
Quality of life and development challenges in a Middle Ramu community

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Abstract

The Middle Ramu District in Madang Province has been identified as one of the least developed districts in Papua New Guinea. There are severe environmental constraints such as flooding and very poor access to outside markets and services. Communities are seriously disadvantaged in terms of access to economic opportunities, basic social services, and infrastructure. In the area covered by this case study there is a functioning mission school and a marginally functional mission health centre at Annaberg, but otherwise there is no administrative presence, the nearest government office being at Aiyome, many hours' travel away. People rely on costly river transportation (one full day to the Banu bridge near Usino from where they can access road transport). In the eyes of a riverine community in Middle Ramu, it is "the Highlanders" who have brought economic change. Entrepreneurs from various parts of the Highlands come in motorised canoes in a search for betelnut, which they exchange for cash and technical items such as solar panels. While concentrating on betelnut trade, people in the riverine settler communities studied rely for their sustenance on buying sago from those living further away from the Ramu River. They find themselves in a cycle of planting and harvesting more betelnut in order to supply the Highlands traders, while at the same time giving little attention to food gardens or cash crops.

Key words: Papua New Guinea, Middle Ramu District, development, community assets, education, health, government services, transport, communications, personal assets, land, economic activity, improving living conditions, geographical terrain, cult activities, mindset

Introduction

The World Bank Poverty assessment 2004 states that poverty levels in Papua New Guinea (PNG) are increasing rather than decreasing (World Bank 2004, vii). This is based on an understanding of poverty linked to five development index factors: income, adult literacy, education (2 factors), and life expectancy at birth. The Madang Province is one of the poorest performers, positioned below the national average with all five indicators. Results for the Middle Ramu District of Madang Province, based on the District Development Index, class the Middle Ramu as the fifth poorest District out of 89 Local Level Governments (LLGs) in PNG (World Bank 2004, Annex 1, Table A1).

Allen and Bourke (2007, p. 30) note how “an important determinant of whether a person is poor in PNG is *where* they live.” Isolated areas with environmental constraints are often designated as “less developed” “underdeveloped” or “disadvantaged” areas. Bryant Allen (2008) has identified environmental constraints as high rainfall, high levels of cloud cover, poor soils, or position on flood plains that are inundated regularly. Moreover, such locations have limited or no access to basic services including health and education services or to markets where they can sell agricultural produce in exchange for cash. They also have poor access to information and knowledge about important matters like health care, nutrition and political developments. They cannot afford to buy imported foods to supplement their traditional diets, are poorly represented politically, and are “invisible” from the main centres of the country. Many of these constraints apply to the people of Middle Ramu where communities are seriously disadvantaged in terms of access to economic opportunities, basic social services, and infrastructure.

Sago is a common staple food in the Middle Ramu (Allen, Bourke, Fritsch, et al., 2002, pp. 41ff.). However, sago should be supplemented by protein and that requires exchange for protein rich foods or nowadays marketing of cash crops, fresh food, firewood or betelnut to obtain cash for buying tinned store goods. Without such additions to their diet people tend to have a negative energy balance and lower body mass and women tend to bear children with lower birth weights with accompanying risk factors of infant mortality and poor postnatal growth (Heywood and Morgan 1992 cited in Allen and Bourke, 2007, p. 33). The situation continues, exacerbated by poor infrastructure (Gibson & Rozelle 2002) and by what Baxter (2001) terms a “failure of governance” (Allen and Bourke, 2007, p. 34).

This study is an exploratory survey about development challenges in a Middle Ramu community. It seeks to identify how people living in two riverine settlements view their current situation in terms of development and well-being. The objective is to gain insights into factors associated with poverty and quality of life experienced by people living in these Middle Ramu communities. Another objective is to make their situation more visible to the wider community and to identify possibilities whereby their quality of life might be enhanced.

This study begins with a historical note since the changing fortunes of various actors are relevant to today particularly in the introduction and then retraction of Government and mission services and the expansion of trade. The study will then explain the method, and findings, and to discuss their significance, before concluding with some observations.

