

DISCUSSION PAPER 23-003

# Examining Conflict Dynamics in Papua New Guinea

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# INTRODUCTION

## Gordon Peake

In the great American novel *Moby Dick*, the narrator Ishmael observes that “the mails are very irregular between here and New Guinea. In fact, did you ever hear what might be called regular news direct or indirect from New Guinea?”

Herman Melville’s book is now well over 150 years old, yet Ishmael’s observations still have some ring of truth to them. This is somewhat remarkable in this age of instantaneous communication. Notwithstanding the pathbreaking works of generations of American anthropologists, there is something of a spasmodic quality to information about New Guinea, the second largest island in the world (after Greenland).

This collection of five papers focuses on Papua New Guinea, which occupies the island’s eastern half.<sup>1</sup> They are akin to modern day “mail.” Written in distinctive authorial voices, they provide informed perspectives on a country that the United States is paying increasing attention to, with the focus around issues of conflict and stability.

In 2022, Papua New Guinea was designated as one of five priority countries or regions under the US Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability, a “ten-year, whole-of-government effort to foster peace and long-term stability through integrated diplomacy, development, and security-sector engagement.”

The guidelines accompanying the Strategy emphasize the importance of “learning, data-driven analysis . . . and information-sharing to understand local dynamics, target interventions, and hold actors accountable.” USIP is lending support to this approach with applied research to support US government efforts in each location.<sup>2</sup>

After the administration identified Papua New Guinea as a priority country, the Institute assembled a study group comprised of senior officials and scholars with more than a century’s worth of accumulated experience in the country. Over a three-month period in 2022, the group provided

input to the embassy in Port Moresby as they elaborated the guiding principles for a strategy to support US efforts to increase stability in the country.<sup>3</sup>

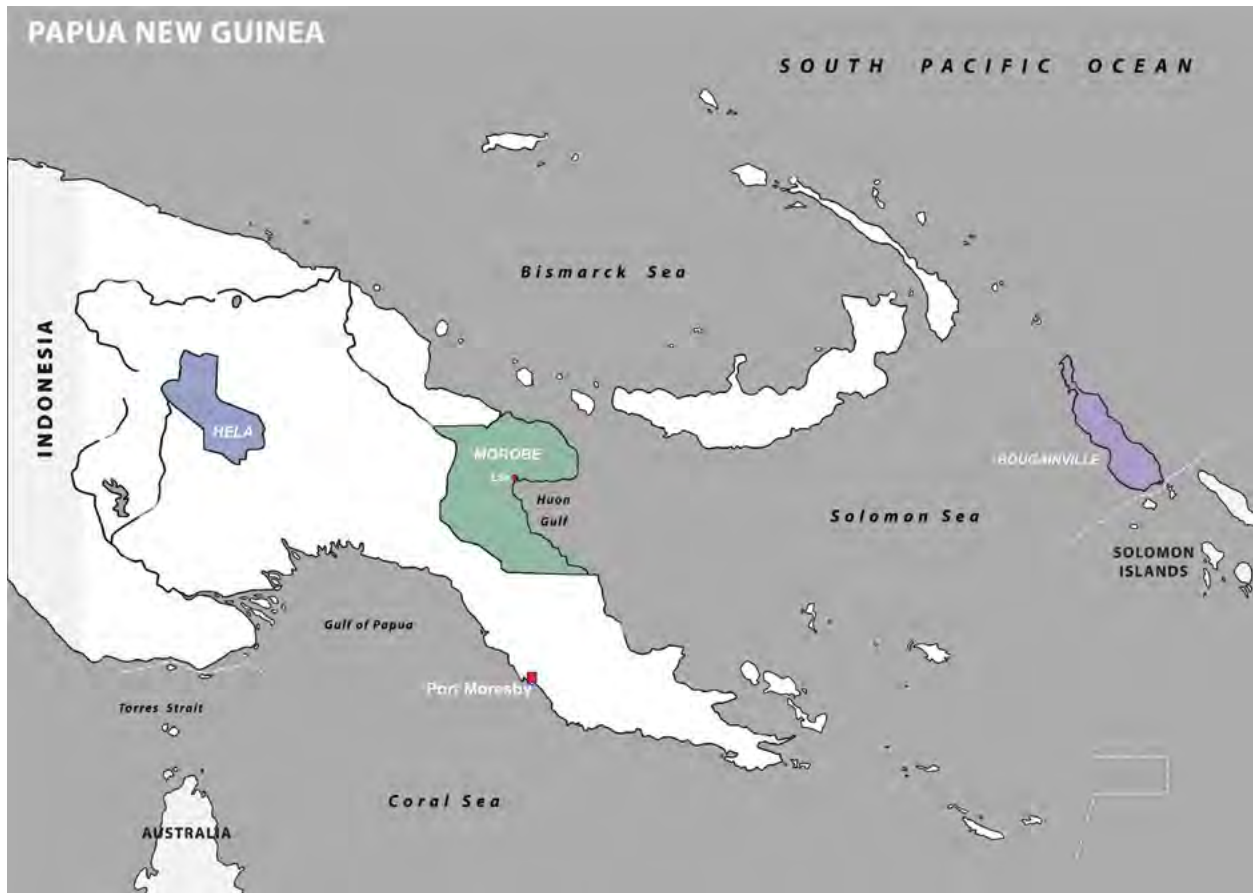
As the specific shape and contours of the US approach for Papua New Guinea became clearer, the Institute commissioned these five papers, which are on topics relevant to areas of emerging focus. Some authors hail from the country; others are expatriate researchers with long experience working there. Like most pieces of correspondence, they blend news that is good and news that is bad. They recount stories of commonplace precarity and reveal tremendous reserves of resilience and cultural strength, as well as areas for hope.

The papers cover the two provinces identified as geographic areas of US focus in the Strategy, as well as three thematic areas of focus.<sup>4</sup>

The two geographically focused papers cover coastal Morobe Province, the country's largest province by population and Papua New Guinea's industrial heart; and Hela Province, located in the Highlands and home to the country's largest resource project (see figure 1). These places are qualitatively different from each other yet share similarities.

Conflict, as it manifests, has few ideological roots. It can be interpersonal, sometimes organized around identity groups, and often involves competition over resources. Its internal logics shift, jump, and evolve over time.

The remaining three papers concentrate on thematic areas to be pursued in the Strategy. These are: tackling the scourge of intimate partner violence, reckoning with the effects of climate change, and meaningfully conducting "consultation." One paper provides new ways of thinking about how to respond to Papua New Guinea's epidemic rates of intimate partner violence. Another lays out the practical impacts of climate change upon conflict, suggesting it is "an amplifier of existing vulnerabilities and drivers of conflict." The final paper elucidates what the commitment to conduct "consultation" means in practical terms within the Melanesian social context of Papua New Guinea. *Consultation* is a word recurrently bandied around as being indispensable for success, yet the term is imprecisely defined. This paper draws on examples from the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, on Papua New Guinea's eastern fringe.



**Figure 1.** Provinces of Hela and Morobe, Papua New Guinea. Adapted from artwork by Rainer Lesniewski/Shutterstock.

The papers cover a mosaic of issues, and the authors explore them in distinctive ways, reflecting their unique vantage points and perspectives. While the papers can be read as stand-alone contributions, three common themes bind them together.

### **Looking beyond the State (“Mind the Gap”)**

The papers suggest that unconventional, unorthodox, and culturally grounded approaches to prevention and peacebuilding are more useful than doing the programming equivalents of form letters, namely co-opting approaches tried elsewhere.

The natural inclination of all states is to find fellow-states to work with to advance their policies and interests. Yet, as each paper shows, the “state” in Papua New Guinea is often more absent than present. When it can be located, it does not always demonstrate interest in tackling

fragility-related issues. As Melissa Demian and Zuabe Tinning observe in their paper on Morobe Province, there is a “gap between the ideal and the real” in terms of how formal governance is meant to work and how it actually operates. While similar observations can, of course, be made about the operation of the state in many countries around the world, it takes on a particular resonance in PNG because of both the extent of the gap and the extensive pretense that frequently occurs in trying to ignore this reality. Variations of this gap are to be found described in each paper. As Michael Main writes about Hela Province, “The relationship between the state and the province of Hela is most accurately described as being one of severe neglect.”

That is not to say there is no good work on fragility-related issues going on. To the contrary. As each paper shows, initiatives are underway that should be lauded. But often, these initiatives are occurring either beyond the boundaries of the formal state or, when they do involve state representatives, entail those representatives acting only in their capacities as individuals. As Miranda Forsyth and colleagues’ paper on productive ways of addressing intimate partner violence shows, the greatest wells of innovation are to be found in sources beyond the state (sometimes through utilizing approaches not traditionally favored by donors). John Cox and Almah Tararia show in their paper that “churches and traditional leaders provide alternative organizational and decision-making institutions at the local level and often enjoy more legitimacy than state institutions.” Accordingly, thinking beyond the state will be important.

## **Not One Place but Many Places**

The papers indicate that thinking of Papua New Guinea as if it were a singular, homogenous nation is as helpful or unhelpful as would be presenting any country in such broad essentialist strokes.

As any resident of Papua New Guinea knows, this country—the approximate size of New England—is a place of tremendous variation in terms of look, feel, and disposition. Within the country is the pulsing capital of Port Moresby, a place of glitzy high-rises funded by the country’s oil and gas wealth, a growing middle class, and low-level shanties known as settlements. Other towns, such as Lae and Tari, provincial capitals of Morobe and Hela Provinces, have, respectively, a small-town and an extended village feel. And even though the “crow flies” distance between Lae and Tari is just

200 miles, there is a huge gap between these two locations in terms of everything from climate to prevailing approaches of managing conflict. Buka, capital of the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, smaller than either Lae or Tari in terms of size, is more different still in terms of approaches to managing and regulating conflict.

That Papua New Guinea is one country comprised of many diverse and complex places is a common theme that emerges from the papers, and this presents both challenges and opportunities for the emergent Strategy. It implies that programming must respond deftly to the environment in which it takes place. Thus, what might work in Buka might not work in Lae and vice versa. This observation echoes the broad observational thrust from many research projects and indicates strongly that working adaptively and adroitly within the prevailing context is the way to proceed. Research in Papua New Guinea conducted by the Development Leadership Program found that “in places where state-citizen relations are limited, adaptive programming approaches that understand and respond to complex ‘sub-national’ political dynamics can lead to positive results.”<sup>5</sup> The Center for Strategic and International Studies recommended that the United States “learn first, program second.” This is all sound advice.

### **Much for Papua New Guinea to Teach the World**

To return to the theme of communication, these dispatches suggest an opportunity for peacebuilders in Papua New Guinea to engage in more regular correspondence with other places afflicted by everyday fragility dynamics—whether in relation to intimate partner violence or conflict based on resources, and whether those resources are monetary or in terms of access to land. There are examples here of original, fresh, and seemingly productive approaches for addressing deep-seated problems of intimate partner violence as well as group conflict resolution. Also, there is a lot to learn from cultural practices within Papua New Guinea. Their emphasis on consultation, discussion, and an egalitarian commitment to shared dialogue can act to either nip conflict in the bud or help resolve it when it arises. Dennis Kuiai, a former commander in Bougainville’s conflict with Papua New Guinea and a present-day peacebuilder, shows that there are lessons from this little-heralded example of a successful peace process that can be shared for secessionist conflicts elsewhere.



