditure on a road to the school has been more effective because that road has been completed. However, especially because the road is unsealed, it is vulnerable to becoming impassable if it is not maintained.
- Other issues that trouble the school are teacher absenteeism, lack of mobile reception, and lack of nearby functioning health facilities. Teacher absenteeism was particularly bad in 2023, the result of political tensions arising from the 2022 General Election and is a reminder of the cost of politics in PNG.
- Most students leave after Year 10 to go to other schools. There are only one-fifth the number of Year 12 students as Year 10 at Jimi Secondary School.
- A stronger focus on maintenance and rehabilitation rather than the construction of new buildings is needed. Use of Starlink and purchase of a solar-battery system to provide light for students and teachers in the evening is highly recommended and should be affordable for the school. A reduction in political tensions would result in less violence and better service delivery.

INTRODUCTION

Jimi Secondary School is a government boarding school located in a remote part of Jiwaka Province in the Highlands, a five-hour drive on an unsealed road from the province's capital.

PNG is home to many rural and remote schools. There are few in-depth studies of such schools though Papiali (2024) provides a detailed study of schools in the Erave sub-district of Southern Highlands Province. As a former adviser to Jiwaka Provincial Education Board, I had the opportunity to visit Jimi Secondary in 2016, and then again in 2024 as a lecturer in the School of Business and Public Policy of the University of Papua New Guinea, with funding from the ANU-UPNG Partnership. This report captures my findings.

ABOUT JIMI SECONDARY SCHOOL

Jiwaka is situated in the central highlands and is a relatively remote province. Jimi is the most remote district of Jiwaka's three districts. It is home to the Jimi Valley, and is characterised by its mountains, rivers and valleys and by its heavy annual rainfall.

Jimi Secondary School is one of eight and the only boarding secondary school located in the Jimi district of Jiwaka Province. Classified by the Education Department as a level-9 school, it has the capacity to house 600 students, though the actual enrollment is around 350. The vast majority of students board at the school though there are a few day students.

The school was established by the Western Highlands Provincial Government as Jimi High School in 1997 with its construction financed by the national government's Rural Education Services Improvement (RESI) program.

The school was given secondary school status in 2019, meaning it would teach from Years 7 to 12 rather than only Years 7 to 10 (The National, 2019).

The school is about one kilometre from the nearest primary school, store, PMV (bus) stop and health facility, all of which can only be reached

on foot. The health facility is in good condition but often understaffed and understocked. There is a nearby airstrip but it is not operating due to a lack of maintenance. There is also a nearby police station but no police. Mobile phone reception at the school is patchy at best, and is only available at certain locations and times of day.

The nearest trade store and bank are five to six hours away by car (in the provincial capital, Banz). The road has recently been upgraded by the local Member of Parliament, the Honourable Wake Goi with funding from the Marape Government Connect PNG program (Leng, 2022). Prior to its upgrade, the road had been in a very bad state. When I visited the school in 2016, I had to walk out as the road was impassible.

School governance entities (the school board and the parents' committee) exist, but rarely meet due to the distances involved in convening a meeting. External inspections are at best annual, with none occurring in 2023, again due to post-election disturbances.

ABOUT MY RESEARCH

This research is based on my June 2024 site visit, which included a detailed inspection of school facilities and a large number of interviews, in which confidentiality was assured. Ethical clearance for the study was obtained from the School of Business and Public Policy, UPNG, prior to commencement. Most students were on holiday when I visited in 2024, but some were still at school. I interviewed the principal, two teachers, three students, the Chair of the Board of Governors and the Parents and Citizens group, the Superintendent and the Education Provincial Budget Officer. 12 of my interviewees were male and three were female. I triangulated across multiple sources of data to ensure accuracy.

My main research findings concern the school's facilities, governance and student numbers.

SCHOOL FACILITIES

As part of the research, I classified the various facilities of the school as being in a good state, a bad state (in need of maintenance) or a very bad state (in need of rehabilitation).

In general, the school's infrastructure is in disrepair. There are 14 classrooms. They all have blackboards and they have roofs that do not leak. However, 12 of them are in need of maintenance, and two in need of rehabilitation. None of them have a table and chair for the teacher. None of them have working electricity.