Historical note

The people in the Middle Ramu River District were first documented after a visit in 1896 by a German scientific expedition led by German botanist and explorer, Carl Lauterbach. The encounter was not a peaceful one and people report many villagers being shot or wounded (Kasprus 1973, p.7). Later, in the

20th Century, unsupervised blackbirders and labour recruiters came to the area (Kasprus 1973, p.2) resulting in a loss of able bodied men from the community. The Catholic mission from Alexishafen started in the Middle Ramu at Annaberg in 1933. Fr Aloys Kasprus SVD who was based there from 1936 to 1943 has left a detailed account of the Rao speaking people and their neighbours (Kasprus 1973). Anthropologist Fr Georg Holtker SVD visited there also at that time. Kasprus was forced to leave by the Japanese invasion and Annaberg suffered bomb damage from aerial attacks.

The period after WWII was a time of mission consolidation with the construction of an airstrip and resident mission services. The Government established a base at Aiyome. People were attracted to settle in hamlets so as to have access to education and health services provided by the mission and government. Kasprus (1973, p 9) notes how epidemics and fear of hostilities and of sorcerers have meant that people tend to live in scattered settlements rather than established villages.

The airstrip at Annaberg ceased operation in 2003 after the close of the mission airways. There has been some work on constructing a road, but road construction stopped after people failed to elect the contractor to parliament. Annaberg parish now has no resident priest. The only access now is by motorised canoe or dinghy along the Ramu River either up river from the coast (one full day) or down river from Usino (6 hours).

Method

Field data for this case study comes from one week of fieldwork by the four researchers in the Middle Ramu villages of Djam and Jitibu in Ward 4 of the Arabaka LLG in March 2016 (Refer map in Figure 1). We were two men and two women. Relying on the advice of local villlage counsellors we met with 18 households to complete questionnaires. Eight people were key informants and others participated in focus groups. We used questionnaires based on those from the 2006 PNG Demographic and Health Survey and a Core Welfare Indicators Questionnaire developed by The World Bank. These were in four parts.

1. We used the Community Questionnaire from the 1996 PNG Household Survey (sections A - listing of community assets, B – Education, C – Health, D – Government Station, E – Transport and Communications, F – Prices. This was accomplished with one key informant from each of the two communities
2. We used Section G from the Community Questionnaire from the 1996 PNG Household Survey with key informants at the Annaberg Mission (health worker, teacher, government worker, and church worker). Section G deals with three activities: Economic Activity, Infrastructure and Services. We asked the key informants to comment on the advantages and disadvantages of the changes they identified in the three activities.

3. We used the Core Welfare Indicators Questionnaire (CWIQ) in 18 households. This is a questionnaire developed by the World Bank and used extensively in Africa (www.ghdx.healthdata.org/series/core-welfare-indicators-questionnaire-survey-cwiq).
4. With focus groups (adult men, adult women, youth from each community) we used the “Quality of Life” questions (61-63) from the 1996 PNG Household Survey. These are qualitative questions about whether people feel better or worse off, their opinion on their standard of living, and their opinion on what the Government can do to improve household living conditions.

We obtained ethical clearance from the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences Research Committee at Divine Word University (No FASS/FS/2/2016).

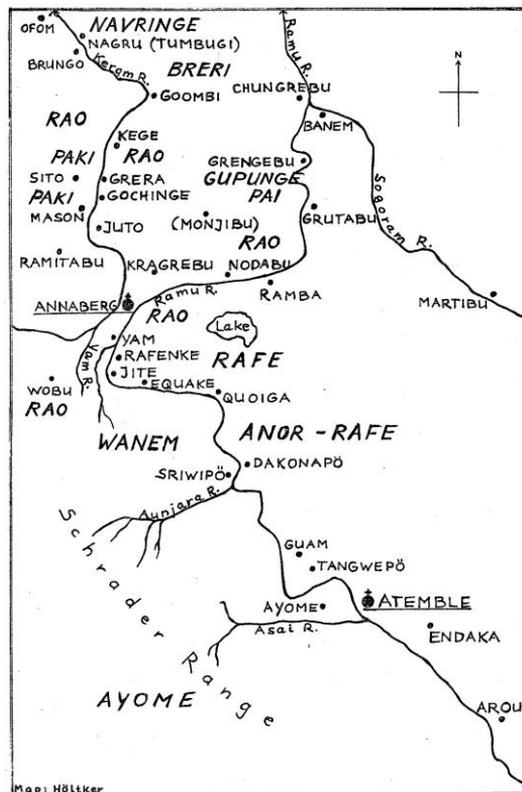


Figure 1: Map by Höltker (in Kasprus 1973) showing Yam (Djam) and Jite (Jitibu) settlements.

Limitations of this study

The main limitations of this study are the brief time spent in the field and our being new to the area.