Because of its geographical location, Papua New Guinea’s peacebuilders and correspondents with lessons to share are seldom in correspondence with other communities working on similar issues in other locations. When they are, productive engagement occurs within the context of other countries across the Pacific. These papers indicate that there would be utility in linking them with this broader network.

## Notes

1. The western half of the island of New Guinea is part of Indonesia and most familiarly known as West Papua. West Papua is the site of one of the longest-running independence movements in the world.
2. For further information on USIP’s work on fragility and conflict, see [www.usip.org/fragility-conflict](http://www.usip.org/fragility-conflict).
3. The Institute has published commentaries, interviews, and analysis that this group has produced. These can be found at [www.usip.org/regions/asia/papua-new-guinea](http://www.usip.org/regions/asia/papua-new-guinea).
4. PNG is made up of 20 provinces, one autonomous region (Bougainville), and one district (National Capital).
5. The Development Leadership program is an international research initiative that explores how leadership, power, and political processes drive or block successful development.

# **LAE: CITY AT THE CENTER OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA**

**Melissa Demian and Zuabe Tinning**

*Editor's note:*

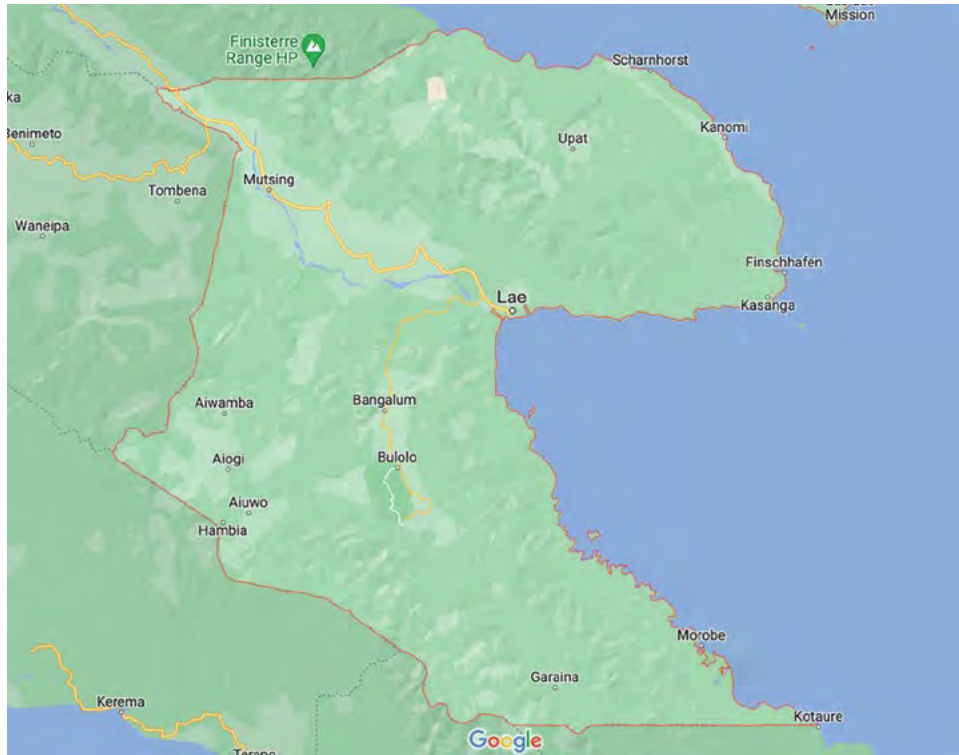
This paper provides historical and personal perspectives of fragility issues in Morobe Province, the largest province in terms of population size, as well as the country's industrial heart and home to Papua New Guinea's second city, Lae.

Clear governance structures are in place in Morobe, but this does not guarantee an effective realization of those structures, leading to an everyday fragility, especially in Lae. Poor resourcing is another factor.

Some of the most promising local initiatives to address fragility are those that might, to non-Papua New Guinean eyes, look unusual. Yet they are the most effective.

## **Lae and Morobe, Lae within Morobe**

Morobe Province is the most populous of the 22 provinces of Papua New Guinea and is located on the north coast of the mainland.<sup>1</sup> Lae is the provincial capital of Morobe (see figure 1). Also, it is the second city of PNG as a whole, serving as its economic engine room by virtue of a deepwater port, road connections to the gold-mining and coffee-growing regions of the Morobe interior and neighboring highlands provinces, and its manufacturing and livestock industries, where “livestock” ranges from poultry to crocodile farming. It is home to the PNG University of Technology, which educates the country's engineers and agricultural scientists, and a collection of Lutheran educational institutions, which at the time of writing are in the process of merging into a planned Lutheran University of Papua New Guinea. Geologically, Lae sits atop a complex fault system<sup>2</sup> that produces frequent small earthquakes and, occasionally, much larger ones, such as the magnitude 7.6 quake that struck the province in September 2022 and caused widespread damage to homes and infrastructure as well as deaths and injuries from landslides and collapsed buildings.



**Figure 1.** Morobe province of Papua New Guinea. Source: Google Maps.

In comparison with the often politically overheated atmosphere of Port Moresby, Lae and its satellite communities are an underrepresented conurbation in assessments of urban life in PNG. Also, Lae’s colonial history is very different from that of the capital, which began as an outpost of British expansion administered via Australia. Morobe, along with the rest of the northern mainland of what is now PNG, was part of the territory of German New Guinea known as Kaiser-Wilhelmsland. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, Lutheran missionaries established stations to convert the Bukawa and Ahi peoples of the Markham Valley. The missionaries were followed by the Deutsche Neuguinea-Kompagnie, which, in 1900, staged an “acquisition” of much of the land on which Lae now sits. That acquisition has had continuing repercussions up to the present day. Following World War I, Germany lost all of its colonial possessions, and German New Guinea became a Mandated Territory administered by Australia. In the 1920s, the discovery of gold in the Wau-Bulolo region of Morobe gave rise to a boomtown phase for Lae, as it became one of the earliest destinations for gold prospectors in PNG.<sup>3</sup> The airstrip built to service the gold fields briefly shot Lae to worldwide fame

in 1937 as the last departure point of Amelia Earhart's ill-fated attempt at global circumnavigation. After a year of occupation by the Japanese military during World War II, Lae and the nearby Salamaua Peninsula were recaptured by Allied forces. The decades following the war saw a steady expansion of Lae's economic significance, culminating in its being granted city status in 1972.

Lae retains something of the flavor of these scrappy, contested, and improvised origins. Already an ethnically mixed area when European colonial interests arrived on the scene, it has since attracted immigrants from across PNG. "All of Papua New Guinea is here," residents of Lae are fond of saying, referring to the fact that the city punches above its weight in terms of the diversity of its population. Alternatively, they may say that Lae is the true center of PNG, an implicit comparison with Port Moresby, whose capital status is an accident of history and politics. Like Moresby, Lae has seen rapid expansion over the past two decades, primarily in the informal settlements extending out along the two main roads leading from the city as people migrate to Lae for education, employment, romance, and adventure.

These settlements account for most of Lae's population, and are home to its low- to middle-income residents. High earners who can afford the stratospheric costs of an unregulated property market live in the city center.<sup>4</sup> Settlement residents, by contrast, are housed in a range of tenancy agreements of greater or lesser formality and security with the owners of the land surrounding the city. These landholders are a mix of customary owners from the original ethnic groups inhabiting the area, descendants of raiding groups from the interior of Morobe Province, and a few entrepreneurial spirits from elsewhere in PNG who have bought state land originally alienated (or not, depending on whom you ask) through the original Neuguinea-Kompagnie acquisition.

In municipal terms, Lae is comprised of two local-level governments (LLGs): Lae Urban LLG and Ahi LLG. Lae Urban has six wards, while Ahi LLG has seventeen wards, of which seven are in Nawaeb Urban LLG within Nawaeb District, a rural part of Morobe. This overlapping district organization reflects how rapidly Lae has grown since its early origins as a gold-rush town, sprawling onto neighboring customary land. As there has been no actual planning for urban expansion into customary lands held by the Ahi landowners, later settlers of this land have clustered into ethnic enclaves from across Morobe Province and PNG. Insecurity of tenancy combined with increasing pressure on

available resources creates and intensifies a social fragility that can erupt into interethnic violence from time to time.

Also, the settlements of Lae are beset by such social issues as high unemployment, a youth bulge that is not matched by opportunities for education or employment,<sup>5</sup> family instability, and mounting problems with substance use and gambling. Teenage girls and young women who become pregnant invariably are removed from education and may be coerced into marriages they would not otherwise have chosen. Teenage boys and young men may join gangs as an alternative to employment that is unavailable or simply uninteresting to them. Small-scale conflict between individuals or families can escalate into actual conflagrations, as when dozens of houses in one ethnic enclave were burned down in 2016. This can occur when smaller fights begin to involve different ethnic groups within a settlement and local community leaders, or police do not intervene soon enough to resolve the conflict.

Beyond the settlements are the nine rural districts of Morobe Province, where almost the entirety of the population lives on their own land held under customary tenure. These rural districts furnish the wide range of agricultural products grown in Morobe, including coffee, copra, cocoa, palm oil, rice, tea, vanilla, and timber. Rural farmers struggle to establish supply chains for their products, however, and are inconsistently supported with mechanisms for downstream processing and exporting of these cash crops.

## **The Role of Government in the Province and the City**

Papua New Guinea has a provincial government system that is somewhat unusual among parliamentary democracies. The member of Parliament (MP) elected to represent an entire province also serves as the governor of that province, while a number of “open” seats represent individual district constituencies within the province. Parliamentary reforms in 1995 devolved a large proportion of provincial budgets directly to MPs, with the aim of quelling regional unrest and calls for secession. The outcome since then has been a now-habitual practice of budget capture by MPs to reward constituencies drawn from specific ethnic and kinship groups with boondoggle projects and

straightforward cash or in-kind transactions for votes. In the meantime, government services and infrastructure have languished to the point of nonfunctionality in some districts.

Political leaders are represented at four levels of the provincial government system. In Morobe Province, that comprises the provincial MP, who is also the provincial governor; 9 district open MPs; 33 local-level government presidents; and 584 ward councillors within each LLG. The provincial governor oversees the 10 districts of the province and has a remit to work in partnership with the district MPs to provide support for policy implementation. In their turn, the district MPs are meant to oversee administration of government policy and development plans in their constituencies through the LLGs and wards. Government funding for projects and basic services is meant to flow from parliamentary budgets to provincial funding to the provinces, and from there to the LLGs and wards. MPs are meant to govern at the national level with an eye to the interests of their constituencies, as in any parliamentary system, while the administrative body of the provincial government executes the MP's orders and decisions. Sometimes this occurs in accordance with a stated development plan, and other times it is more aligned with an MP's personal agenda.

