

This paper provides an overview of how social and economic inequalities are being experienced and articulated in Papua New Guinea (PNG). PNG is often imagined to be a country divided into 'grassroots' and 'elites'. However, here I focus on the position of the middle class, or 'working class' in the contemporary PNG idiom, and argue that this important group is deserving of more sustained attention and should not simply be dismissed as an 'out of touch' urban elite.

In the only book-length study of these issues in PNG, Gewertz and Errington (1999) documented emerging forms of class distinction in PNG. They described their book as one 'which many Papua New Guineans had hoped could never be written' (ibid:2) because of the strong national ideology of egalitarianism, embedded in the 1975 Constitution. Nevertheless, they argue that middle-class Papua New Guineans are stepping away from ties of reciprocity with kin from 'the village'. The middle classes also distance themselves from the urban poor, particularly those who live in informal 'squatter' settlements, who are often regarded as a security threat due to concerns about violent crime. In popular discourse, rural villagers and urban settlement dwellers alike are regarded as 'grassroots', while other town dwellers are 'elite'. Indeed, it is common to hear the term 'elite' applied to almost anyone who has completed their secondary education. This loose popular usage includes many who are not at all 'elite' in the sense of being wealthy, politically powerful or culturally sophisticated.

In PNG a growing middle class of urban, salaried people refer to themselves as the 'working class', distinguishing themselves from subsistence 'grassroots' workers who do not work (if work is understood as receiving salaries or regular payments for services). Where urban wage earners were once regarded as straightforwardly 'elite', increasingly, middle-class budgets are coming under strain. In the face of rising costs of living, deteriorating housing stock and faltering services, discourses of nation and citizenship that

previously included the middle class are becoming embittering. The 'working class' people I engage with often speak of PNG in a tone of moral outrage, disillusionment or despair. The middle class can no longer be assumed to be among the nation's 'elite'. Indeed, the now characteristic 'working class' lament is about the cost of living and the inadequacy of ordinary wages to meet basic costs (Monsell-Davis 1993). The 'working class' may be better described as the 'working poor'. Many 'working class' Papua New Guineans rely on 'loan sharks' to live from pay to pay (Goddard 2005). Even relatively well-salaried Papua New Guineans supplement their income with subsistence contributions from their own gardens or from rural kin. Many try to set up family members in small enterprises in order to expand the sources of household income. For the PNG working class, the lines between licit and illicit blur as low wages, pay-day loans, petty bribes, small enterprises, gambling, microfinance programs and 'fast money schemes' make up a world of tenuous circulations of money (Cox 2011).

The 'working class' are hardly elite when compared with those who wield real influence in PNG: senior public servants and powerful political patrons or the landowner rentier millionaires who capture the benefits of resource developments. The well-known blogger and political commentator Martin Namorong (2014) uses the term 'predatory elite' to describe these powerful figures. Despite a booming economy based on mineral extraction, the state, or brokerage of access to the state, is still the centre of wealth creation for local elites. Good (in Amarshi et al. 1979:158) labelled the emerging bourgeoisie of PNG 'the parasitic group' because they 'act as if the control of the state for administrative purposes was an end in itself' and monopolise access to education. The truly elite powerbrokers of PNG monopolise the resources of the state and ensure that those outside their patronage networks are locked out of access to education, employment and other prerequisites of social advancement.

Simplistically categorising the PNG middle class as 'elite' fails to capture their experience of economic precariousness. Moreover, when low-level bureaucrats, teachers and nurses are described as 'elite', the operations of the real powerbrokers are obscured. The middle class of PNG should not be dismissed as an elite group, somehow detached from and unrepresentative of the true grassroots. This poses too great a gap between the 'working class' and the 'grassroots', where there are often overlapping personal networks and political concerns. Of course the 'working class' enjoy privileges that set them well apart from their village relatives (and that are often envied) but maintaining the categorical opposition between 'elites' and 'grassroots' obscures the plentiful interactions between these groups within PNG. Indeed, there is evidence that middle-class opinions as found in newspapers are important in framing village discussions of social issues (Lipset and Halvaksz 2009). My own work (Cox 2011) has argued that many 'working class' Papua New Guineans have a strong moral commitment to national development and are troubled by the poverty of their rural kin. Many working-class people still anticipate returning to 'the village' upon retirement and so need to maintain good relationships with their rural kin (Gewertz and Errington 1999). Interconnections between the grassroots, the middle class and the 'predatory elite' need to be recognised and better understood, especially where they coalesce around particular political issues, economic interests, religious movements or consumer practices.

The middle classes can play key roles in social and political change, democratisation and economic development, yet critical exploration of these questions in Melanesia is overdue. As processes of urbanisation advance and the middle classes emerge as a significant group — not simply as members of a homogeneous and self-interested 'elite' — there is increasing interest in them from academics and policymakers. However, as yet, we know little of their distinct economic interests, moral values, political and cultural ideologies, and social aspirations; or how the middle class may be

driving cultural change, not least around gender roles (Cox and Macintyre in press; Spark 2014). In order to inform policy that will keep abreast of these rapid social changes, there is a particular need for research that analyses how the middle classes are reshaping the public sphere of PNG.

Author Notes

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