



Focus on Empowering Rural Women and Improving Commercial Small-Scale Subsistence Agriculture to Alleviate Poverty in Rural Papua New Guinea

Philip Nasi
Murdoch University

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Abstract

Majority of indigenous people of Papua New Guinea live on subsistence farming practices to provide for their families. The research shows that women in rural areas play a paramount role through subsistence agriculture in sustaining livelihood. The subsistence agriculture has long been practiced in Papua New Guinea since prehistory and the women play key roles in selling surplus farm produces at local markets.

Keywords

Rural Women, Small-scale agriculture, poverty, Papua New Guinea

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1. Introduction

Agriculture is the Melanesian way of sustaining livelihood in Papua New Guinea (PNG). The majority of the indigenous people of PNG in rural village communities are living on subsistence farming practices to provide for their families. Where there is cash flow in a rural community, surplus agricultural products are sold in local markets for income generation to meet other basic needs such as medical fees, children's school fees and to purchase supplementary household needs and wants. However, the income generated at markets is often not sufficient to meet all financial needs of a rural household. This is mostly due to common barriers such as poor road conditions and high transportation costs to access market facilities and services in urban centers. As per the United Nations Development Report 2016, PNG has a lower Human Development Index (HDI) rating of "154 out of 188 countries and territories" (UNDP 2016, 2). This paper argues that women in rural areas play a paramount role through subsistence agriculture in maintaining livelihood. As well, the paper discusses the potential that subsistence agriculture holds in alleviating poverty in rural communities should the key barriers be obliterated.

2. Materials and Methods

Subsistence agriculture has long been practiced in PNG since prehistory. Archeological remains found in the Kuk Swamp of Vaghi Valley in the highlands of Papua New Guinea show that agriculture has been practiced in the highlands of PNG for thousands of years (Denham et al 2003, 189; Trotsenburg 2014). This further illustrates that traditionally and historically Papua New Guineans are subsistence agricultural farmers. The practice and method of agricultural activities differs in accordance with the geography and topography of a society's location. For instance, the Eastern highlands communities farm taro, sweet potatoes and rear pigs for consumption or ceremonial use (Feil 1987, 27), whilst people on the low lands of the Sepik region are renowned for processing and consuming their staple starch from sago palm trees (Tuzin 1992, 103). The practice of sustaining livelihood through agricultural approaches is common in many parts of the world. Before oil was discovered in the 1970s, Nigeria had been heavily dependent on its agriculture industry which contributed about two-thirds of the country's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) (FAO 2005). Cassava was the dominant staple and was mainly grown in the southern part and in "Middle Belt" region of Nigeria (Polson & Spencer 1991, 65; FAO 2005). In Egypt,

agriculture was the key drive in the civilization process and is one of the oldest “agricultural civilization” centered around the River Nile delta where they farmed wheat and raised cattle (El-Nahrawy 2011). And in the Asian region, the staple rice is now farmed for commercial purposes as well in the rural areas (Pingali 1997, 629). These evidences show that agriculture is the backbone of many countries around the world.

In contemporary PNG, the women in rural areas play key roles in making sure there is food on the table to feed their family by selling surplus farm produces at local markets. The little income they generate from local markets is managed to cater for necessary household needs and emergency expenses. Sarah Byrne (2017) from the Business Advantage PNG cited Dr. Gina Koczberski from Curtin University in Western Australia (Dr. Koczberski is currently researching alongside Prof. George Curry on empowerment of rural women as agribusiness entrepreneurs in Papua New Guinea) as stating that currently seventy-five percent of revenue generated by women is used to maintain household needs compared to men who contributed twenty-five percent out of their income. It is common in most rural Papua New Guinean nuclear family units for the mothers to be household managers, who monitor and control food supply and manage finances.

Apart from working alongside the men on their local farms, women have reproductive responsibilities, children upbringing and are key players in children’s early education. Dr. Gina Koczberski further summed up women’s roles in her statement on Byrne’s (2017) blog post as; They produce the bulk of subsistence food crops, contribute to household income and fill valued social and community roles. They also take on most of the responsibility of childcare and domestic tasks.

Women are often multi-tasked in a typical rural household setting. Men play less significant roles in early childhood upbringing and childcare as these are traditionally considered as women’s role in most PNG societies. As identified by Philip Gibbs (2016, 133) in his case study of a rural male sample population in Western Province, men considered themselves as the “provider”, “protector” and “leader” of the family unit. With these roles defining their identity, a man is often the sole decision maker in a household.

Traditionally, women's roles are viewed as less superior than that of men in many rural societies of the world based on cultural obligations and societal ethos. Amin (1997, 215) when studying roles of women in rural areas of Bangladesh stated that though women work long hours and play important roles in the "domestic economy", their work is "invisible and undervalued in the society around them". While in Nigeria women made up 60-90% of the agricultural labor force tending to farm and gardens to support their family (Ogunlela and Mukhtar 2009, 21). A study by Brown and Park (2002, 538) on "education and poverty in rural China" showed that when making decisions about putting children to school from a poor household, the son is favored more by the parents than the daughter. Female children were held back to make way for resources to be accumulated and channeled towards the male sibling's education. These scenarios show the common ethos that often distinguishes the role of men and women in rural areas.