This formal structure represents an ideal relationship between the province and the districts and between the LLG and its wards. In practice, there is frequent disharmony among MPs and their concerns, which can be reflected in disorganization or outright loss of government provisions to local communities. Sometimes churches and NGOs are able to step into the breach of government disinterest, mostly in terms of providing schools or health services, but these efforts are of a patchwork and inconsistent nature.

The “fragility” profile of a province like Morobe, with its large population and significant urban center in Lae, derives in many respects—though by no means exclusively—from this gap between the ideal and the real. The fact that there is a clear governance structure in place does not necessarily translate to an effective realization of that structure. Among the factors contributing to fragility in Morobe are:

- Poor resourcing of key programs in the provincial administration. For example, the Youth Development Council receives little attention from either the national or provincial government, despite an identified “youth” sector in the government programming organization.

- A disconnect between national department sectors and provincial sectors, such as in the law and justice systems. The courts and police departments are meant to come under national functions, while community law and justice needs are meant to fall within the remit of provincial government. The two former departments receive limited support from national government, and there is even less support from the province to the village courts at the LLG and ward levels of government. The village courts were initiated at PNG's independence in 1975 to serve the bulk of the population in matters of civil law.<sup>6</sup> Village courts are used enthusiastically in the settlements around Lae. Although the responsibility of the village courts is to handle a defined range of social issues, magistrates are known also to hear criminal cases that lie outside their jurisdiction and are not referred to the district or national courts.<sup>7</sup>
- Disparities in the delivery of services to communities situated on the boundaries of different municipal entities and provincial districts. These are where most settlements are situated, for example, and often they are deprived of essential utilities and other infrastructure because their location divides responsibility for them between different MPs unsure of who their constituents are.
- About one-third of the land in and around Lae is held under customary tenure by the Ahi people, who are its original inhabitants. These landowners make decisions independently of any planning or zoning policies, and lease their land to in-migrating settlers for income generation. They do not have bylaws to govern either terms of use or lease periods for customary land. Customary land, therefore, sits outside of state control over planning and development without consultation of these landowners.

These issues fall, in theory, within the authority and responsibility of the government at provincial and district levels.

## **Fragility in the Donor Sector**

Donors and the private sector tend to be involved in what might be called matters of everyday fragility. Most donor agencies act through NGOs as their intermediaries, who then create projects to

address determinants of social issues, such as programs on HIV, TB, education, family and sexual violence, and so forth. The NGOs and private-sector programs are effective only if there is an actual relationship with the government and if the government administration has resources both material and human, not to mention the political will, to support the NGO programs.

In many cases, the NGOs themselves turn to community volunteers to run their projects. These volunteers tend to be active members of the community; at this point in the “implementation chain,” there is little to no involvement by state actors. The NGOs and, sometimes, the private sector may report directly to a national department or to various managers within their own organization and not to the district or provincial administrations. Another gap can appear here, where an MOU or MOA may not spell out any obligations of NGOs or private-sector actors to report to the government.<sup>8</sup> In these instances, government bodies have no influence over NGO reporting and are thus hampered from making decisions regarding NGO activities in the province. For their part, many NGOs demonstrate variable levels of commitment to the programs they initiate, often withdrawing after several years of a program’s operation. These factors can produce a chronic non-sustainability of programs that have positive impacts but for a short duration.

Sometimes there is a “relay race” effect, whereby an NGO withdraws from a program it is supporting with the understanding that it will be picked up by another NGO or a government body. At times, this handover process happens smoothly; in other cases, the program becomes incoherent or overstretched and may struggle to continue operating. An example of this is the Family Support Centers (FSC) program in key provincial hospitals, including Angau Memorial Hospital in Lae where the first FSC was established by Soroptimist International in 2003, and then taken over by Médecins Sans Frontières in 2007. These specialist clinics were established to serve the needs of women and children seeking health care and advice following episodes of domestic violence. MSF withdrew its support in 2013, after which some clinics were taken over by UNICEF, and others by the PNG National Department of Health. While most of these clinics are still in operation—although a few are not—they work with uneven levels of staffing, resourcing, and data collection, and are in some cases obliged to meet their commitments by making referrals to other services.<sup>9</sup>



## **Existing Initiatives Addressing Fragility in Morobe and Lae**

The “donorscape” of Lae is far more transient than it is in Port Moresby, where most aid agencies have permanent offices and are thoroughly (some might say fatally) enmeshed in the commercial and political life of the capital. By contrast, Lae is treated as a fly-in, fly-out destination by aid representatives, and its ability to retain donor attention is invariably impacted as a consequence. Projects of various kinds have seen bursts of activity, such as the Justice Services and Stability for Development (JSS4D) program for supporting the law and justice sector; a training and support partnership between the Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary and the Australian Federal Police; and Femili PNG, an NGO that has sought to create a single point of contact for women seeking help for issues around family and sexual violence. All of the foregoing have been funded through various branches of the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade and are guided by its priorities. Other donor bodies, apart from those associated with churches, are thin on the ground in Lae.

Some of the most promising local initiatives to address fragility are those that, to non-Papua New Guinean eyes, may look somewhat unusual. One example of this is an anti-violence program that works with perpetrators as opposed to victims. Tinning has, with an assistance team, implemented a Male Behavior Change Training Program. This program was initiated with support from Population Services International, JSS4D, and the Community Development unit of the Morobe provincial administration. It has had noticeable effects on men’s attitudes and behaviors toward family and community life. Skills are imparted in training sessions to identify how issues arise and how to manage anger and conflicts in men’s relationships, as a form of incremental change to behaviors that result in male violence.<sup>10</sup> The training also covers health and broader gender issues. Many participants report success in managing their relationships following the program, and a number also have been successfully employed in the formal sector.

Despite these successes, this initiative is stuck in a funding gap. Resources are forthcoming only when this and similar local programs happen to align with the temporary attention of a politician or a foreign donor. An evaluation of the training was proposed, but no funding for the evaluation was available, and so trainings occur now only when they are called for by communities who are willing and able to fund them. Tinning is now planning for these trainings to be followed by

other support programs, including employment, education, or SME start-ups, based on participants' needs and interests.

The holistic approach to preventing violence taken in this training program also is reflected in some of the other initiatives the authors have documented in their research on women's strategies of redress for domestic violence and community group formation in 2016–17 and 2019. These include a soup kitchen and a children's homework club set up by a settlement women's association, and a singing and marching group run by a village court magistrate for the women she is trying to assist in their recovery from violence. These homegrown programs operate in some cases through LLG or ward organizational structures and, in others, through church groups and the wider community activities they are engaged in. Initiatives of this kind tend to appear through the efforts of "efficacious personalities" who may hold several positions of authority in their settlements and churches and are, as such, able to marshal multiple networks of support for their ideas. They operate without the material resources or personnel of donor-led programming, but also without the formal bureaucratic structures of programming that can be at odds with how local relationships actually work.

## **Programming Options for the Future**

For a relatively young city, Lae and its satellite communities boast a robust history of self-organizing for political, social, and economic aims.<sup>11</sup> Research conducted by the authors indicates that the impetus to self-organize remains present in the Lae settlements but often appears at such a local scale that it flies under the radar of NGOs and government bodies alike. Addressing issues of fragility that are consistent with the context of Papua New Guinean values around social obligations would mean taking local relationships seriously as the starting point of any successful intervention.

Among the types of initiatives we would like to see more of, or see supported further, are those that ask how relationships in trouble can be supported from multiple angles, thus contributing to longer-term stability in the city and the province. These could include:

- Facilitating negotiations between local government and customary landowners to address long-standing land lease issues through proper urban planning, land use agreements, and

enactment of appropriate seismic building codes. These would help address the problem of housing precarity that most of Lae’s population lives with, and secure the city against infrastructural damage and loss of life caused by major seismic events.

- Fostering the formation of youth associations and mentorship programs and their engagement in wider community development activities. This would address the issue of developing forms of peer-group solidarity other than gangs, embed young people in their communities through intergenerational relationships beyond families that may have failed them, and give them ways of mapping out their futures that put the lives they would like to lead within reach.
- Working with the private sector to fund educational and vocational programs, especially in technical institutions, followed by an employment track for high-performing graduates. As with the foregoing option, this one would establish a realistic connection between what businesses need and what young people want, which is jobs that pay good wages and have social esteem attached to them. A current project of the Lae City Authority, for example, aims to create jobs for the city’s youth, such as “road maintenance, city beautification programs and waste management.”<sup>12</sup> This type of initiative will certainly create jobs, but for one thing it is clearly aimed only at young men; and for another it is unlikely to deliver either the wages or the respect that skilled jobs in the private sector can.
- Developing programs to keep pregnant girls and young women in education, or return them to education, through childcare schemes and support with the double burden of educational and maternity costs. The channeling of girls out of education and into marriage at very young ages—with no options for returning to education or entering formal employment following the birth of their children—represents one of the most significant human losses to the city, the province, and the country as a whole. A sustained intervention into the experience of girls and young women facing early pregnancy by keeping them in education would be nothing short of transformative for hundreds if not thousands of women in Morobe.

The common thread in programming opportunities of these kinds is that they have the potential to address intimate social issues through “big picture” interventions, and vice versa. Whether people

are recent in-migrants to Lae or grew up in the urban environment, there often can be a disconnect between simply living in the city and actually making a livelihood there. An inability to realize the latter is among the main root causes of fragility for both individuals and their communities. Effective interventions would recognize both that Lae will only continue to grow as the magnet conurbation of Morobe Province and that nuanced approaches are required to ensure that growth can be made to support the flourishing of people’s lives in the city.

## Notes

1. The province counted a population of 674,810 people in the 2011 national census.
2. Phil R. Cummins and Hadi Ghasemi, “Not If, but When: Unless Papua New Guinea Prepares Now, the Next Big Earthquake Could Wreak Havoc in Lae,” *The Conversation*, July 3, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/not-if-but-when-unless-papua-new-guinea-prepares-now-the-next-big-earthquake-could-wreak-havoc-in-lae-185708>.
3. Ian Willis, *Lae: Village and City* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1974).
4. Two-bedroom apartments in the “formal housing” area of central Lae currently rent for upward of USD 1,500 per month, a cost that far outstrips any but executive-level wages in the country.
5. While the national unemployment rate is currently reported at just 2.75 percent, this does not capture the fact that much of the rural population of PNG make their livelihoods through a combination of subsistence agriculture and cash cropping rather than waged employment. In the towns and cities, a different picture emerges, with figures as high as 60 percent of young adults living without jobs. Gedion Timothy, “Papua New Guinea Struggles against Youth Unemployment, Poverty,” *Development Aid* (blog), April 9, 2021, [www.developmentaid.org/news-stream/post/88266/papua-new-guinea-youth-unemployment](http://www.developmentaid.org/news-stream/post/88266/papua-new-guinea-youth-unemployment).
6. Michael Goddard, *Substantial Justice: An Anthropology of Village Courts in Papua New Guinea* (Oxford: Berghahn Books, 2009).
7. Melissa Demian, *Grassroots Law in Papua New Guinea* (Canberra: ANU Press, forthcoming).
8. A Memorandum of Understanding or Memorandum of Agreement is by now a ubiquitous feature of governmentality in Papua New Guinea. Few initiatives can proceed without documents of this kind.
9. Kate Butcher, Jo Kaybryn, Katherine Lepani, Moale Vagikapi, and Lucy Walizopa, *Independent Formative Evaluation of Family Support Centres in Papua New Guinea*, IOD PARC Australasia for UNICEF, 2016, [www.unicef.org/png/reports/independent-formative-evaluation-family-support-centres-papua-new-guinea](http://www.unicef.org/png/reports/independent-formative-evaluation-family-support-centres-papua-new-guinea).
10. Nayahamui Rooney, Miranda Forsyth, Joshua Goa, Dunstan Lawihin, and Dora Kuir-Ayius, “Thinking Incrementally about Policy Interventions on Intimate Partner Violence in Papua New Guinea: Understanding ‘Popcorn’ and ‘Blanket,’” *Culture, Health & Sexuality* (2022), DOI: 10.1080/13691058.2022.2103736.
11. R. Adams, “City and Village: The Ahi Response,” in *Micronationalist Movements in Papua New Guinea*, edited by R. J. May (Political and Social Change Monograph 1, Research School of Pacific Studies, Australian National University, 1982), 207–45; John Lucas, “Lae—A Town in Transition,” *Oceania* 42, no. 4 (1972): 260–75.
12. See <https://lca.gov.pg/community-programs/urban-youth-employment-program/>.

