

## Sustainable development through customary land management in Papua New Guinea

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### Abstract

Papua New Guinea (PNG) is a nation characterized by immense cultural diversity and deeply entrenched customary land systems. Over 90% of its land is under customary tenure, forming the foundation of identity, social organization, and economic livelihood. While this system preserves cultural autonomy and local ownership, it poses challenges for national development and economic planning. This paper explores how customary land management can support sustainable development in PNG. Using secondary literature, policy analysis, and selected case studies from Morobe, East New Britain, and the Highlands, it examines existing legal frameworks, institutional mechanisms, and practical experiences. The study argues that integrating customary land into formal economic systems through strengthened legal frameworks, capacity-building, and inclusive policies can create a path for equitable and sustainable growth.

**Keywords:** customary land tenure, sustainable development, Papua New Guinea, land management, Incorporated Land Groups (ILGs), land policy

### 1. Introduction

Papua New Guinea (PNG) possesses abundant natural resources and a unique socio-cultural fabric in which land plays a central role. For most Papua New Guineans, land is not merely an economic asset but the basis of identity, spirituality, and social structure. Approximately 90 percent of PNG's land is held under customary tenure (Filer, 2011). While this system protects indigenous ownership and maintains cultural integrity, it also limits the nation's capacity to utilize land for broader development initiatives.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the relationship between customary land management and sustainable development in PNG. It aims to identify how traditional land systems can be integrated into formal economic frameworks without undermining cultural

values. The study also explores challenges, opportunities, and policy mechanisms for strengthening land governance in support of sustainable development goals.

## **2. Literature review**

Customary land tenure in PNG refers to systems of land ownership and management based on traditional laws, oral agreements, and communal inheritance. These systems are recognized under the PNG Constitution and the Land Act (1996), which stipulate that customary land cannot be bought or sold on the open market. This recognition reinforces the importance of cultural and social identity but creates challenges in aligning customary systems with formal economic processes (Larmour, 2002; Anderson & Lee, 2010).

Scholars such as Filer (2006, 2011) and Larmour (2002) argue that the dual system—customary and statutory—requires innovative mechanisms to facilitate development while protecting customary rights. The introduction of Incorporated Land Groups (ILGs) and the Land Registration (Customary Land) Act (2009) represented significant steps toward bridging this gap. However, implementation remains slow, hindered by limited awareness, bureaucratic complexity, and weak institutional capacity (Filer, 2006).

Recent studies highlight successful models in which customary landholders engage in commercial ventures through ILGs, particularly in agriculture, tourism, and renewable energy (Grow PNG, 2025; NEA, 2024). These examples suggest that customary land can serve as a platform for inclusive economic development when supported by transparent governance and community participation.

## **3. Methodology**

This paper employs a qualitative research approach based on a review of secondary data sources, including government policies, academic publications, and case studies. The analysis focuses on three regional examples—the Markham Valley (Morobe Province), East New Britain, and the Highlands—where customary land initiatives have been successfully implemented. The objective is to identify key factors that enable effective land governance and community-based development.

### **3.1 Research design and approach**

The research approach integrates:

- **Document Analysis:** Examination of legislative documents, government policies, provincial development plans, and institutional reports.
- **Literature Review:** Analysis of peer-reviewed academic articles, books, conference papers, and research reports from scholars focusing on land tenure, political ecology, and sustainable development in PNG.
- **Case Study Method:** Comparative analysis of selected examples from Morobe (Markham Valley), East New Britain, and the Highlands region.

This triangulation of sources strengthens the validity and richness of the findings by drawing from multiple perspectives

### **3.2 Data sources and selection criteria**

All data used in the study were obtained from publicly accessible and institutionally archived materials. Secondary sources include:

#### **1. Academic publications**

Works by scholars such as Filer, Larmour, Anderson & Lee, and other researchers writing on customary land tenure, ILGs, and development policy in PNG.

#### **2. Policy and legal documents**

- The Papua New Guinea Constitution
- Land Act (1996)
- Land Groups Incorporation Act (amended 2009)
- Land Registration (Customary Land) Act (2009)
- National and provincial development frameworks relevant to land governance

#### **3. Institutional reports**

These include reports from the National Energy Authority (NEA), Grow PNG, provincial governments, and donor or NGO publications focusing on agricultural development, rural electrification, and eco-tourism.

#### **4. Case studies from provinces**

The three selected regions (Morobe, East New Britain, and the Highlands) were chosen based on the availability of documented initiatives that demonstrate practical engagement with customary land.

The inclusion criteria for all data sources were:

- Relevance to customary land management or sustainable development
- Credibility and reliability (peer-reviewed, officially published, or institutionally verified)
- Clear documentation of processes, outcomes, or policy implications
- Representation of diverse geographic and cultural contexts within PNG

Sources lacking clarity, objectivity, or sufficient documentation were excluded to maintain research integrity.

