



Reversing rural decline in PNG: the 11th Henry Kila Memorial Address

By Andrew Anton Mako
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This is an edited extract of the 11th Henry Kila Memorial Address delivered to the 2023 Australia Papua New Guinea Business Forum and Trade Expo in Port Moresby on 16 May 2023. [Read the full speech.](#)

I was born in the mid-1980s, and grew up in the Highlands of Papua New Guinea, in Enga, in Porgera District, in a beautiful government outpost called Kolombi, which was established by early Christian missionaries during the colonial era.

During its heyday, Kolombi was more than just a government outpost. When I was a kid, it had a well-functioning health centre that supervised more than ten aid posts. There was a police post with a permanent police officer, and a formidable village-court magistrate. Together they ensured law and order was maintained.

There was an agriculture extension officer to promote agriculture services, particularly for cash crops, and a kiap or government administrator. There was an LLG (local level government) chamber which ensured regular local council meetings were held, and a community school which I attended as a boy.

However, disaster struck in 1996 with the closure of Kolombi's airstrip, apparently due to a lack of funding for maintenance.

When the airstrip closed, Kolombi started to face "rural decay". All the vital government services slowly ceased: the police post closed down, the kiap left, most health workers left and all the aid posts shut down; the agriculture extension officer departed, and the community school closed down as the teachers left.

Without the presence of a government authority, law and order started to deteriorate.

As I have [written about previously](#), I made the decision to leave. As a 13-year-old, I walked for 12 hours to Porgera town, in bare feet over treacherous terrain. I will forever be grateful to the family who adopted me, a complete stranger. They took me in and looked after me,

enabling me to complete my schooling, and from high school I went to The University of Papua New Guinea and then The Australian National University.

However, as far as I can tell, I was the only one to escape Kolombi. No other child from my area, or virtually none, has received any formal education since 1996. By 1997, when I returned to Kolombi, again on foot, it was clear that government services had already stopped, and cash cropping had been abandoned.

Since then, things have only got worse. With the proliferation of guns and the total breakdown in law and order, many tribal fights have erupted, involving numerous tribes in the district, and destroying property and claiming many lives, including some of my relatives and friends.

All the development gains, even from before independence, have been lost.

What I have related is not uncommon. Indeed, it is the typical story of rural collapse in PNG. Reversing the decline will not be easy. But we must try. I certainly don't have all the answers, but here are a few reform priorities.

First, although Papua New Guinea started off well after independence in 1975, full of promise and the opportunities a new country could offer, in the decades since independence corruption and maladministration have permeated both the public and private sectors of the country.

We now have a toxic mix of bad governance and, in my view, the Melanesian ways of doing things around allocation of resources, especially through the so-called big men system, whether in politics, public administration or in business. The big men system ensures that political, and public leaders receive automatic deference irrespective of their conduct. People worship the ground they walk on.

We, therefore, have members of parliament (MPs) concentrating powers to themselves, especially under the auspices of devolved funding allocation, such as the District Services Improvement Program (DSIP). The MPs decide the allocation of funding to the districts and provinces, which significantly dilutes their primary role as legislators in the national parliament.

How long will the PNG government continue to devolve scarce funding without demand for transparency and accountability? This is a crucial issue going forward, because now the government plans to allocate over two billion kina annually for the next five years to the provinces and districts - to be controlled by MPs.

Second, building the human capital of PNG is an important requisite for the nation's

development. Smart investments - which this conference will talk about - will not go far if we do not have a smart population. It is a known fact that the quality of education in PNG has either stalled or fallen over the years.

Investments to uplift the country's education standards, as well as to build its human capital through teaching, research, staff and student exchange, and scholarships - including at the tertiary education level - are critically important. An educated young population is an important prerequisite for both the private sector's growth and overall economic expansion in this country.

Third, economic diversification should not be just tokenism or provision of lip-service, say, through allocation of ministerial portfolios on coffee, copra and livestock. It requires a conscious government policy shift to alter the structure of the economy away from the resources sector to support growth in the non-resources sector, underpinned by improvement in the real sectors such as agriculture, fisheries, manufacturing, tourism, ICT and other services.

Importantly, it is about the government providing the enabling policy and investment environment that would facilitate private sector-led growth in the country.

After all the gold, copper, oil and gas of this country are exhausted, this country and its private sector will fall back on its human capital, its non-resources sector - such as agriculture, fisheries and manufacturing - and its institutions to drive economic growth and development in the long term.

We need to invest in these sectors, using the proceeds from the mining and petroleum sectors now - because, as Mr Jerry Garry of PNG's Mineral Resources Authority recently warned, and I quote, "When we don't have any of these copper and gold mines anymore, where are we headed?". He projects that our mines will run out in a generation's time.

To conclude, it is both sad and worrying that we now have a young population growing up in PNG, in my old township and elsewhere, in a vacuum of good leadership, good governance, reverence to the rule of law, and with no meaningful exposure to the outside world. With the collapse in basic education services in many rural areas, the country's future is not rosy. Nevertheless, this only makes the task of reform more urgent and important.

As the late Henry Kila would have recommended, we need to make a significant push towards strengthening our governance institutions. We need to embark on growth-enhancing policy reforms, strengthen our human capital by investing in our young people, and put more emphasis on the non-resource sector in terms of our public policy advice and

commentary.

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