# HELA

## Michael Main

### *Editor's note:*

This paper provides perspectives on fragility dynamics in Hela Province. Located in the country's highlands, Hela is Papua New Guinea's most recently established province and is among its lowest ranked in terms of development indicators.

This paper employs the methodology used by the Fund for Peace in compiling its Fragile States Index and shows the weakness and large-scale absence of state institutions within the province. Understanding cultural factors among the Huli—the people of Hela—is important for understanding fragility dynamics within the province.

An extensive network of motivated grassroots expertise exists that could be better utilized.

## **Introduction**

This paper has been prepared for the US Institute for Peace to assist in its engagement with Papua New Guinea and, specifically, Hela Province. This paper comprises three main parts: an introduction to Hela Province itself, an analysis of the fragility dynamics that exist in Hela Province, and an overview of local capacity and grassroots efforts to improve the situation in Hela.

### ***Background to the Papua New Guinea Highlands Provinces***

The Independent State of Papua New Guinea is comprised of 20 provinces, the National Capital District of Port Moresby, and the Autonomous Region of Bougainville. Each province serves as a political and administrative division, each has its own governor and provincial government, and these are further divided into districts and then local-level government areas. This system is a legacy of the Australian colonial administration, which governed the former British territory of Papua from 1906, and later of the former German colony of New Guinea from 1920.<sup>1</sup>

### *The Formation of Hela Province*

Hela Province is located on the southern side of the Central Highlands Range. Hela is the newest of the Highlands provinces, having come into existence in 2012, carved out of Southern Highlands Province after a long political campaign that had its origins in the cultural identity of its Huli-speaking population.

Although PNG is often observed as the most culturally and linguistically diverse population of any nation on earth, Hela is unusual in that it is remarkably unified, both linguistically and in terms of cultural identity. PNG, with its 800 or so different languages and 22 administrative regions, remains a contested and difficult system to govern.

Hela is the name of the mythological apical ancestor for all Huli people. The Huli belief is that Hela, who was a pre-human spirit ancestor, had four sons and one daughter. These children were named Huli, Obena, Duguba, Duna, and Wana Hewa. In brief, these five children of Hela each settled in a different location. Huli settled in the area near present-day Tari, the province's administrative capital, and this location is understood to be the center from which all Huli people began to spread. It is important to understand that, prior to the 1930s, the Huli population and their neighbours were completely unknown to the outside world. Huli themselves were not aware of the existence of humanity beyond the neighboring groups with which they conducted trade. According to Huli, the other children of Hela settled in different parts of the highlands and are the origin of those neighboring groups. Huli viewed themselves as being at the center of a trading network (which they were) and as the custodians of cosmological and ritual knowledge that bound together the entire world. From a Huli point of view, it never really made sense for them to be subsumed within a larger Southern Highlands Province.

For Huli, the concept of order, of having society correctly bound together rather than unraveled and disorderly, is of fundamental importance.<sup>2</sup> It is disorder that is at the source of illness and conflict, and the recognition of Hela as a separate province was viewed as key to securing a prosperous future for the Huli people. The desire for the formation of a separate Hela Province became more intense after Hela's oil and gas reserves started to be exploited during the 1980s. The PNG LNG project, managed by Exxon Mobil, brought the issue to a head. During the 2000s, as the PNG

LNG project started to become a reality, Huli leaders threatened the existence of the project unless a separate Hela Province was formally established.<sup>3</sup> Finally, in 2012, they got their wish.

Hela Province covers an area of 10,498 square kilometers and has a population well in excess of 250,000, according to PNG's last census (in 2011), and possibly exceeds 500,000. The landscape consists of a series of fertile mountain basins surrounded by mountainous limestone peaks. Traditionally, Huli lived in scattered households rather than villages, and the difficult terrain has always made the collection of census data very difficult. There has not been an attempt at official census collection since 2011.<sup>4</sup> The current prime minister of PNG, James Marape, is a Huli and was born in the provincial capital, Tari.

## **Fragility Dynamics of Hela Province**

To provide an outline of the fragility dynamics of Hela Province, I follow the methodology used by the Fund for Peace in compiling its Fragile States Index, and apply the same indicators used by the index to structure this report. The Fragile States Index takes an agnostic approach to cultural dynamics, so these are not specifically included in its methodology. For Huli, cultural factors play an important role in understanding the fragility dynamics of Hela. Accordingly, I include some of these cultural factors in the fragility analysis below.

## **Cohesion Indicators**

### *Security Apparatus*

The security apparatus of the state is weak in Hela. The system is chronically underfunded. It is also the case that the civilian population vastly outguns the entire PNG police force and army combined.<sup>5</sup> The only properly funded police units are those deployed in the protection of the assets of the PNG LNG project. During times of high conflict, the army has been deployed to ensure that the main road through the province, which connects the PNG LNG Project, is kept open. Deployment of the army has not always gone well, and on a couple of occasions, the army has been forced to retreat when it has engaged with the heavily armed local population. This occurred in 2018 when landowners

attacked ExxonMobil's camp at Angore. The army was deployed but forced to retreat, and the camp was ransacked and set on fire. In December 2015, two soldiers were killed when they tried to intervene in a dispute near the Komo airfield. The army was withdrawn from Komo after that, but it has been redeployed to Tari on several occasions since. In October 2021, a soldier was shot and killed in Hela, prompting an increase in the deployment of troops to Tari. This deployment was directly linked to the PNG LNG project, with the defense force chief stating: "Hela hosts a key LNG project, and it is in all our interests to ensure security is established and enforced."<sup>6</sup>

### ***Factionalized Elites***

Huli social organization is extremely complex and fluid. There is no centralized leadership structure, and there are hundreds of clan groups that cross-cut and interconnect across the landscape. Leadership is based largely on individual ability and ambition and is often contested. Traditionally, Huli had no chiefs, and it was not until 1989, during the drilling of a gas-exploration well by BP, when a drilling supervisor gave a hardhat with the word *Chief* on it to a local senior landowner that Huli started labeling themselves with that title. Land boundaries between clans is a highly contested affair, and conflict often breaks out between two individuals in a land dispute. Conflict between individuals can escalate, and those individuals can, in certain instances, each raise a small legion of supporters to assist them. These conflicts can be deadly, involving major gun battles and razing homes, schools, and any and all infrastructure associated with the opposing side.<sup>7</sup> Disputes can take years or decades to resolve, and almost the entire landscape is haunted by either unresolved or active conflict.<sup>8</sup> Political elites sometimes garner support by arming their supporters and assisting them in their disputes. Police, who have clan ties themselves, may sell ammunition and, sometimes, weaponry to their clansmen.<sup>9</sup>

### ***Group Grievance***

Conflict between groups has been a constant feature of Huli life for centuries, just as warfare was the norm between political units of Europe. Reports from early encounters with the Huli population during the 1930s tell of a landscape marked out by trenches and high walls built primarily for defense,



and this is still largely the case today. Usually, disputes are over land, but the subject of disputes has expanded to include a much broader range of claims. Disputes can be incredibly complex because they often involve very detailed historical claims to ancestry, land occupation, and land use. Group formation and identity, the Huli social organization, is a deeply complex topic beyond the scope of this report but is vital for any understanding of how disputes form and play out.<sup>10</sup> People will become involved in fights because of obligations to kin and friendships, and because the favor will be returned. During the recent elections, and also for previous elections, grievances between rival political candidates have been sources of armed conflict between their supporters. Also, there is a generational shift such that historical knowledge is not held by the younger generations.<sup>11</sup> Furthermore, disputes often are unable to be resolved through argument and appeals to genealogical knowledge because they are increasingly based not on genealogical claims to land but on more prosaic concerns, such as a stolen smartphone. This is more the case in urbanized areas, especially Tari. Having said that, it is still also the case that most fights are about other, unresolved fights.<sup>12</sup>

## **Economic Indicators**

### ***Economic Decline and Poverty***

The economic situation in Hela Province is dire. The perception of poverty dramatically increased after 2014 when the construction phase of the PNG LNG project was completed and the production phase began.<sup>13</sup> Construction jobs were lost, and people started waiting for royalty payments that never came.<sup>14</sup> The province is among the least developed and most neglected in PNG yet is responsible for a large proportion of PNG's resource wealth.<sup>15</sup> Many people are without even basic services, and the province lacks much of the basic infrastructure on which to build an economy.

### ***Uneven Development***

Stark inequalities exist between those who have been able to benefit from resource wealth and the vast majority who have not. Well-educated elites and people with business interests and ties to the business and political elite of the country have been able to prosper.

### ***Human Flight and Brain Drain***

Elites who have been able to prosper from resource wealth and those who are well educated tend to move out of the province to live in Port Moresby. There are few opportunities to invest capital in Hela Province, partly because of the levels of armed conflict and partly because of the lack of infrastructure such as roads, power supply, and so on.

## **Political Indicators**

### ***State Legitimacy***

It would be tempting to suggest that the state would have no legitimacy whatsoever in Hela Province if the current prime minister of PNG were not from Hela himself. The relationship between the state and the province of Hela is most accurately described as being one of severe neglect. Political corruption is rife, and during the last election campaign, vote rigging was even filmed by the perpetrators and published on Facebook. During the 2017 elections, the current prime minister, James Marape, won his seat of Tari-Pori based on what observers from the Australian National University noted was a voter turnout of 109 percent.<sup>16</sup>

### ***Public Services***

A severe lack of public services is by far the most egregious development problem in Hela. In 2016, the health system of the entire province was taken over by the Oil Search Foundation, a nonprofit foundation set up by the resources company. Much road construction over the years also has been undertaken by Oil Search (which, in the intervening years, has been acquired by the Australian oil and gas company Santos) via tax-credit schemes. People decry the lack of a standard list of basic services, including health care, education, roads, power supply, clean water supply, and law and order, including police and judiciary. In many parts of the province, these services are simply nonexistent. Everywhere, they are substandard.<sup>17</sup>

## *Human Rights and Rule of Law*

The situation in Hela is unusual in that the state has limited power to commit human rights abuses in the province. The main feature is neglect rather than unwanted intervention. Neglect is the basis for state illegitimacy. Rule of law is extremely weak, and human rights concerns impact those who are not involved in conflict but suffer its consequences. In Hela Province, the state is fragile to the extent that it barely exists at all beyond the major towns.

