Rural road network must be improved to boost rural economy

By Joe Harry, School of Natural & Physical Sciences, Department of Sustainable Development, University of Papua New Guinea

Introduction
Papua New Guinea’s economic outlook does not look promising at the moment. However, the Government should consider investing more on rural road networks improvement projects. This has the potential to promote agriculture development, tourism, and other service inputs to boost the local economy, as well as generating government revenue through taxes.

In the past decades, the government has given little attention to improving the rural road network in the country. Poor road network has resulted in 80 percent of the country’s population in the rural areas being cut-off from participating in economic activities and accessing social services.

Furthermore, 97 percent of arable land used under customary tenures are not linked properly through road network. Hence, economic activities in rural areas are taking place at a snail’s pace resulting in low cash flow.

Infrastructure is vital for rural development
Infrastructure development stands out to be an important development component on the Medium-Term Development Plan (MTDP) III and other development documents. However, most of the development in Papua New Guinea (PNG) have been in urban areas. To achieve an inclusive sustainable economic growth as stipulated in the MTDP III, it is necessary to improve road networks in rural areas.

The Key Results Area (KRA) number one on the MTDP III emphasizes on increased revenue and wealth creation whilst the second KRA focuses on quality infrastructure development which is yet to be seen emerging in rural areas. Urban centres appear to benefit more from improvement in social infrastructure such as road networks. Port Moresby has benefited significantly through more investment in roads and other social infrastructures than remote rural areas. For example, in October 2016, Port Moresby City Hall reported that K1.27 billion had been earmarked for road construction in the capital city.

Rural areas remain unattractive to private investors, business houses and other major companies that can bring development and create more economic activities. This is because of poor or lack of good road networks. Poor infrastructure development means high cost of running business in the rural areas of PNG.

Building and maintenance of road networks in PNG has been a great challenge for the government. This is due to difficult geographical terrain, high rainfall all year round and many more. PNG has so far 30,000km – 40, 000km of roads of which approximately 9,000km are considered to be national roads with 40% of this is sealed. More than 68% of the road networks...
from national, provincial and district roads are in deteriorating state and sometimes inaccessible to people living in rural areas. The government’s efforts to link the country with better road networks is still minimal and needs better policies and strategies to ensure that allocated budgets for the construction or maintenance of rural roads are well spent on constructing sustainable and all-weathered roads that can benefit those in the rural areas.

Impact of lack of good road network on economic activities in rural areas

- **Poverty of opportunities**
  Poverty of opportunities entail a lack of access to education, health services and income opportunities. In PNG, poverty of opportunities is primarily rural and is associated with those in communities with poor access to basic services, markets and transportation. Women and children are often hit harder because they cannot easily migrate to cities and towns where the services are.

- **High rate of unemployment**
  There is a high rate of unemployment in the rural areas of PNG. This is because of the deteriorating state of local road networks resulting in a high cost of transport and making it very expensive to operate businesses. Hence, there is less job opportunity created in the rural areas.

- **Law and order issue**
  Law and order issues in rural areas of PNG is closely linked to poor road condition. When there is no road, law enforcers find it difficult to operate in rural areas.

- **Poor road network restricts access to education**
  Poor rural road condition restricts school children from accessing quality education. This is because most of the high schools and secondary schools are located in the main (provincial) centres which are hardly accessible by road transport. Fares for road transport are also expensive for school age children to afford.

- **Difficulty in accessing basic services**
  Poor road conditions hinder the rural population to access basic services such as health care. Basic needs such as medical supplies, school stationaries and other services are also delayed and do not arrive on time at rural communities. Communities that are not connected by any form of road network tends to suffer most.

What the government can do

- Construct all-weather roads and link up different districts and provinces that can benefit from each other economically.
- The Government should consider increasing budget on infrastructure development in the rural areas.
- Other forms of transport should also be considered in rural areas.

Conclusion

Good road network is vital in rural areas to improve local economic growth which in turn improves living standards of the rural population and government revenue. Road networks are like arteries, where an economy functions and links the producers to markets, encourages smooth
operations of local based small and medium enterprises. Although there are many priority areas, increasing Government spending on social infrastructure such as roads will result in sustainable development for the country. It has the potential to promote agricultural development, tourism and other services, which can boost the local economy. Thus, boost the national economy, improve socioeconomic status of rural dwellers and provide more revenue for the government.