Papua New Guinea: challenges from rural practice

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Aims of the presentation

There are two primary aims:

- To introduce the context of Papua New Guinea
- To highlight particular challenges for a primarily rural context where there is emerging urbanisation and a number of pressing challenges and dilemmas
Settled at least 60,000 years ago. It is located north of Australia and has a population of over 6 million people.

Was under colonial powers (Germany & Britain) from 1880s and Australian administration from 1884.

In 1906 became an Australian colony but the Australians did not train PNG nationals in administration (Healy 1987).

Became independent in 1975 – has largely adopted British institutional structures.

There are democratic elections but there is also a high turnover of politicians (Denoon 2005). There is some improvement in stability – Somare is now into his eighth year in office (Kwa, Howes & Lin 2010).
Country context

- Over 700 different cultures/languages.
- 85% of the population is rural-base and has a subsistence existence.
- Difficult terrain which increases the costs of service provision and development.
- Experiencing rapid social change.
- Climate change and environmental issues.
Country context

• The economy is experiencing a growth in mining and petroleum projects and favourable commodity prices,

• In terms of social development – there are generally low social well-being indicators including high infant and maternal mortality rates and low gender equality.

• HIV/AIDS is consider at an ‘epidemic level and the prevalence is generalised.
The University of PNG was established in 1965 and in 1971 the first lecturer in social work was appointed (O’Collins 1973 – now Emeritus Professor).

There is a community-based focus for social work and the aim is for students/graduates to return to the village. Typically, this has not happened.

From independence in 1975 economic growth has been slow and the emphasis has been in ‘wealth now, welfare later’ – there are poorly developed strategies for social development (MacPherson 1996).
Social work in contemporary context

- “social work in PNG is concerned with the social welfare aspects of development and aims to enhance the quality of life of people in both rural and urban communities through the use of appropriate social work practices...” (Social Work Strand, 2010:3)

- Nevertheless, PNG is a ‘challenging” country is which to undertake development work and engage in human services.
Developing social work

- Historically, the mainstream churches have been instrumental in establishing schools and hospitals and generally responding to the pastoral needs of heir congregations.

- This work, historically, followed a holistic approach to working with people and communities.

- Despite being established in 1971, social work remains relatively ‘new’ to PNG.
The predominately rural population relies on traditional methods to meet basic food, shelter and clothing.

The ‘causes’ of poverty are varied and complex – geography, population growth, natural disasters, disease, gender inequality, and increasing pressure on land or under-development of land.

There is a rich natural resources and a minerals boom but this is associated with an array of social costs.
Social issues

- Some debate about whether PNG is rich in resources - there are difficulties in accessing resources due to difficult terrain and lack of infrastructure (Allen, Bourke & Gibson 2005).

- 37% of people live in poverty:
  - Poverty is not necessarily due to unequal market forces but environmental conditions that prevent engagement with domestic and international markets (Ashwell & Barclay 2005).

- The formal economy is relatively small and around 85% of people follow a subsistence lifestyle (Kwa, Howes & Lin 2010)
Challenges for social work in PNG

- There is a need for professionally trained human resources but the social services are under-developed and social problems are increasing (Mills 2002). The need is to slowly develop indigenous technical and professional capacity through quiet example and mentoring (Duke 2004).

- In the absence of a formal welfare sector there is a need to strengthen informal social support (Mafile’o & Api 2009).

- People in the region face many problems including lack of access to education, modern media, modern employment and regional and international economic markets (Timmer 2009).
Social Work practice context
Community development and community empowerment is emphasised and the community is the primary point of entry for many social work and human service interventions.

Social work is also playing a proactive role in upholding rights-based interventions and raising a voice for the powerless – some of our graduates are vocal activities and critics.

Community-focused policy and practice remain relevant (Department of Community Development, 2007).
Examples of practice

Aitape Tsunami (1988) – institutional models of care were not appropriate and there was focus on re-building communities
Manam volcanic eruption (1997) – responded to victims but also strengthened community power structures.
Challenges ahead

- HIV/AIDS – a generalised epidemic:
  - Highly stigmatised
  - Need to increase awareness and prevent transmission
  - Counselling care and family support

- Climate change and environmental degradation – potential threats to rural development

- Mental health and substance abuse
Summary

• Social work is still relatively ‘new’

• Emerging social issues call for:
  • New skills and models of practice
  • New approaches to social work education and training
  • Ensuring that standards of practice are aligned with international standards
  • Harnessing the skills and knowledge of the ‘trailblazers’ who are ‘doing it now and doing it right’
Summary

- There is a need to develop PNG-centric models of practice that affirm our models but also remain consistent with international best practices.

- There is also a need to balance development and ensure that the products of development are (a) enjoyed equally by all and (b) are sustainable.
References


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