## **Social Indicators**

### *Demographic Pressures*

The population of Hela Province has grown dramatically over the past few decades. During the 1970s, the Huli population was estimated to be around 80,000. In 2011, it was estimated to be around 250,000; and in 2019, the Global Data Lab estimated Hela's population to exceed 500,000. However, no census has been conducted since 2011, and it is very difficult to put a reliable figure on the population size. Many people are born and die without ever being registered. Life expectancy is low, and the population is young. The increased population size puts pressure on land resources. There has been a process of urbanization in Tari, and there still is plenty of highly fertile land available for agriculture.

The main problem is that people have nothing to do. Lack of infrastructure means there is limited access to agricultural markets outside the immediate area. There are very few prospects for young people, unless they are well educated with kinship connections to opportunities outside the province. There are some who are fortunate and many who are not. The region is susceptible to periodic drought and flood events, and these can impact food supply. This is especially the case with drought. The last major drought was in 2015–2016, when the World Food Program intervened to supply emergency relief to remote parts of the province. Also, the region is susceptible to earthquakes and landslides, and the state has limited capacity to assist when disaster events occur.

### ***Refugees and IDPs***

Internal displacement of people is a huge and urgent problem for Hela Province. Warfare often results in many people having to flee conflict zones and seek refuge in other parts of the province, and this situation can last for many years. The Displacement Tracking Matrix has identified 13,666 people in Hela Province internally displaced because of violent conflict during the recent election period during July and August 2022.<sup>18</sup> Often it is the case that a local school will start a new school year with dramatically reduced class sizes because so many families have had to flee violence and direct threats to their lives. This is largely a product of how conflict is structured culturally, with blood relatives automatically classified as legitimate targets regardless of whether or not they are involved in the dispute.<sup>19</sup> People's houses also may be burned and their crops destroyed during conflict. There are many people who cannot move from their own areas lest they cross into "enemy" territory. This is the case even in the middle of Tari township, which has been in a state of periodic conflict between certain groups for several years.<sup>20</sup>

### ***Trauma***

The issue of trauma is an indicator not considered by the Global Fragility Index but hugely important for Hela Province. Nearly the entire population has been exposed to the horrendous realities of violent conflict, and intergenerational trauma is a major driver of fragility in Hela. Many people grow up severely damaged by these events, angry, and with no future to think about, with nothing but a gun to demonstrate their worth. In a previous research project, I interviewed people who chose to be hired gunmen simply because they were HIV-positive and felt outcast and that their lives had no meaning.<sup>21</sup> I took cover from bullets being fired by children who, despite the corruption and neglect they suffer, should otherwise be in school holding pens. This is a deeply traumatized society, its fragility fundamentally a function of its poverty.

## **Cross-Cutting Indicators**

### ***External Intervention***

The security issues in Hela Province make it very difficult for external actors to operate. Organizations such as the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) have been running small programs for several years, but it is very difficult for them to have the type of transformational impact needed. The medical charity MSF operated in the Tari hospital for eight years, until 2016; however, this organization is not a development organization. Its role is to provide medical treatment to people in a conflict zone rather than build local capacities. MSF pulled out when the resource company Oil Search (taken over by Santos in 2021) assumed the running of the entire Hela provincial health system, and MSF staff were replaced by Voluntary Services Overseas. Oil Search had been closely involved in providing development assistance to the province for many years, although this was propelled largely by the personality and drive of its former managing director Peter Botten. Still, there is no doubt that Oil Search has contributed hugely to the provision of health services in the province.

ExxonMobil has a different model. It has not assumed the running of the entire provincial health system as Oil Search did in 2016. ExxonMobil has intervened on the ground in various ways, such as helping to fund a small health center, providing school desks, funding agricultural projects, and developing the local rugby team. It is not a development organization and does not purport to be one. Their position aligns with landowners in this respect. The people are more inclined to blame the state and its corruption for the lack of benefits from the project rather than the company itself.

Currently, the UNDP Joint Highlands Program runs some programs in Hela Province, such as peace and development workshops and agricultural projects, which helps some people earn an income and make improvements to their lives. This is relatively small in scale.<sup>22</sup> Also, missionaries have made important contributions to the province since they first arrived in the 1950s. However, the church has far less influence and far fewer resources compared to what it had under the former Australian administration.

Police operate under the terms of a Memorandum of Understanding with Exxon Mobil that sets out the interface “in relation to the security of the project.”<sup>23</sup> The terms of the MOU are not universally understood. The police mobile squads assigned to protect these assets are referred to locally as the LNG police, notwithstanding that this is not their formal role. I interviewed several of these “LNG police” for previous research, and they were quite terrified of the local population. Officers told me directly that they had no intention of risking their lives in defense of the PNG LNG project against the landowners because it was obvious to them that the landowners had not benefited from the project. Yet it also is the case that the landowners do not wish the PNG LNG project to be destroyed. From the outset, the promises made to landowners by the politicians of the day were massively inflated. Speeches from political leaders that laid out ambitious plans for the province have not coordinated with reality.<sup>24</sup> The failure of this project to deliver on even the most elementary promises semaphored by leaders is a driver of fragility in Hela.

## **Reasons for Optimism**

There exists in Hela Province an extensive network of grassroots expertise that can be utilized, and also the motivation to work hard at improving the situation. It should be stressed that most people do not fight, and the province is burdened by the actions of a minority of heavily armed men. Even those who are involved in armed conflict generally do so because social and cultural conditions give them few other options. The NGO Young Ambassadors for Peace has had some success in resolving entrenched conflict situations.<sup>25</sup> All over the province, there are good leaders doing their best to try to bring about peace. Some politicians have organized gun amnesties, and there is a general desire to rid the province of weapons.<sup>26</sup> The first problem always has been one of resourcing, and not too far behind that is the problem of commitment. Any intervention needs to go the long haul in Hela, and temporary programs will generate only temporary solutions. It will be possible to disarm Hela only when the logic of gun possession has been replaced by a logic of developmental change, material progress, and the realization of a better future. The second problem is one of macro-scale development, which is what the PNG LNG was supposed to deliver. Hela Province exists on paper but still

needs to be built. It is not possible to develop an economy without a suitable road network, a power supply, and an absence of personal security. The way to reduce fragility in Hela is to construct a desirable and achievable economic and developmental future for the province and its people.

## Notes

1. The Australian Pacific Territories of Papua and New Guinea were divided into district administrations, and these became provincial administrations after Papua New Guinea's independence in 1975. Originally, the entire Central Highlands range was administered as Central Highlands District. This range, which forms the mountainous spine of PNG's main island, comprises just 14 percent of PNG's total landmass but contains around 40 percent of PNG's population. In 1951, the Central Highlands District was divided into the Eastern Highlands and the Western Highlands Districts, both located in the former Territory of New Guinea, and the Southern Highlands District, located in the former Territory of Papua.
2. The first attempt at the formation of Hela Province was made in 1974, when Andrew Wabiria, the member for Koroba-Lake Kopiago, moved a motion in the PNG House of Assembly for the creation of a separate Hela Province. Calls for the formation of Hela Province had been heard since the 1960s, when the Hela Gimbu Association was formed. *Gimbu* is a Huli word that means "join" or "bind together."
3. From the Papua New Guinea *Post-Courier*, "Do Not Downplay" issue (January 7, 2005). A copy is on file with the author.
4. The 2011 census reports a total population of 249,449.
5. Prior to the 1990s, guns were uncommon in Hela, and bows and arrows were still commonly in use. Based on interview data I collected in the field, guns came into greater use following the 1992 elections. This violent period saw fierce and politically motivated fighting between people from Tari and the nearby town of Nipa. The trade of arms into the PNG highlands more broadly is a debated topic and difficult to research. Some have been traded across the border with Indonesia. Some have made their way from Australia. Many are the same type as is issued to the PNG police and military.
6. "1,000 Soldiers to Be Based in Hela to Keep Peace, Stability, Toropo," *The National*, Port Moresby, October 12, 2021, [www.thenational.com.pg/1000-soldiers-to-be-based-in-hela-to-keep-peace-stability-toropo/](http://www.thenational.com.pg/1000-soldiers-to-be-based-in-hela-to-keep-peace-stability-toropo/).
7. In October 2016, following an outbreak of warfare near Komo, I traveled with the manager of the local mission school and health center documenting dozens of burned houses and destroyed gardens. A film crew from the ICRC arrived, and we took them around to collect footage and interviews for the short documentary film *Tribal Conflict in Papua New Guinea | On the Frontline*, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=wo4uf-fXsUk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=wo4uf-fXsUk).
8. The pattern of conflict across the province is so complex and nebulous that it would be impossible to map. Conflicts are traditionally resolved through a lengthy process of compensation payments mediated by clan "big men" leaders and "middle men" with no ties to either side in the dispute. However, it also is the case that conflicts can reemerge even after the dispute appears to have been resolved. Andrew Kobylinski, "Forgotten Conflicts 2022: Tribal Violence in Papua New Guinea," *Australian Institute of International Affairs*, March 14 2022, [www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/forgotten-conflicts-tribal-violence-papua-new-guinea/](http://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/forgotten-conflicts-tribal-violence-papua-new-guinea/).
9. In 2020, PNG's police minister stated that PNG police are involved in firearms smuggling, along with drug running and land theft. Ben Doherty, "Papua New Guinea Police Accused of Gun Running and Drug Smuggling by Own Minister," *The Guardian*, September 18, 2020, [www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/18/papua-new-guinea-police-accused-of-gun-running-and-drug-smuggling-by-own-minister](http://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/sep/18/papua-new-guinea-police-accused-of-gun-running-and-drug-smuggling-by-own-minister).
10. Several Huli scholars, including myself, have made various contributions toward describing Huli social organization. A Huli individual will hold simultaneous claims to several different portions of land in different parts of the province. These are rights to land occupation and use and are based on a hierarchical system whereby a male will have primary rights to his father's land, secondary rights to his mother's land,

and tertiary rights to land that a friend has permitted him to use. Land occupation for a long period of time tends to increase rights to land, and all land claims are subject to genealogical recall and historical accounts of ancestral claims. This system is highly susceptible to interpretation and constant disagreement over historical truths.

