

# Urban elites, rural exclusion and the politics of growth

by Kingtau Mambon

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Port Moresby and damaged bridge in rural PNG

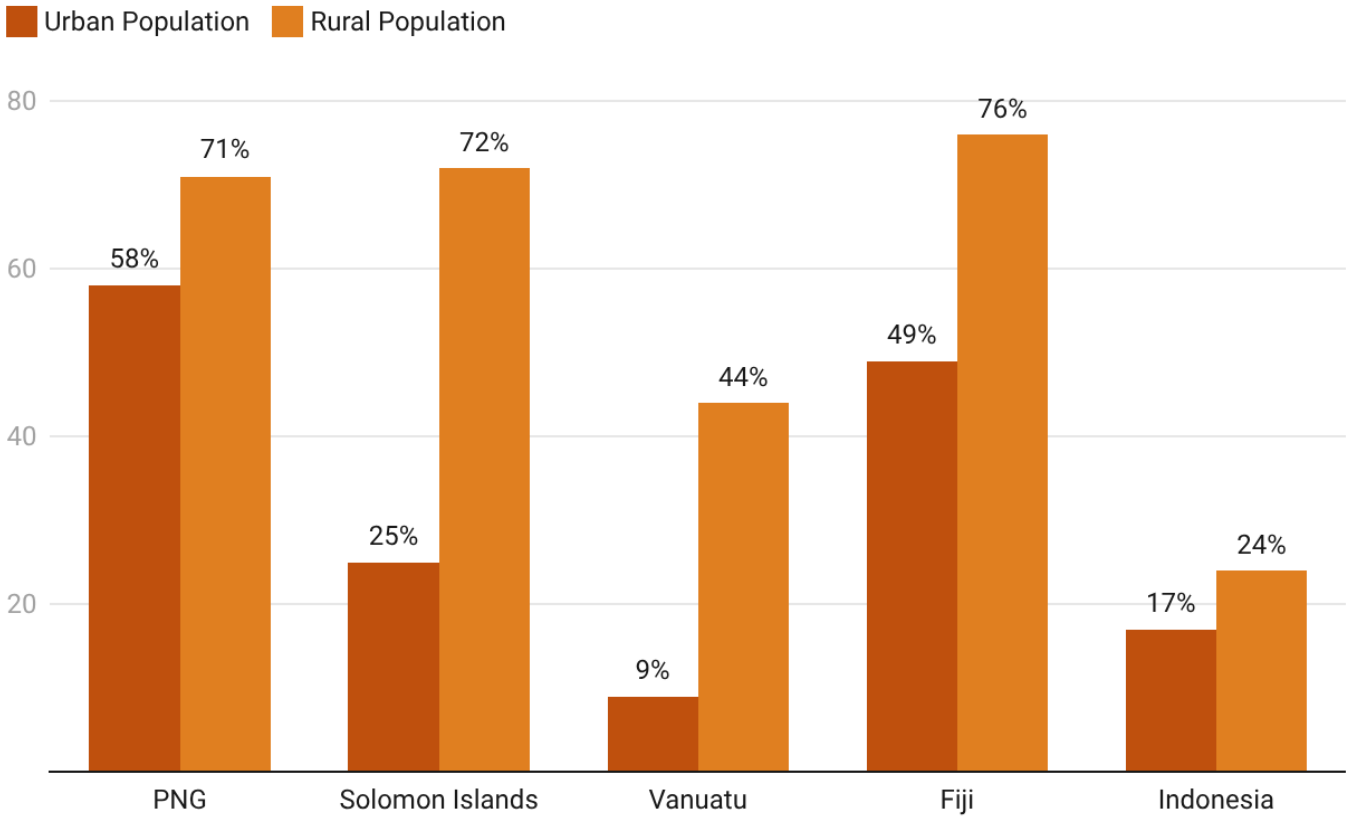
*Photo Credit: Flickr/Weli'mi'nakwan and Andrew Anton Mako*

Neglect of the rural population is frequently attributed to globalisation. But treating globalisation as the sole culprit averts attention from deeper policy failures that have widened spatial schisms within countries. This post reflects on an article, “[The Urban-Rural Gap and the Dilemma of Governance](#)” by Anirudh Krishna, on that issue. Although the article was published over a decade ago, its arguments are strikingly relevant today.