There are two male and two female dormitories. The two male dormitories are in a bad state, and the two female dormitories are in a very bad state.

There are ten teacher houses for the 20 teachers at the school. Most teachers have to share a house, even if they have their family with them. Only the Principal and Deputy Principal get houses to themselves. Two teachers are housed at the nearby primary school. The houses have not been maintained since the school opened, and are all in a bad state.

The toilet facilities in the school are pit latrines.

The mess is extremely basic with cooking on a wood fire.

The school's main generator is out of order. A mini, portable generator is used as required to provide power to the school administration and to the computer lab. No electricity goes to the classrooms, the teachers' houses or the student dormitories. Students are unable to study at night due to a lack of lights.

The school has few text books, and there is nowhere secure to store them. There is a computer lab, with about five computers, which is sometimes connected to the portable generator.

There is no sports field at the school and no sporting equipment. The school grounds are large. However, there is no fence/proper fence

around the school's perimeter.

There is no school vehicle.

No investments have been made into infrastructure repair or maintenance in recent years. However, there have been three big investments into new buildings.

In 2022, out of its own funds - the Tuition Fee Free (TTF) funds that schools get in lieu of school fees - the school constructed a library. This is largely but not fully complete and lies idle. It lacks stairs, windows and a main door.

The Jimi District Development Authority built a "four-in-one" classroom complex in 2021. It also is almost but not fully complete, and is also not used.

Finally, the national government recently funded the construction of a science lab. It also is nearly but not fully complete, and sits empty and unused. The school lacks any science textbooks and equipment to make the lab usable.

In summary, none of these three new buildings have been finished, and all three sit empty. There are no books in the library, no chairs and desks in the classroom complex, and no science equipment in the lab.



Incomplete library, June 2024 (Rex Kupil)



Incomplete new classrooms, view from the back, June 2024 (Rex Kupil)



Incomplete science lab, June 2024 (Rex Kupil)

SUPERVISION, GOVERNANCE, COMMUNITY RELATIONS AND FUNDING

Schools in PNG are subject to a standard inspection and governance regime. The Jimi Secondary School is so remote that at most there is an inspection once a year. There was one in 2022 and one in 2024, but none in 2023, due to post-electoral violence in the area. The 2022 inspection was by the Provincial Secondary Inspector and the one in 2024 was by the Provincial Education Adviser and the Provincial Guidance Officer.

The school has a Board of Management, that makes financial decisions on behalf of the school. It should meet quarterly, but only met once in the first half of 2024.

Parental participation is promoted through the school's Parent and Citizens group. This had also met once by the time I visited in mid-2024. The remoteness of the school makes parental participation difficult.

However, surrounding communities are supportive of the school and help ensure its safety and security and assist the school in transporting school supplies when road conditions were bad to the school. In return, local communities use the school facilities for sporting events and training.

While the school generally has good relations with the local community, road blocks by political supporters threatened the teachers and students in 2023, leading to teacher absenteeism and reducing student enrolment in 2024 in the two senior years.

All schools in PNG receive TFF funds in lieu of fees which used to be charged by all schools. (Note that some fees are still charged.)

The school's TFF budget for 2024 was K800,000. The first quarter TFF payment was late due to late submission of school's census data for the previous year, 2023, and had not arrived by the time of my visit. The Jiwaka provincial government provided K50,000 for the school in 2024.

Priority areas for spending for the school are teaching materials (class hand-outs, chalk), consumables (food, fuel) and transport (car hire, payments for carriers when the road is closed). No budget allocation is made for maintenance or textbooks.

ENROLMENTS

339 students were enrolled in Jimi Secondary in 2024, 120 in Grades 9 and 10, 75 in Grade 11, and 24 in Year 12. About one-quarter to two-fifths of the students were females, except in Year 12 where only one-eighth of the students were female. (See Figure 1, page 6)

With 20 teachers, at the school, the average class size is only 17. However, class sizes are larger for the lower years and smaller for the higher years.