11. Traditionally, Huli genealogical history was taught to boys by their fathers in the men's house. This detailed body of knowledge is of little relevance to younger generations, and the social structures that used to support this traditional lifestyle mostly no longer exist. Young people want education, meaningful employment, and a better future for themselves.
12. Robert Glasse, the first anthropologist to study Huli, observed during his fieldwork in the 1950s that "the majority of Huli wars end inconclusively." Robert Glasse, *Huli of Papua: A Cognatic Descent System* (Paris: Mouton, 1968).
13. Expectations that the PNG LNG project would bring "desperately needed services, roads, power, jobs and economic growth to the region" were "perilously high" prior to the project's commencement. Jo Chandler, "Papua New Guinea's Resource Curse," *The Monthly*, September 2018, [www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2018/may/1525096800/jo-chandler/papua-new-guinea-s-resource-curse#mtr](http://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2018/may/1525096800/jo-chandler/papua-new-guinea-s-resource-curse#mtr).
14. This resulted in threats to shut down the project and actual disruption of the project on a number of occasions. I was present when ExxonMobil's facility at Hides was blockaded in 2016 due to the failure of the state to recognize landowners and distribute royalty payments. "Stand-Off in Hela over Royalties," *PNG Report*, [www.pngreport.com/png/news/1111390/stand-off-in-hela-over-royalties](http://www.pngreport.com/png/news/1111390/stand-off-in-hela-over-royalties).
15. According to the Global Data Lab, Hela Province has the lowest Gross National Income per Capita of any province in PNG, and this has been consistently the case since 1990. The PNG LNG project made no impact, according to this indicator. See <https://globaldatalab.org/shdi/table/lgnic/PNG/?levels=1+4>.
16. This is according to the Australian National University Department of Pacific Affairs, "2017 Papua New Guinea General Elections Observation Report," 2018, Canberra, [https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/uploads/2019-04/png\\_report\\_hi\\_res.pdf](https://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/sites/default/files/uploads/2019-04/png_report_hi_res.pdf).
17. The lack of basic services and subsequent impact on levels of violence in Hela Province is documented in the recent report by Conciliation Resources, "Conflict Challenges and Opportunities for Building Peace in Hela Province, Papua New Guinea," [www.c-r.org/our-work-in-action/exploring-opportunities-peace-hela](http://www.c-r.org/our-work-in-action/exploring-opportunities-peace-hela).
18. The International Organisation for Migration's Displacement Tracking Matrix has identified 13,666 peoples in Hela Province internally displaced as a result of violent conflict during the recent election period between July and August 2022, [https://displacement.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11461/files/reports/IOM\\_PNG\\_Highlands\\_Violence\\_2022\\_DTM\\_Report\\_1.pdf](https://displacement.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbd11461/files/reports/IOM_PNG_Highlands_Violence_2022_DTM_Report_1.pdf).
19. The Huli term *halene tapa*, meaning "eight generations," refers to the tradition where anyone who is a relative from four generations on each of his father's and mother's sides automatically becomes a legitimate target of war.
20. There has been an ongoing dispute over the Tari airport land for several years, and this has erupted into gun battles adjacent to the airstrip on several occasions. Whenever this happens, the airport is closed, and Hela is cut off from access by air for several days or weeks.
21. One interviewee for another research project told me, "I don't care because I have a virus in me and I can go and die because my relatives are going to get compensation from the tribe where I go and support and fight for them."
22. For example, a recent UNDP initiative has been the supplier of solar lighting equipment to a community impacted by violent conflict. One of the stated benefits is to enable women to continue with their sewing at night. See <https://papuanewguinea.un.org/en/183993-peace-initiative-benefits-local-population-and-service-providers-hela-province>.
23. The Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary operate under the terms of a Memorandum of Understanding that "sets out [the] interface with the RPNGC in relation to security for the Project." According to the MOU, [Exxon Mobil] offers "support such as transport, fuel, lodging and stipends for the police away from their normal work locations." The company "encourage(s) the PNG Government to address security threats in areas adjoining [its] operations without directly assigning public security forces to the Project or its personnel, facilities and operations." Complete details of the MOU are available at <https://www.pnglng.com/About/safety-security-health/Security>.



24. I have an audio recording of a speech at the Umbrella Benefits Sharing Agreement meeting for the PNG LNG project led by the late Hela provincial governor Andisen Agiru that I refer to here: <https://press-files.anu.edu.au/downloads/press/n7584/pdf/ch12.pdf>.
25. The UNDP in PNG profiles some of this work here: <https://papuanewguinea.un.org/en/95227-women-leading-peacebuilding-hela-province>.
26. See <https://emtv.com.pg/more-than-70-guns-handed-over-to-joint-security-force-in-hela/>. Generally, guns handed over during these amnesties are poor-quality homemade shotguns or other unserviceable weapons.

# **THE “HARM-SCAPE” AND THE “SUPPORT-SCAPE” FOR BOTH MEN AND WOMEN IN REGARD TO INTIMATE PARTNER VIOLENCE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA**

**Miranda Forsyth, Joshua Goa, Dora Kuir-Ayius, Dunstan Lawihin, and Nayahamui Rooney**

*Editor’s note:*

This paper provides new ways of thinking about responses to intimate partner violence.

Rates of intimate partner violence (IPV) are at epidemic levels in Papua New Guinea, causing widespread misery and hindering development. The prevailing response is heavily state-centric and punitive in focus. This paper proposes refocusing analysis on the multiple harms within which IPV is experienced and the varied sources of support for those who have been harmed. To that end, it introduces the concept of *harm-scapes and support-scapes* within which both men and women experience harm and support in different ways. Seen in this way, both harms and supports are multifaceted and entangled and involve community, family, and church as well as the state.

The paper shows how this reality requires a multilayered response that moves between these “scapes” or spaces—navigating between reducing harm while simultaneously strengthening support and seeking forms of accountability that are important to survivors of violence.

## **Introduction**

IPV is at epidemic levels in Papua New Guinea, causing widespread misery and hindering development. It occurs and is experienced within complex “harm-scapes”—a proliferation and intermingling of both old and new harms—and “support-scapes”—the entangled array of actors and institutions that work toward preventing IPV and other forms of violence. Men as well as women live within both harm-scapes and support-scapes, but these “scapes” are experienced differently by different genders. Common policies for dealing with IPV, such as strengthening the criminal

response to male perpetrators, typically focus on penalizing men and increasing support specifically designed for women. This is a laudable goal, but in complex systems with myriad interconnections, these interventions may lead to increased harm. They may result in reducing support for men in ways that cause further damage to families and the community as a whole, including the women those measures are intended to serve. Broadening our focus to understand these landscapes and the interconnections and trade-offs they entail is essential to developing good policies in this area.

Family is generally accepted as the foundation for social and economic development in PNG as a communal society. However, this foundation often is challenged by intimate partner violence. PNG's demographic and health survey (DHS) 2016–18 found that 56 percent of women age fifteen to forty-nine have experienced physical violence, and 28 percent have experienced sexual violence. Over the last ten years, several key policy interventions have been introduced to try to address the problem. In 2013, the Family Protection Act and the Lukautim Pikinini Act were passed. In 2017, the government of PNG launched the 2016–25 PNG National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender Based Violence. In addition, family and sexual violence units have been established in police stations throughout the country through support provided by the Australian government, and family support centers have been established in hospitals to treat patients presenting as victims of violence.<sup>1</sup> These interventions are characterized by heavy reliance on a criminal justice response and donor funding.

There is little evidence that these interventions have had much real impact. A report tabled by the Special Parliamentary Committee on Gender-Based Violence, a body established by the National Parliament in 2020, noted “a growing feeling amongst communities across the country that violence is increasingly raging out of control with perpetrators facing little accountability.”<sup>2</sup>

We have argued in previous publications that, as well as failing to curb the rates of IPV in PNG, the heavily state-centric and punitive focus of the prevailing response has had unintended negative consequences.<sup>3</sup> It has not met the needs of victims of violence who do not want, or cannot afford to have, their perpetrator—usually a man—locked away and instead wish for the violence to just stop. Also, it has led to some men feeling disempowered by laws that are seen as being designed

to protect women.<sup>4</sup> These laws are perceived by men as acting as a blanket to smother men's agency in resolving violence and conflict in their homes, and to have empowered women in ways that disrupt cultural and social norms, thus threatening their relevance and identity.

Is it possible to conceive a more productive frame through which to view the complex issues around IPV in PNG? One is to supplement an approach based on identifying and responding to criminality with one focused on identifying and responding to harm. It starts from a different place—putting the harm caused by violence in the center of the analysis, and encouraging all impacted by it, including men, boys, families, and the broader community, to play a role in addressing it.

This approach is particularly important in a place like PNG, where many women live in constant fear of violence from many sources and the local law-and-order mechanisms are overstretched. Initiatives to support women are more likely to be effective when there is broader community safety and effective local and policing mechanisms that have widespread public support.

We can think about both women and men in PNG existing within what criminologists Julie Berg and Clifford Shearing call “harm-scapes.”<sup>5</sup> These comprise a proliferation and intermingling of both old and new harms that produce varied forms of insecurity. While they use the term to refer to nonhuman actants, such as climate change, pandemics, and AI, it is a framework that can be usefully adopted to also cover human harm, including IPV. In this paper, we briefly sketch out some of the key features of these harm-scapes from the perspective of both men and women. In so doing, we are not seeking to minimize or sweep under the carpet men's responsibility for violence against women. It is well understood that men are the main perpetrators and women are the main victims. Rather, we wish to make space for the fact that often there are layers of victimhood that make binary categorizations of good and bad, victim and perpetrator, unproductive.

In addition to thinking about harm-scapes, it also is necessary to consider support-scapes, by which we mean the array of actors and institutions that work toward preventing IPV and other forms of violence, as well as those that care for those impacted by it. In PNG, these support-scapes also are complex and entangled. They are populated by family, community, church, and civil society actors as well as institutions of the state, which itself is entangled in the society. Ultimately, both men and

women's experiences of, and responses to, IPV need to be understood in the complex entanglement of both harm-scapes and support-scapes.

Through consideration of the harm- and support-scapes around both men and women, we can gain more insights into the physical, emotional, and social spaces in which women experience IPV; the spaces in which men perpetrate it and, to a lesser extent, experience it; the norms, structural contexts, triggers, places, institutions, and ideologies that shape these harm-scapes; the important people and significant networks in these physical and social spaces; and the key influences and ideas that shape how the actors in these spaces behave and respond.

Below, we briefly describe these landscapes, drawing from a research project that aimed to contribute to our understanding of community and individual perceptions of the broader familial impacts of family and sexual violence (FSV) and IPV on the family unit and the experiences of individuals within family units. This research was conducted mainly in urban settlements in Lae, PNG's second largest city, in 2018 and 2019.

### **The Harm-Scape within Which IPV Occurs from a Women's Perspective**

Our research found that fears of violence and insecurity are a daily presence in the lives of many women in PNG. There are widespread levels of intimidation, threats, and violence in both public and private spaces, often generated by youths whose use of drugs and alcohol leads to theft, pick-pocketing, harassment, urban ethnic and tribal fighting, and rape. One of our interviewees said: "In my community, violence is ongoing every day." Another stated: "A small thing with alcohol can escalate into violence like fire."

Cycles of IPV also form a systemic part of this harm-scape, with most of the women we interviewed currently experiencing or having previously experienced long-term suffering as a result of IPV. Most women experiencing IPV remained in the abusive relationship, and, indeed, many expressed a determination to continue in the relationship. Women face considerable social pressures to maintain their families intact, as the family unit is valued in society and within the church. Furthermore, most women and their children are financially dependent on their husbands.

