

Patricia K. Townsend, *The Situation of Children in Papua New Guinea*. Boroko, Papua New Guinea: Papua New Guinea Institute of Applied Social and Economic Research for the Department of Finance and Planning, 1985. Pp. 135. K6.00.

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*The Situation of Children in Papua New Guinea* is a book-length report prepared by the Papua New Guinea Institute of Applied Social and Economic Research (IASER) for the Department of Finance and Planning. Given the enormity of the task, it is a thorough and competent job that presents a realistic view of the present and future needs of Papua New Guinea's children. Townsend divides children into four categories: infants, young children, school-age children, and youth. In each case she first discusses nutrition and health, then education and general

social welfare. She points out that at each of these four broad stages of life there is a shift in the primary environment of the child. In infancy the mother is all important, in early childhood the extended family, in later childhood the community, and finally it can become the province and the nation.

To the question "Why children?" Townsend replies that (1) they need an advocate as they cannot speak for themselves, (2) they are the future, and (3) they are the main beneficiaries of most national and provincial government expenditures. She points out that traditionally the costs and benefits of having children were not extreme whereas in the rapidly changing, unbanizing environment that exists today this must inevitably change. As children under the age of fifteen make up some 43 percent of the population, this is a situation of great importance.

The most difficult decisions to be made have to do with how to divide the responsibility for meeting the needs of children. That is, should it be the family, kin, village, church, or some other? Townsend does not take a position on this, although she does make cogent suggestions on how to expand existing programs and create new ones.

In every chapter there is much discussion of the family. Townsend is fully aware of the variation in circumstances that can exist for New Guinea families. She suggests that in some cases children probably need protection from the ignorance of their families, whereas in other cases there can be entirely unrealistic expectations of the extent to which families might be able to participate in community and school affairs. As fathers are virtually never mentioned in this report, it is not entirely clear to me what is meant by a "family." Interestingly, this is a problem in the totality of Papua New Guinea ethnography. Fathers are always characterized as being distant or absent or uninvolved and so on. At best they are ignored and at worst maligned. Thus when Townsend writes that "Papua New Guineans take pleasure and pride in their children," one cannot help but wonder if this applies to all Papua New Guineans or only females. This is an important issue that needs to be addressed. For example, Townsend reports that some 60 percent of New Guinea husbands are said to sometimes hit their wives, but there is no mention at all if they also hit their children, Townsend is here at the mercy of another curious aspect of New Guinea ethnography—the virtual absence of detailed accounts of Papua New Guinea childrearing. This is another serious shortcoming in the anthropological record of Papua New Guinea, which we can only hope will soon be rectified.

The chapter on "The Needs of Youth" is perhaps the least clear. As Townsend herself points out, the broad definition of youth employed in

Papua New Guinea includes ages twelve to twenty-four. This raises the question of how meaningful or useful the category of “youth” actually is. As youth, according to Townsend, is “the healthiest, best-nourished age group in Papua New Guinea,” it is obvious that their problems lie elsewhere. And, as might be surmised, these problems have to do with education, employment, delinquency, and related matters.

There is a useful appendix summarizing existing policies and legislation for children in Papua New Guinea.

Townsend summarizes by stating the obvious need for policy and planning for children in Papua New Guinea. She offers the volume as a tool with which to begin such discussions. Given the kinds of data that were available to her, the immensity of variation in Papua New Guinea, the difficulties of generalizing, and in many cases the unfortunate lack of information, she has created a very useful tool indeed.