### **3.3 Case study selection and rationale**

The study focuses on three regional case examples to illustrate how customary land has been mobilized for development within PNG:

1. **Markham valley, Morobe Province** – chosen for its well-documented agricultural land leasing initiatives through ILGs supported by Grow PNG.
2. **East New Britain Province** – selected due to its consistent engagement with eco-tourism and community-based cultural enterprises operating on customary land.

3. **Highlands Region (selected districts)** – included for its renewable energy projects, such as micro-hydro and solar systems, which demonstrate community partnerships on customary land.

These cases were selected because they represent varied economic sectors (agriculture, tourism, renewable energy) and because each case demonstrates different governance arrangements, allowing for a comparative assessment of what factors influence success or limitations in customary land development.

### 3.4 Analytical framework

The analysis was conducted using a **thematic content analysis** approach. This involved:

1. **Coding data** from literature and policy documents to identify recurring themes such as governance, legal mechanisms, community participation, dispute resolution, and economic outcomes.
2. **Comparing case studies** to highlight similarities and differences in how customary land is mobilized.
3. **Synthesizing findings** to identify enabling factors and structural constraints within PNG's customary land system.
4. **Interpreting results** in relation to sustainable development principles, including social equity, environmental stewardship, and economic inclusion.

Themes were reviewed against internationally recognized sustainability frameworks such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), particularly Goal 1 (No Poverty), Goal 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), Goal 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), and Goal 13 (Climate Action).

### 3.5 Limitations of the Study

Several methodological limitations are acknowledged:

- **Dependence on secondary data:** Without primary fieldwork, the study relies on existing interpretations and may not capture emerging or undocumented local realities.
- **Uneven documentation:** Some provinces have more robust reporting than others, which may affect the balance of case studies.
- **Regional variations:** PNG's cultural and land tenure diversity means findings cannot be uniformly generalized across all communities.
- **Policy gaps:** Some legal documents lack updated assessments, limiting the analysis of recent reforms.

Despite these limitations, the triangulation of multiple data sources and the careful selection of well-documented case studies strengthen the credibility and relevance of the findings.

### 3.6 Ethical considerations

Although the study does not involve human participants, ethical research principles were applied, including:

- Respect for indigenous knowledge and customs reflected in the documented materials
- Proper citation and acknowledgement of all authors, institutions, and data sources
- Avoidance of bias by presenting balanced interpretations of challenges and opportunities within customary land management.

#### **4. Challenges of customary land tenure**

Despite its cultural significance, the customary land system presents practical barriers to development. A major issue is the absence of formal documentation and registration, which limits the use of land for investment, collateral, or large-scale infrastructure projects (Larmour, 2002). Disputes over boundaries, inheritance, and ownership further complicate land utilization. Moreover, investor hesitation is widespread, as customary land is often perceived as legally uncertain and risky (Anderson & Lee, 2010).

Institutional constraints, including limited government capacity and inadequate outreach programs, exacerbate these challenges. Consequently, many communities lack access to tools and training necessary for formalizing land ownership and participating effectively in development initiatives.

#### **5. Opportunities and best practices**

Despite these challenges, several legal and institutional reforms have provided pathways for progress. The Land Groups Incorporation Act and the Land Registration (Customary Land) Act (2009) enable landowners to form ILGs, register land voluntarily, and enter contracts while maintaining customary ownership (Filer, 2006). These frameworks empower communities to manage land collectively and engage with external partners.

Successful case examples include the Markham Valley project, where ILGs leased land for agricultural ventures, creating employment and income while preserving customary rights (Grow PNG, 2025). In East New Britain, customary landowners collaborated with tourism operators to develop eco-tourism enterprises that enhance cultural preservation and environmental sustainability (East New Britain Provincial Government, n.d.). Similarly, in the Highlands, the National Energy Authority (2024) documented community-based renewable energy projects that utilize customary land for micro-hydro and solar systems, advancing rural electrification and sustainable livelihoods.

#### **6. Policy implications and recommendations**

To enhance the contribution of customary land to national development, targeted policy interventions are essential:

1. **Capacity building and education:** Implement land literacy programs in local languages to improve understanding of ILG and registration procedures.
2. **Simplification of procedures:** Streamline land registration processes and invest in digital mapping and mobile registration units for rural areas.

3. **Legal safeguards:** Strengthen laws to ensure transparency, equity, and fair benefit-sharing in development agreements.
4. **Inclusive governance:** Promote the participation of women, youth, and marginalized groups in land decision-making forums.
5. **Integrated land information systems:** Develop a national database on customary land to support policy planning and dispute resolution.

These actions can increase investor confidence, reduce conflicts, and promote community empowerment.

## 7. Conclusion

Customary land in Papua New Guinea should be viewed not as a constraint but as a cornerstone for sustainable development. By integrating traditional systems with modern legal and economic frameworks, PNG can achieve inclusive and culturally appropriate development. Strengthening institutional capacity, enhancing legal clarity, and empowering landowners as equal partners in development are crucial for realizing this vision. Customary land, when effectively managed, holds the key to achieving sustainable growth, social cohesion, and cultural preservation in PNG.

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