Financial precarity is also an important component, with marital breakdown and chronic episodic violence entangled with ongoing poverty. Financial hardship was both a consequence of IPV and made it harder for women to access support and to seek help from the formal justice system for fear of being unable to continue to support themselves and their children without their partner's income.

Social change and contemporary practices and abuses of cultural and social norms and practices, such as polygamy and bride price, form key components of the harm-scape. These practices are prevalent in PNG today, although there are few reliable statistics about them. The 2021 Parliamentary Report stated: "Committee members remain concerned that despite polygamy already being illegal, nonetheless, the practice continues and can still often trigger violence, both between husbands and wives and between two alleged wives."<sup>6</sup> Our interviewees spoke of men having multiple affairs and entering into polygamous relationships, living with their family but being violent toward the mother and children. Others told of husbands who came home drunk and woke up the whole family, chasing them out of the house. Most children were left with their mothers when their fathers left for other women. In many of these cases, the man also stopped supporting their family financially. Hardly anyone who had separated from her partner was able to obtain maintenance from him to support their children. One interviewee stated: "A lot of problems occur when the father decides that he wants to take a new wife. Mothers now have a lot of emotional pain. This emotional pain along with the violence."

Traditionally and currently, bride price serves an important social function of mediating relationships between social groups and is a key public recognition of a woman's important role and value in society. However, rapid social change and the urban context have meant that contemporary practices outside the traditional social context often create vulnerability for women who find it difficult to leave violent relationships. One of our male interviewees stated: "I think one of the main causes is bride price. I can say that like bride price is a cause of this [IPV]. For example, many people believe that 'if I pay off my wife then I claim her. I own her. I can do whatever I want with her. I can beat her, I can even cut her, break her arms because I have paid for her.' This is a big thing. Many people will agree with this."

The above discussion illustrates the utility of viewing IPV as playing out on a harm-scape comprised of multiple intersecting forms of harms. Some of these harms are specific to women and girls; others are shared by men and boys. Some harms have their roots in long-standing practices, while others are newer and emerging. In the harm-scape, these different forms of harm interact in particular ways that influence how different groups of women in different contexts experience IPV. However, an even more complete picture can be generated through understanding the intersection of the harm-scape with the support-scape.

### **The Support-Scape within Which Women Experience Support to Address IPV**

Women navigate between informal and formal support mechanisms, sometimes accessing more than one mechanism at various times and sometimes trying one and then the other.

The main informal community mechanisms available to women in urban settlements are the “blok komitis,” a ubiquitous feature of local governance in urban PNG. These are very local institutions that perform the task of mediating disputes between parties living in the area with the aim of reaching an amicable settlement. Blok komitis can be problematic for women seeking to address FSV and IPV for a number of reasons. For instance, they charge “table fees,” which many women cannot afford; and the outcomes often involve compensation payments, the terms and prices of which are set at the discretion of the komiti. Also, often they are based on local ethnic or social groupings, so members of the komiti may be kin to the perpetrator. Moreover, komitis may privilege collective social harmony over a need for justice for the woman seeking support. But it is far better than nothing. This local mechanism for resolving conflict—witnessed by local community members—can be effective for longer-term resolution of IPV and other forms of violence.

Community leaders often play significant roles in addressing community-level insecurity, such as holdups and ethnic fighting and, as a result, are less able or interested in attending to IPV. Churches provide a haven for many women, often providing much needed care and counseling, but they also emphasize returning to the family unit and turning to God and prayer. This approach can dissuade women from seeking needed support.

Many women said that neighbors hardly ever intervene to stop physical violence between a couple because of the perception that domestic violence is a family matter that must not be interfered with by anyone outside of the family or the household. On the other hand, insiders do play a role; both family members and other nonfamily members within the same household often stop or control violence among family members.

In terms of the formal systems, the main service the women access is the police. To seek support, especially from the police, they need to muster considerable fortitude to bring a perpetrator into the formal system and draw on financial and personal resources to navigate through the complex web of documentary, institutional, and other factors this entails. The police provide a range of services, including mediating between the parties and warning perpetrators to desist, as well as prosecutions. While police mediation in the context of IPV has been criticized as minimizing the harm, we argue that accepting women's agency about how to respond prioritizes a woman's decision about her and her children's safety, given the multiple financial and nonfinancial considerations involved.

Only a very small percentage of women have been able to pursue legal avenues to resolve violence in their relationships.<sup>7</sup> The parliamentary inquiry into gender-based violence released a report in 2021 that found that 15,444 cases of domestic violence were reported, but only 250 people were prosecuted, with fewer than 100 people convicted.<sup>8</sup> In his response to the report, the commissioner of police acknowledged that "there is still much to be done," while noting that it is "vitally important" that the government fund the RPNGC's Family Sexual Violence Unit's Development plan.

Viewed as a support-scape, it is clear that responses to IPV also must be seen as emanating from a diverse range of sources that differ according to context. Such reflections have led us to discuss the benefits of networks such as policing coalitions with civil society, that combine state and nonstate resources in creative and responsive ways.<sup>9</sup>

## **The Harm-Scape within Which IPV Occurs from a Man's Perspective**

Whereas women spoke about victimhood and hardship due to the long, chronic suffering from IPV, men spoke more about their societal roles and status and about how these were being threatened and



eroded in many ways, including through new laws and policies seen to be about protecting women. Men's traditional role as breadwinner is threatened through many processes, including urbanization, leaving many confused and unsure of their identity and social role. The high costs of living in urban areas, even in places without the provision of basic services, means that finding enough money to get through from day to day is a challenge for many men.

Men, too, face lives governed by economic precarity and violence, especially in the forms of ethnic conflict and cult violence—often exacerbated by drugs and alcohol—and low levels of education and opportunity for employment.

Many of our male interviewees acknowledged their cultural assumptions about their superiority over women and entitlements to control them. One said: “Because of our—men’s—superiority, we think ‘I am the bossman,’” a ubiquitous PNG pidgin term for “authority.” Many interviewees observed that women also engaged in problematic behavior, such as drinking and taking drugs and gambling, and some men felt that customary norms of masculinity entitled them, or even required them, to use violence in such situations: “[When] we [men] observe that the woman’s character does not meet the expectations of our clan to pay the bride price, for example, to be generous and share things. If we see that she does not meet expectations like this, then I beat her. We must adhere to my people’s and clan’s ways.”

An important theme in our research was the intergenerational links between young boys’ and men’s experiences of, and uses of, violence. Women told stories about how their sons resorted to drugs, homebrew, excessive alcohol consumption, pickpocketing, and other unlawful activities as a result of IPV, as well as dropping out of school. Many boys in PNG grow up in an environment in which violence by men is condoned and frequently actively encouraged. Understanding these intergenerational dynamics within the harm-scape recognizes that contemporary events, actions, and interventions can have long-lasting and unpredictable effects over time. This makes it especially important not to make assumptions about the impact of new policy directions but to develop regular feedback and monitoring loops.

## **The Support-Scape within Which Men Experience Support to Address IPV**

Like women, men use multiple strategies to seek to avoid the slippery slope of succumbing to IPV.

One interviewee stated:

In my community, these kinds of problems occur many times, and couples use many roads to sort it out. One road is they look at the church leader. Another is they see the community leaders. Another is they look within the family. If there is a good mediator in the family, they ask them to support mediation. Another is they use the law. Many times, when they use the law, you will see that both the parties do not agree. While they are still angry, they turn to the law. And when they calm down, they use the church leaders or they use the community leaders or they sort it out in the home.

The most preferred informal supports were those that allowed men to seek help while retaining their cultural assumptions of dominance, strategies we term “nonviolent dominance” even while acknowledging that dominance always involves a degree of violence. These strategies include men taking responsibility for engaging in reconciliation with their partners and helping their children manage the harm occasioned by the violence. The church confessional also was an important place for some Catholic men to seek support. One priest stated: “This kind of talk in confession works very well. How the men follow up in life I don’t know, but the confessional box is a protected environment. I am not allowed to speak about it. Only in general terms. They know this. They know they are protected. Nobody can overhear them. Then they can open up. In most other situations they have to play a role—they are the bosses. They are men. They are strong. But not in confession. If you speak to them in the right way, then you can speak with them.”

In contrast, formal structures of law were frequently framed as being seen as a threat and not a source of support. One interviewee stated:

There is a lot of violence that occurs in families and among our youth. When we try to resolve these matters, the law and order actors [the police] rush in and we hastily charge

people so the person is liable for his behaviour. But in my view our law is not effective . . . Instead of rushing to exclude the perpetrator by applying the law, we should try bringing him back to the community through corrective measures so he can become a good man or she can become a good woman. Such corrective approaches acknowledge that this person is part of the community, so we try to rebuild and reconcile the persons so that he or she can become a good citizen. . . . For many of these issues we are talking about, the law is like a blanket. Many people who try to go through to the processes of taking people to court, penalizing them, end up pushing the offender all the way, because there is no means to bring the person back into the community.

## **Conclusion**

Our research demonstrates that IPV occurs and is experienced in a complex landscape of harms and supports that are experienced differently by men and women. This reality requires a multilayered response that moves between these “scapes” or spaces—navigating between reducing harm while simultaneously strengthening support and seeking forms of accountability that are important to survivors of violence. It is clear that supports to one support-scape—such as strengthening the criminal response to male perpetrators—can contribute to the harm-scape experienced by men. Understanding these interconnections and any trade-offs involved is essential to good policy development in this area.

Our findings suggest that men may be more receptive to messages about IPV interventions that promote the benefits for family and community rather than framing them as women’s rights, which are perceived by men as belonging only to women. In addition, men may be less likely to resist policies that complement state interventions with initiatives that build upon support mechanisms already being utilized in their community, particularly those where they are not cast as “criminals” or lawbreakers. There are compelling reasons why it is important to consider the social and cultural context in which women are fighting against violence and in which men’s power in society is hegemonic. In PNG, social and cultural norms mean that communities are closely tied and people are

very much embedded in their communities. Thus, whereas international rights-based approaches treat women as individuals whose rights can be separated from the community, this is challenging in the PNG context where women are deeply embedded within their social settings. Thus, these cultural and social norms may make it more difficult for women to exercise their rights independently of the broader community. Our data suggests that this is the case and, in order to support women, policies also need to consider what other complementary interventions are needed.

These reflections suggest that resourcing should be directed toward programs that build upon incipient or emerging actors and institutions in the support-scapes for both men and women. Naturally, these will vary considerably from province to province, and even district to district, but it is likely that there would be relative agreement about who these actors and institutions are in every place. Notwithstanding critiques about the role of churches in reinforcing men's dominance, our findings suggest that churches that are proactive in finding ways to offer support for their members experiencing intimate partner violence or violence at home may offer alternative and potentially important spaces for both men and women. In addition, there also should be resourcing of programs to train appropriate individuals to conduct safe, neutral, and effective mediation or restorative dialogue in which all parties can have their say and exercise agency in determining how to move forward safely as a family in the wake of violence.