3. Results and Discussions

In the recent decade, women's important role in agriculture has been recognized and governments and organizations are collaborating to empower women in this sector on a global scale. The Food & Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nation 2011 article on Women in Agriculture Closing the Gender Gap for Development published on the FAO official website (cited in Alwang et. al 2017) states that women made up fifty percent of the agriculture workforce around the world. In the United States of America there was a significant rise in the number of women in farming from one hundred and twenty-eight thousand in 1978 to one hundred and fifty-five thousand in 1997 (Trauger 2004: 291). With recognition from government, non-government agencies and world organizations, women in Papua New Guinea are gradually being empowered to participate in the market economy. Successive governments of Papua New Guinea have been investing and attempting to promote income generation through agriculture over the years for majority of the population in rural areas. Under the leadership of the then Prime Minister, Michael Somare, the government published a national guiding strategy called the PNG Vision 2050 in 2011. In the Vision 2050 (2011, xv), the Land Reform (Scenario Two) outlines the government's commitment to alleviating poverty through agriculture; This scenario will empower our people to participate in income-generating activities through cultivation of their land. This will lead to broad-based economic growth and ensure balanced development in rural and urban areas. The national

government of PNG recognizes the importance of agriculture and the potential it has in alleviating poverty in the country, and is investing in agriculture.

With government initiatives, such as the establishment of rural farmers' cash-crop cooperative societies, many subsistence farmers are attempting to venture into small-to-medium agricultural enterprises, but are facing barriers in their income generation prospects. A key barrier to achieving the Vision 2050 is the lack of proper road links connecting villages to urban centers. This is mainly due to the rough terrain, fast flowing rivers, wide expanse of swampland and less or no maintenance work on deteriorating existing roads. In their research on sustainable eco-forestry community projects in Papua New Guinea, Fisher and others (2014, 36) stated that:

Very poor roads complicate access to markets for harvested timber and harvesting sites are often located in difficult terrain remote from roads. The costs of transport can be very high, particularly for small eco-forestry operations, which have higher production and transport cost per unit than larger commercial operations.

For rural villagers to participate effectively and attain the PNG National Government's Vision 2050, proper road networks are vital components of such economic development.

Some years back, the government encouraged and guided farmers in the low land areas to set up cocoa cooperative societies to help them cultivate portions of their land areas to grow cocoa and sell the beans to export depots. According to Garnevskaja and others (2014, 419), cocoa cooperative societies have had a "dynamic history and [had] contributed to the country's development in the last few decades". However, the road networks and transport infrastructures have deteriorated to beyond repairable states in many areas over the years. The PNG government's failure to continuously allocate adequate funds for road maintenance has had adverse effects on the eighty five percent of the seven million six hundred thousand Papua New Guineans living in rural areas (Dornan 2016, 444; Gibson & Rozelle 2002). People in rural areas have been facing difficulties participating in the market economy and encountering hardships in accessing health and education services situated at urban centers due to poor road conditions.

Good road links have contributed significantly to socio-economic development in rural parts of the world. Between 2006 and 2015, the World Bank helped rehabilitated 1, 299 roads connecting rural areas of Fujian Province in China to urban centers, evidently reducing the high transport costs and promoting more participation by the rural population in urban markets (The World Bank, 2016). Meanwhile, the European Union (EU) gave a 10 million euro pounds to the Rwandan government in late 2016 to help complete a 200 kilometer rural roads rehabilitation project, stating that “rural roads facilitate access to markets, basic economic and social services as well as enhance access to food and improve rural policies at the local level” (European Union 2016). The economy of a developing country grows when the rural populations are linked by good road links to markets and social services in urban centers.

In another attempt to alleviate poverty through the agriculture sector, the government of PNG has ventured into inviting foreign private companies to partner with indigenous landowners to develop customary land areas into large scale agriculture plantations under a Special Agriculture Business Lease (SABL) concept. The focus is on establishing oil palm plantations in rural areas around the country. However, the consequences have been destructive to the indigenous landowners. Gabriel and others (n.d.) stated that the SABL approach has caused many indigenous rural people around the country to go against investors and the government on the basis of losing their rights to land and resources as well as not adequately benefiting from this concept. The SABL approach brings about more disadvantages than benefits to rural people. World organizations like Green Peace have rallied against the SABL concept alongside national activist groups like Act Now PNG. In 2011, the then Acting Prime Minister Sam Abal sanctioned the Commission of Enquiry (COI) into seventy-seven SABL projects in the country (PNG Commission of Enquiry SABL, 2011). Following the report from the enquiry, the current Prime Minister Peter O’Neill (The National 07 Nov. 2016): cancelled all Special Agricultural and Business Leases (SABL) due to irregularities in various land and forestry laws that allowed the devastation of forests.

The cancellation of Special Agricultural and Business Leases licenses allows for land owners’ rights over their land and resources to be restored. For rural indigenous groups who lost much of their natural resources in a SABL project, they can now use their land to grow other crops or raise farm animals to export.

4. Conclusion

The high poverty rate in Papua New Guinea can be alleviated significantly if the national government focuses on boosting current small-to-medium enterprises, especially those operated by rural women subsistence farmers. In the process of empowering women subsistence farmers, it is important to maintain road networks connecting rural villages to urban centers as well as building new roads to isolated villages. When rural women are empowered to participate effectively in the market economy using transport on good road conditions, Papua New Guinea will see a drop in its poverty rank in the world.

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