There are several reasons for there being far fewer students in Grade 11 and especially Year 12.

First, until this year Year 10 students in PNG had to pass an exam to proceed to Years 11 and 12.

Second, COVID-19 had a negative effect on student enrolment in 2021, 2022 and also 2023. The pandemic and related policies such as social distancing, wearing of masks and vaccination, as well as stories of death published in the social media led to an atmosphere of fear leaving most students staying at home.

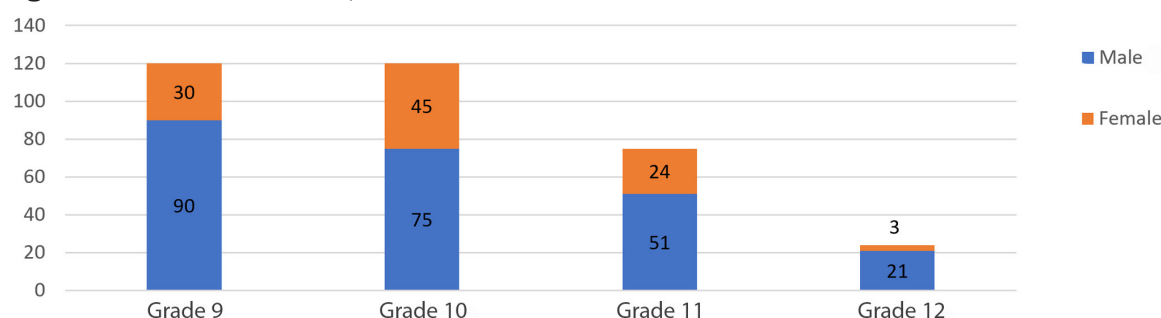
Third, the road condition has only just improved. Before that, the inability to drive to the school made it even more isolated and led students to avoid it. The poor road condition not only made it harder to get to the school but also increased safety concerns.

Fourth, there is no power for the dormitories or the classrooms, so it is not possible to study at night time. This becomes more important in later years and thus is another reason for students to leave.

Fifth, students are concerned for their welfare if they become ill. The nearby Health Centre is poorly attended by staff and poorly stocked. Two students died in 2016 and 2017.

Finally, as noted earlier, there was chronic teacher absenteeism in 2023. This occurred when the road to the school, which was in any case in very bad condition, was blocked by supporters of one of the candidates who had been defeated in the 2022 general elections.

Figure 1: Student enrolment, 2024



Source: Jimi Secondary School records

DISCUSSION

Some of the findings of this research are familiar from other studies.

Infrequent inspections are common for rural schools in PNG due to low availability of funds (Papilali, 2024). Research conducted in Gulf and East New Britain provinces quoted one Standards Officer as saying: ‘We are supposed to visit four times per year, but most schools are on the coast and it is very expensive to get there. For example, few schools, has not been visited in the last six years. I visited last year. It took three or four hours to get there by road. The trip is quite rugged, and there are no funds’ (Walton, Davda and Kanaparo, 2017).

Several other findings of this study are consistent with the findings of Papilali’s (2024) case study of schools in the Erave sub-district in the Southern Highlands, including the positive impact of improved roads on school attendance, the negative impact of political violence, the paucity of inspections and the poor state of much school infrastructure.

The problem of non-completion of school projects has also been observed by other researchers. A nationwide survey of schools and health centres found that one-third of DSIP school projects were incomplete and/or late, and that of these respondents said 40% would never be finished (Howes et al, 2014, p.132). The same report also raised the risk that even if complete, buildings might not be utilized because of a lack of recurrent funding.

The “build, neglect, rebuild” syndrome in infrastructure in PNG, the Pacific, and indeed elsewhere is also well known. There was a major report on the subject in 2013, and that report itself refers to a donor report on inadequate infrastructure maintenance in 1999 (Dornan 2013). So, this is not a new problem. But why is the school constructing new buildings rather than looking after and repairing the existing ones? There are several reasons.

The first is that some funding sources, such as DSIP, have a strong preference for funding projects, and thus are set up for funding new buildings rather than maintaining existing ones. This does not explain, however, why the school chose to spend its own funds on a new library but has never invested in maintenance.