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Findings

1. Community assets

In each community there is a trade store, a cocoa fermentary and a meeting house. The trade store sells general store goods, food items and often petrol and oil for outboard motors. Apart from a trade store there are indoor sales from people's own houses and a mobile market whereby store goods and food items are moved to different areas for sale. The trade store owner at Jitibu admitted, "I bought beer to sell, but customers taking the beer on credit ruined me" (*Mi baim bia kam salim, dinau tasol mekim na bisnis bilong mi bruk olgeta*).

2. Education

Each community has an Elementary School but these had no supervision and they no longer function. Children can go to the Elementary School at Annaberg (involving several hours' travel). The nearest Primary school is also at Annaberg. The school at Annaberg (level 4) appears to function rather well despite a shortage of teachers. The nearest High School is at Aiyome, reached after 2 or 3 hours by motor canoe and then several hours walk. No students from Jitibu have ever been selected to further their education beyond High School. They are said to "learn fearfully" (*skul wantaim pret*) because in 2015 there was inter ethnic tension with fighting and burning of school dormitories. Now the High School students sleep in a classroom and have to find their own food. Most female students do not continue after grade six because of the dangers in travel and customary obligations such as marriage. Teacher absenteeism is a problem at both primary and secondary schools. Teachers fill resumption duty forms but then fail to remain at the school. They cite transport problems as a major reason for their absence.

3. Health

Health Facilities in the level 2 sub-health centre are old and need maintenance. The new maternity ward at Annaberg is unused — the reason given is that it is too small. All five local aid posts have no health worker and are not operating. For health services people have to go to Annaberg Mission, which is around 45 minutes by canoe from Djam and several hours by canoe from Jitibu. There are now only two trained staff at Annaberg sub-health centre and we were informed that with recent severe cuts in Government funding to the Catholic Health Services it is not possible to recruit new staff, and support staff will have to be laid off.

Patients are required to pay for services at the Annaberg health centre: K2 for regular treatment and K10 for a woman giving birth. After having their first child in a supervised delivery at Annaberg most mothers opt to deliver children

at home with the assistance of their husbands. This can be due to dissatisfaction with service at Annaberg or in order to save money. We found some women had borne as many as twelve children. Unfortunately, if income is low, medicine will be the first item to be cut from expenditure. “So we only go to the health centre for serious illnesses. For anything less serious we treat it at home” (*Olsem na sampela taim mipela go long hausik taim sik em bikpela tru, taim sik i no bikpela, mipela stap long haus*). There has been no immunization for babies for at least five years because the gas fridge used for storing the vaccines does not function properly and gas is short. It costs the Catholic Health Services around K2000 for boat and car hire to send emergency cases for hospitalization to Madang. In recent years there have been more than ten such emergencies a year. Health workers say that recent severe funding cuts by the Government means that, starting in 2016 there will be no funds to cover such emergencies.

4. Government services

The nearest government station is at Aiyome. To get there requires several hours by boat and then a long walk. The village counsellor echoed what seems a common sentiment when he said, “The government does not care about the people” (*Gavman i no wari long ol pipel*). People told us they have been waiting over a year for a visit by an agricultural officer to give them advice on how to deal with the Cocoa pod borer damaging their cocoa plants. A study by Seip (2011) has found that Middle Ramu District Administration structure has a high level of centralisation with nine levels of hierarchy, which makes it ineffective. Contextual factors such as the environment and size of the area were not adequately considered when designing the structure of the Administration.

5. Transport and communications

When there was a mission plane, mail and medicine were delivered in weekly flights, and teachers, health and mission workers could travel easily. However, since 2003, the long river trip is the only option. Travel to Madang costs at least K95 per person (K70 for motorised canoe to Banu bridge, K5 stay overnight, K20 for bus fare to Madang). Of the women interviewed at Jitibu, only one had ever travelled to Madang. Previously communication was by a 2-way radio at the Mission. A Digicel mobile phone tower erected recently allows mobile phone communication for those who can afford to purchase a phone and top-up credit.

6. Personal assets

The majority of households use solar panels for energy (light and radio). One female interviewee has a sewing machine but she says she does not know how to use it. People gather water on sheets of iron draining into small containers. Flooding of the river makes fixed toilets impractical since floods carry toilets away and release their contents.