In this article, Krishna argues that the divide in today’s world is no longer only between countries but increasingly within countries. It is spatial. Wealth, opportunity and political influence are concentrated through the process of urban agglomeration and the creation of urban elites while rural areas stagnate in the background. Fast-growing economies such as China, India, Indonesia and South Africa now contain both those who are elite and those who are poor by global standards.

Krishna shows that poverty rates are consistently higher in rural areas. For instance, in Malawi, 57% of the rural population lives below the poverty line, compared with 17% of urban residents. In Zambia, the figures are 78% rural versus 28% urban; in Vietnam, it’s 22% versus 5% in rural and urban areas, respectively. Over the decade these numbers might have changed, but still the argument made then holds equally for PNG and its Melanesian neighbours, as [World Bank data shows](#) (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: Poverty rate by residence in Melanesia, 2025**



Source: World Bank Poverty and Equity Briefs (2025) • Created with Datawrapper

Access to basic services follows suit. In Ethiopia, 97% of urban residents have access to improved drinking water, compared to only 42% of rural residents. In India, 60% of city residents have improved sanitation facilities versus only 25% in rural areas. In Papua New Guinea, rural sanitation is at 15% whereas urban sanitation rates hover at 49%. Educational attainment is similarly unequal. In Pakistan, 61% of urban residents complete secondary education, compared with half of that figure for rural residents. Even when years of schooling are similar, learning outcomes are poorer in rural schools.

Rural areas are poorer, but urban areas are more productive. According to Krishna, this results in a governance dilemma: should governments prioritise poor rural households or globally competitive households in capital cities? In theory, democratic systems should balance both. However, not in practice. Despite making up only a small proportion of the total population, urban elites' preferences shape policy priorities, public investment decisions and national development narratives. Governments build airports, information superhighways and elite universities in urban centres, but rural schools, health clinics, roads and internet access are underfunded. All this results, Krishna argues, in rural populations' being locked into informal, insecure and sometimes sordid forms of work.

When economic mobility out of rural poverty is blocked, control of the state becomes the most reliable route to wealth. I can't help but think of my own country. During the first general election in 1977, two years after independence, **under 900 people** contested in PNG's national elections. The last general election in 2022 saw **around 3,619 candidates** contest the national election. Even after accounting for **population growth**, competition for political power has intensified. There were 31 contestants per 100,000 people in 1977. That number rose to 35.5 contestants per 100,000 people in 2022 — an increase of approximately 15%. Ask any Papua New Guinean about their future aspirations and chances are high that they will say that they want to become a politician. Krishna links this dynamic to corruption, elite capture and resistance to democratic accountability — this could help explain why extreme inequality often coincides with political instability.

Further, Krishna argues that more migration to urban areas is not the solution. However, this is unconvincing, as the rich countries are all heavily urbanised, and urbanisation and economic growth go together. That said, we can all agree with Krishna that economic growth is not enough. Krishna puts forward five points to try to close the urban-rural divide. Three are particularly interesting.

First, he argues that a minimum living standard should be non-negotiable for all citizens. Access to basic nutrition, housing, education and health should not depend on where someone lives. China is cited favourably for its rural health insurance, free education and minimum income guarantee. Second, equality of opportunity must replace trickle-down thinking. This requires serious investment in rural education. And third, democracy must embrace genuine local governance. Local control over schools, clinics and infrastructure is essential if rural citizens are to matter politically.

In sum, Krishna shows a deep urban-rural divide is not inevitable, but rather is the result of policy choices. And unless those choices change, there will continue to be prosperity for few and exclusion for the many. This is particularly relevant for Papua New Guinea given that **over 85% of its population** still lives in rural areas, a ratio that has hardly changed over the past 50 years. Crafting policies that support a smooth transition into high-return industrial and services sectors and ones that support the rural majority population are equally important.

*This is a revised version of an article that first appeared on the author's blog, [Lanesia Knots](#).*

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