A second reason is that new projects are easier to contract. A contractor can be selected (either by a competitive procedure or through sole-sourcing, and either by the school or by some government authority) and the construction task delegated to them. Remote schools may not have the technical expertise required for ongoing maintenance.

A third reason is prestige. Every school wants to be able to say it has a science lab and library. Parents and other stakeholders would be impressed by that, especially if they are not aware of the run-down nature of the other buildings.

Another finding of interest is the service delivery costs of elections and post-election violence. While there has been much commentary on electoral violence, the phenomenon of post-electoral violence and the damage it does to the economy and service delivery has received much less attention. Yet in 2023, the post-electoral violence in Jimi led to a high level of teacher absenteeism, and a number of students then leaving the school.

A final finding concerns the slow adoption of new technology by the school. Starlink was not available in 2024, but the school had made no effort to install solar lights. Solar uptake rates by PNG households are among the highest in the world (IFC 2019), but this high level of uptake has not been matched by the public sector. Solar panels, or better, solar panel-battery systems, are clearly affordable within school budgets as now is Starlink. Their purchase would be transformational.

CONCLUSION

This is only one case study, so its findings may not be generalisable to all remote secondary schools in Papua New Guinea. Nevertheless, several lessons stand out.

First, the school administration and Board of Management of Jimi Secondary have done well in recent years to obtain funding from external sources for new buildings. But they, and probably most remote schools, need to place more emphasis on maintaining and rehabilitating existing assets.

This is a message for funding agencies as well as for schools. Since the completion of this study, I have been informed that a new girls-only secondary (boarding) school has been created in the next valley over from Jimi Secondary. While it

is good to be promoting girls' education, it is likely that the funds spent on the new school would have been better spent on fixing Jimi Secondary.

Second, schools need to embrace new technology to overcome the penalties associated with remoteness. They need to purchase access to Starlink, and they need a solar lighting system.

Third, schools are not masters of their own destiny, especially not remote schools. Roads and airstrips to connect them are vital. Roads need to be built, improved and maintained. And airstrips need to be reopened.

Fourth, election violence is costly, not only at the time of the election, but in the months or even year after an election, where it can negatively impact on service delivery.

REFERENCES

- Dornan, M (2012) "Infrastructure maintenance in the Pacific: challenging the build-neglect-rebuild paradigm", Devpolicy Blog, 2 July <https://devpolicy.org/infrastructure-maintenance-in-the-pacific-challenging-the-build-neglect-rebuild-paradigm-20130702-2/>
- Howes, S, Mako, AA, Swan, A, Walton, G, Webster, T and Wiltshire, C 2014, 'A lost decade? Service delivery and reforms in Papua New Guinea 2002–2012', The National Research Institute and the Development Policy Centre, ANU, Canberra.
- International Finance Corporation (2019) "New IFC report shows PNG a leader in off-grid solar lighting", IFC Blog, August 8, <https://www.ifc.org/en/pressroom/2019/new-ifc-report-shows-papua-new-guinea-a-leader-in-off-grid-solar-lighting>
- Leng, A (2022) "Connect PNG: the road to development?" Devpolicy Blog, 11 August, <https://devpolicy.org/connect-png-the-road-to-development-20220811/>
- Papiali, C (2024) "The collateral effect of TFF policy and missing link roads in rural Erave schools, Southern Highlands Province, Papua New Guinea", Academia, <https://www.academia.edu/127614681>
- Walton, G, Davda, T and Kanaparo, P (2017) 'The challenges of providing free education in Papua New Guinea', Development Policy Centre Discussion Paper No.61, Crawford School of Public Policy, The Australian National University, Canberra.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Rex Kupil is a Lecturer in Human Resource Management in the School of Business and Public Policy at the University of Papua New Guinea.

The author wishes to thank Professor Stephen Howes and Mr Andrew Anton Mako for their support and help in the course of this research.

This research was supported by the ANU-UPNG Partnership, an initiative under the Aus-PNG Partnership funded by the Australian Government. The views expressed in this publication are those of the author only.

devpolicy.anu.edu.au