The river is their greatest asset. People come to settle near the river in order to be closer to transport and services. A man said, “The Ramu River is a national highway.” He added, “God made it for us, not the government. It comes from

God but the people put a price on it” (*Ramu em nesenal haiwe. God i wokim long mipela i no gavman. God i wokim tasol man i putim prais moni long en*).

A major concern raised by the villagers along Ramu River, is pollution due to what they claim is the dumping of the waste from the mining upstream, namely, Ramu Oil Palm, Dumpu Cattle Farm, Kurumbukari, Marengo and Kainantu mining. A man spoke as follows, “Previously we didn’t have illnesses such as growths, but now many people contract illnesses that were unknown to our ancestors. My wife died from one of these illnesses” (*Bipo mipela nogat kain sik olsem growth, nau planti bilong mipela kisim ol kainkain sik we ol tumbuna i no save kisim long em. Meri billong mi dai long dispela sik tasol ya*). People had a sense of disquiet, claiming that now they see fish covered with sores – something that did not occur before.

7. Land

The land around Annaberg is not densely populated. However, land suitable for settlement is not readily available. Many have come in as settlers. “The land we live on now is not really our land” (*Graun nau mipela i stap long em nau ya em i no graun bilong mipela tru*). The families that we live with now received us and gave land. But they put boundaries that we cannot go beyond” (*Ol femili mipela istap wantaim nau ya i kisim mipela kam na givim graun long yumi na mipela i stap wantaim ol. Tasol ol i makim graun inap long mipela long wok na i no long go abrusim mak ol i givim mipela long en*). They are not permitted to go beyond the boundaries of the land they have inherited through matrilineal ties. Many settlers said that they could not have many animals or make extensive gardens because “land owners” would complain that they were overstepping the mark. “We are given a piece of land where we can plant a food garden and we can plant buai near our house, but we can’t plant sago or do commercial cropping.”

8. Economic activity

The main source of income of the villages is betelnut. All members of a family, including children can own stands of betelnut. Mainly during the season from June to November buyers come by motor canoe from the Highlands and go from village to village buying betelnut. Bags weighing approximately 30 kg sell for between K100 and K200 (on an average K150) and a family can produce eight to ten bags a year, meaning they can earn at least K1500.

From a trading economy to a cash economy people now rely on money, as one man expressed it, “The highlanders come with money and now we have to pay to live.” It used to be that people would live from their own sago. Now as one person put it, “*mipela i les long wok*” (we don’t want to work [scraping sago]). Now they buy sago at K35 for a ten-kilogram bag from their Keram neighbours of the East Sepik Province. Such a bag may last a family for up to three weeks depending on the size of the family. Buying sago for the family may cost K600 per year. When they have no cash, they must go and scrape sago. They leave the river and go to cut sago palm in the bush and float it down the river to where they can cut and prepare it near where they live.

Local people are afraid to travel outside of their home area. There are river pirates and raskols at landfall at Usino. So they prefer to let the Highlanders do the travelling while they sell betelnut from home.

The other items for the cash economy are cocoa and sales of garden produce. Cocoa is owned by nuclear families. However, people have to contend with cocoa pod borer laying eggs inside the cocoa pod resulting in restricted development of cocoa seeds. and they have received little help from agricultural officers to deal with this problem.

Table 1. Typical items of income and expenditure for families in the Djam and Jitibu settlements

Income from
Selling betelnut
Marketing store goods (rice, sugar, salt, tinned fish)
Cocoa as a cash crop
Sago
Fish
Garden food
Tobacco
Hiring canoe and engine
Selling petrol
Selling marijuana, distilled alcohol
Selling sex
Expenses for
Travel
Food
School
Health
General store goods
Fuel
Church offering
Funeral payments

Table 2. Mark up on prices for store goods in the Middle-Ramu

Item	Town Price (Madang)	Price Middle-Ramu
Trukai rice 1kg	K4.50	K7.00
Ramu sugar 1kg	K4.50	K8.00
Diana tuna small	K1.30	K4.00
Beef cracker	K1.20	K3.00
Digicel flex card K3	K3.00	K5.00

9. Improving living conditions

When asked whether taking everything into account do they feel worse off or better off than they were two years ago. Two said they are worse off. They majority said that there was no change. “The river changes but for us there is no change” (*Wara Ramu i senis, mipela i no senis*). All respondents said they would like the government to give priority to road access that they hope would lead to improved living conditions. People wait on the Government for social change, but agree that the Highlander traders are the ones who had brought about economic development. “The Highlanders came and changed us. Because of them we sleep at night [with solar lamps], we wear shoes and trousers. It wasn’t our member of parliament; we vote for them for nothing.” (*Ol Hailans i kam senisim mipela. Ol i mekim mipela slip long nait, werim su na putim trausis. I no ol memba, mipela i votim ol nating*).

