

# Raising awareness in rural PNG: empowering citizens



by Gurame Moiya

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Supporting PNG university students to return to their home districts and share their learning with citizens is the most effective way to ensure rural communities are armed with greater knowledge in order to make informed decisions and improve their lives.

I was born and raised in a small village called Gunangi in Sina Sina Yongumgu (SSY) District, Simbu Province. Growing up, I watched my parents work hard every day, dedicating themselves to subsistence farming. Life in the village was simple, and I always thought it would remain that way. However, when I attended high school, I began to dream big. I was fascinated by science and aspired to become a medical doctor, inspired by the fact that my mother had been ill for a long time. But just as my dream was taking shape, my mother passed away due to endometrial cancer. I had just started year 11. Suddenly my father had to provide for me and my younger sister (my older sister had already married). This loss changed my perspective and I shifted my focus from medicine to business studies.

During that first term in year 11, I was introduced to accounting and business decision-making. I learned about record-keeping and how to manage resources to make a profit. These subjects captivated me. I also began to learn about fiscal and monetary policy, government budgets and how economies functioned. This new world intrigued me and I decided that this was the path I would follow. I believed that understanding economics would allow me to make smarter financial decisions and, more importantly, help others in my community to do the same.

Getting into university was an exciting achievement. In 2022, I completed my Business Foundation Year at the University of PNG and, soon after, I was selected in a competitive process to study economics. It felt like a dream come true, and I was grateful for every opportunity that came my way. However, as I progressed in my studies, I also often thought about how I could use what I was learning to help my father and others in my village.

One issue that deeply troubled me was that many people in rural areas, including

my own mother, suffer and die from treatable diseases simply because they lack the resources to access proper healthcare. I remember that when my mother fell ill, we took her to the hospital but we could not afford to pay the cost of her urgent medical treatment and subsequent surgery. This is often the case with people in our village and it leads to tragic outcomes, as many people forego the necessary treatment. This creates a vicious cycle of poor health, trapping people in a situation of ongoing struggle and keeping them stuck in their circumstances, not being able to work or care for their families. For many their condition worsens, and ultimately, they lose their lives. According to the World Health Organization, the **top five leading causes of death** in PNG for 2021 (the most recent data available from the World Health Organization) were tuberculosis, COVID-19, ischaemic heart disease, stroke and chronic obstructive pulmonary disease — all treatable illnesses.

It was the challenge of access to medical care that sparked a strong desire in me to improve the lives of people in rural communities. I recognised that while I could make a difference, true change would require the collective effort of many people working together. The key to achieving this was changing the mindset of the community. In my village many people face significant challenges in earning an income, and even when they do, their earnings are often not used productively.

To spread simple yet crucial information of the type I had gained in high school and university, I realised that the most effective approach would be to use community awareness programs. These programs would allow me to reach not only my own community, but also the broader district. Despite still being a student, I saw this as a meaningful way to make an impact and bring much-needed information.

So, during our university break at the end of 2023, I helped to lead a group of students who were originally from SSY, and were now studying at UPNG, to launch a program in my district. Such initiatives have been rare in our district in recent years so the Member of Parliament for SSY, Kerenga Kua, was very supportive of our efforts. He generously provided funding for transportation, logistics and accommodation, ensuring the success of the awareness campaign once we arrived. His assistance played a crucial role in making the event possible.

We visited eight communities in the Suai, Yongumgul and Tabare local-level government areas. We focused on the important themes of health, the economy, social issues and education pathways. We made sure to present the information in a simple and accessible way. For example, in areas relating to the economy, we discussed how individuals could make smarter economic decisions. We talked extensively about how people can use their land to grow more profitable crops like onions, carrots, and cabbage, and sell them for higher prices. We also talked about building rental houses, as urbanisation was increasing in the area, making housing

a profitable business.

I was excited to be part of this program, as it gave me the chance to contribute to the community and help bring about change. By taking advantage of new opportunities, people could improve their financial stability, afford medical care and send their children to school. The feedback from the communities showed a strong desire for knowledge and a willingness to make positive changes, with similar challenges present across different villages.

Rural communities in PNG have teachers, nurses and some even have medical doctors. However, these professionals often are focused on their core tasks with low pay and no capacity to take on extra work. What's needed is a system that can bring information directly to the communities. Rural areas face challenges such as limited internet coverage, unreliable electricity and lower digital literacy, which make face-to-face communication more effective. Plus urban residents are generally more comfortable with online information, while rural communities may be skeptical of its reliability.

A student-led awareness program is a great way to reach people because students often have the trust of the community. These programs are not costly to run, and the students are eager to help. The Student Association of SSY at UPNG, for example, was able to organize and execute the awareness campaign without significant financial backing, simply by reaching out to community leaders and collaborating with local institutions. The students can create a bridge between the rural population and the information they need to make better decisions for their health, finances, and family life. By inspiring students to become educators and providing basic resources, we can create a ripple effect of positive change.

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## Disclosures:

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