However, there are other consequences. Highlanders who come to buy betelnut leave behind “buai children” (*ol pikinini buai*) when they contribute to unwanted pregnancies and fatherless children. “They come and trick our young girls. When they are done with money and betelnut they leave girls with their babies” (*Ol i kam giamanim ol yangpela meri, moni na buai pinis ol i go lusim meri wantaim pikinini*).



Figure 2: Photo, Highlander traders loaded with bags of betelnut on the Ramu River. (Photo P. Gibbs)

Discussion

Seventy five years ago Aloys Kasprus reported how the people in the Middle Ramu are not favoured with agricultural land but that “economically the Middle Ramu tribes are not too badly off, most of them can fall back on fishing and game-hunting” (Kasprus 1973, p.16). Because agriculture on a larger scale is impossible, the Rao people rely on on barter to acquire some fruit for a change in their staple diet of sago (Kasprus 1973, p.40).

Sago is still people's staple diet. But the exchange has changed. Instead of bartering to have a change from sago, people now sell betelnut to obtain sago. This brings them into the world of money. As one man said, life is worse than before because "*mipela stap long moni wol na ol i kolim mipela ol bek pes lain*" (we live in a world of money and we have a reputation for being backward). When trade involved their own resources such as fish, game or agricultural produce they did not see themselves as disadvantaged. However, in a money world they are "*bek pes*" (marginalized). One man put it this way, "The introduction of money is making us poor."

Aloys Kasprus noted how, "to receive for their cowry shells dry coconuts and betelnuts, the Annaberg Raos had to paddle down to the Vimvito Raos who had big groves of these palms" (Kasprus 1973, p.51). They would trade pots, salted fibres, tobacco and shells for betelnut. The terms of trade have changed. Annaberg Raos now have stands of betelnut that they trade for money and with money it is no longer necessary to work to obtain sago. "We don't work any more [scraping sago]. The Highlanders have changed our lives." (*Mipela i no moa wok. Laip bilong mipela ol hailans i sensisim*).

Conclusion

What have we discovered about the development challenges for people in the two settlements we studied in the Middle Ramu? We summarise the development challenges at the present time in the following six points.

1. **Transport:** The Member, Ben Semri, brought in machinery to connect the Ramu with the Trans-Gogol Road. However, people say that, when they did not support him with their votes, the road project was abandoned. River transport is time consuming, costly and not always safe. Besides the expense of the boat, people must pay for any bags they carry, and for lodging if the travel includes an overnight stop.

2. **Geographical terrain:** The area is isolated with little land available for cash cropping. Land close to the river is subject to flooding. In times of flooding people are unable to catch fish in the swollen and murky water. It would be advisable for people to learn more about and adopt appropriate food preservation for such times.

3. **The non-presence of government:** Local-Level Government Councillors and Committee members say that they do not meet on a regular basis and they are not aware of any development plan for the District. Also they are not aware of any development funds such as SME grants being given to the District. The only police available for the Middle Ramu District are from the neighbouring Usino-Bundi District

4. **Health and educational services:** Health services are poor and costly. Many children return from school to the village showing little benefit for their time at

school. It could be an advantage to have a technical high school or a community college more adapted to educating for needs in a village setting.

5. **Cult activities:** Respondents said that cargo thinking arises when there is money circulating in the village. Cult members pay women for their services as “flower girls” at “good night” houses, and men allow their wives to be part of the cult so they can get money. The cult delves into the occult, with a “covenant box” that is believed to hold secret powers. There was a rumour that cargo would come on Independence Day 2015, but the day turned out to be a non-event. Sorcery is also a development issue because it can be part of a response to envious sentiments against those who try to advance beyond the status quo.

6. **Mindset:** Teachers say that parents will not pay project fees because there is “free education”. Some link this mindset to cargo thinking and fear that if they advance, others will be jealous and harm them through sorcery. With this mindset, people have a sense of being disempowered.

In a world valued by money the Middle Ramu are “*Las Madang*” (isolated). The airstrip has closed and they dream of a time when they will have a road that gives them access to the good things of a money economy. In the meantime some resort to cultic activities dreaming that this will open up access to money and the good life.

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