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# **CLIMATE CHANGE AS A DRIVER OF CONFLICT IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA**

**John Cox and Almah Tararia**

*Editor's note:*

This paper explores the relationships between conflict and climate change in Papua New Guinea. Climate change poses a range of severe risks, but these should not be conceptualized narrowly in environmental terms. Climate change should be seen as an escalator of existing drivers of conflict, particularly those related to pressure on land and resources, rather than as a discrete driver itself. Climate and conflict-sensitive programming from the PNG government and its development partners must include the role of extractive industries, national governance, the capacity of the state to deliver equitable services; support accessible and locally relevant dispute resolution processes; and strengthen civil society.

## **Introduction**

This paper provides an overview of the principal climate risks and their likely impacts as drivers of conflict in Papua New Guinea. There are four sections: 1) a country profile providing background on PNG's physical environment, population, and economy; 2) a summary of the major climate-related risks and impacts in PNG, including other environmental hazards such as earthquakes and tsunamis; 3) an analysis of the links between climate and conflict using the fivefold framework developed by Conciliation Resources; and 4) conclusion.

## **Papua New Guinea Country Profile**

Papua New Guinea is a Small Island Developing State (SIDS) that is highly exposed to climate risks. Climate change is an existential threat for many SIDS, particularly the low-lying atoll states of the Pacific (Kiribati, Marshall Islands, and Tuvalu) where rising sea levels already are contaminating groundwater and accelerating coastal erosion. These conditions influence external understandings of

climate change in the Pacific, and a “sinking islands” narrative dominates the media and other framings of the issue and may close off worthwhile adaptation options.<sup>1</sup> However, the physical geography of PNG, while it does include low-lying coral atolls, is much more diverse, with high alpine areas, great river valleys and sprawling coastal deltas, and volcanic islands. PNG’s geographical and cultural diversity, history, demographics, and political economy all combine to make a climate risk profile that is very different from that of other Pacific SIDS.

Most of the population of PNG (87 percent) live on ancestral customary land and depend on subsistence horticulture, hunting, and fishing, usually supplemented with some cash income.<sup>2</sup> Subsistence living has provided a highly effective informal social safety net; nevertheless, the natural endowments of different parts of the country vary considerably, and some areas experience food insecurity.<sup>3</sup> While policymakers and the urban political elite often presume a hearty “subsistence affluence” as the natural state of the nation’s rural population, many communities experience disadvantage across a range of measures and are highly vulnerable to environmental and economic shocks.<sup>4</sup>

Colonial and post-independence history has shaped the development of towns, harbors, plantations, and mines, all reordering space and people according to exogenous logics that have usually ignored or overridden indigenous cultural preferences and aspirations. Development has largely focused on economic returns to foreign-owned capital, and the benefits to local populations are highly uneven.<sup>5</sup> The nation’s social infrastructure, such as the schools and clinics required for delivery of basic services, has failed to keep up with population growth, and progress in development indicators has been largely stagnant.<sup>6</sup>

Poor governance and services lower the country’s ability to mitigate and adapt to climate hazards. The great cultural diversity of PNG’s 10 million people is apparent in the 800 indigenous languages that are spoken across the country, even as the pidgin Tok Pisin has become a national language, alongside English as the language of education and government. The strength of local affiliations has been a challenge for nation-making in PNG. The weak presence of government in most rural areas means that state capacity is low, and often hollowed out by male-dominated patronage politics and corruption.<sup>7</sup> Churches and traditional leaders provide alternative organizational and decision-making institutions at the local level and often enjoy more legitimacy than state institutions.

## Climate-Related Risks and Impacts in PNG

PNG's atolls (such as the Mortlock Islands and Carteret Islands in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, or Arhus in Manus Province) face challenges of climate-driven sea-level rise and coastal erosion. Already, Carteret Islanders have attempted to relocate to less vulnerable areas,<sup>8</sup> although the conditions in the Carterets may be driven primarily by tectonic subsidence.<sup>9</sup> Elsewhere, king tides led to severe erosion and saltwater intrusion in several coastal and islands provinces in the northern part of the country in 2008.<sup>10</sup>

Tropical cyclones and storm surges also are likely to become more severe with climate change and pose a threat to coastal areas. Unlike Fiji and Vanuatu, PNG has not experienced category 5 cyclones in recent years, but the effects of storm surges and flooding during the buildup of tropical cyclones can have disastrous impacts. Heavy rain has caused damaging flooding in riverine areas and landslides in mountainous locations. Often, these effects are worsened by the logging of PNG's tropical forests (and large-scale agricultural land clearings).

Drought is a significant climate-related risk across several environmental settings in PNG. During the El Niño Southern Oscillation (ENSO, a periodic climatic phenomenon across the Western Pacific), densely populated highlands areas have experienced severe droughts and accompanying frosts that have destroyed subsistence and commercial crops and created famine conditions and wildfires (most recently in 1997–98 and 2015–16).<sup>11</sup> This ENSO also produces heavy variability of rainfall, with a higher risk of flooding and landslides across most of the country in La Niña years but drought in the eastern islands. ENSO may become more extreme with climate change and pose a risk to agricultural production in PNG. Overall, PNG is expected to become significantly wetter, with an average increase in mean annual rainfall of 8 percent by 2030.<sup>12</sup> This may benefit drier regions but could be more intense in already wetter areas and threaten crop yields, including subsistence staples such as coconut, sweet potato, and yams, and major export commodities such as cocoa, coffee, and oil palm.<sup>13</sup> Small-scale market grower-sellers in the highlands complain that they no longer understand the seasons.<sup>14</sup>

As with other severe natural hazards, drought-induced famine has forced people to move from their homes, usually to nearby areas where they can access assistance from kin, and for temporary



periods. Remittances of food and money from urban relatives have been highly significant as an informal coping strategy, leaving people who live in more remote locations that have poor access to markets more vulnerable. Imported food also is important in PNG's towns, and climate-related disruptions to global supply chains for rice or wheat pose a potential risk to the cost of living for urban Melanesians.<sup>15</sup>

Other natural hazards that are not climate related also have caused movements of people. These include earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic eruptions. These events may provide an indication of how social resilience within affected communities and the capacity of governmental agencies are likely to be stretched by future climate-driven hazards. A further layer of complexity in the Pacific is that natural hazards also have sparked alternative explanations and conspiracy theories that have undermined trust in government and other responders. This can lead to victim-blaming and sorcery accusations.<sup>16</sup>

As the spread and prevalence of mosquito-borne and other diseases changes, further stresses are likely to impact the PNG population and its underresourced health system. Disease can have a severe social impact in Melanesia, where unexplained deaths can be attributed to sorcery or malign spiritual forces.<sup>17</sup>

While emergency responses and the prospect of permanent relocations of populations from environmentally vulnerable areas capture much of the international community's attention, climate change also is notable for slow-onset effects that may have severe impacts over time. Infestations of pests, for example, may worsen with rises in temperatures, threatening commercial agriculture and food security. In East New Britain Province, the cocoa pod borer led to an 80 percent fall in cocoa production in 2010 and has had a significant impact on food security for smallholder growers there and in other parts of the country.<sup>18</sup> Heat waves are highly likely to intensify and will have effects on health, economic productivity, and energy consumption.<sup>19</sup>

Climate change poses a range of severe risks to PNG, but these should not be conceptualized in narrowly environmental terms. Climate change is known to amplify existing social, economic, and environmental vulnerabilities and, therefore, requires multisectoral adaptation responses. Areas that are vulnerable to climate change also experience other social and economic disadvantages. For

instance, Mike Bourke notes the impact of saltwater intrusion on the production of swamp taro (a staple crop) in the Mortlock Islands as a significant driver of out-migration from the atolls.<sup>20</sup> However, the lack of medical and transportation services in the Mortlocks also act as compounding factors that undermine local adaptation and resilience. Similarly, informal urban squatter settlements are poorly serviced, vulnerable to rising food prices, and juggle competing claims to land but also face additional climate-related stressors such as access to clean water and vulnerability to heat waves.<sup>21</sup>

The vulnerabilities of communities across PNG to climate-change impacts vary according to regional geographies; local resilience, including access to markets; quality of service provision; and the adaptive capacities of provincial and national governments as well as of civil society institutions, particularly churches. Climate change poses a range of serious risks to food security, livelihoods, and land, and the impacts may become drivers of conflict as a rapidly growing population competes for diminishing resources. These hazards may drive migration in the case of disaster events, but in PNG, movements of people are likely to be local, temporary, and cyclical rather than large-scale, permanent resettlements.

### **Analysis: Climate as a Driver of Conflict**

Climate change is a multidimensional phenomenon that amplifies existing environmental, economic, and social vulnerabilities. It should, therefore, be seen as an escalator of existing drivers of conflict, particularly those related to pressure on land and resources, rather than as a discrete driver itself. In relation to conflict and climate change in the Pacific region, Conciliation Resources has identified five broad risk factors for climate and conflict in the Pacific.<sup>22</sup> These are used as a highly relevant analytical framework for the analysis of PNG and climate change below.

#### ***Climate Change, Land Use, and Community Conflict***

A significant risk of conflict in PNG is likely to lie within clan and extended family groups as people disagree over entitlements to the use of customary land. In-group conflict over land is known to have intensified around economic development projects, particularly mining. Customary land

accounts for about 90 percent of total land in the country and provides a type of informal social security for the majority of the population, specifically for those with land-holding rights. Customary land also is foundational for group identity in Melanesia; hence, many traditional landowners continue to see land that was alienated in the colonial period as still rightfully belonging to them.

Although customary land is a source of much stability and security, landownership and use rights reflect inequalities of power between and within groups, particularly along the key axes of gender and generation.<sup>23</sup> Even among rural-based populations, understandings of rights to ownership and access to land are not clear-cut. Over the last decade, understandings of land have been destabilized by controversial (and possibly illegal) special agricultural business leases (SABLS), where customary land is sublet to logging companies on the pretext of establishing plantations. The length of these leases, usually 99 years, effectively alienates the land from customary owners and has functioned as a “land grab.”<sup>24</sup> Studies of large-scale agricultural and forestry projects have shown how status differentiations are created and/or accentuated regardless of their belonging to a landholding unit.<sup>25</sup> For example, in a large-scale oil palm development in New Ireland, older male landholders converted customary land into an agricultural project (through logging) but, in the process, excluded younger males.<sup>26</sup>

Dispute-resolution mechanisms, including the local land courts set up to cater to internal and intracommunity affairs, function, but with limited capacity. They are starved of resources.<sup>27</sup> Where these systems do function, this is mainly due to the cooperation of individuals needing the service and their community leaders (village planning committee chairpersons and village law-and-order representatives) rather than the state.<sup>28</sup> Customary land disputes inevitably are resolved only partially or not at all. Therefore, disputes may lie dormant for years until triggered by other events. Unless land mediation systems are strengthened, the additional pressures brought to bear on land by the effects of climate change are likely to heighten in-group conflicts and possibly escalate them beyond the local scale.

### ***Climate Change–Related Displacement and Relocation***

The most prominent example of climate-related displacement and relocation in PNG has been the Carteret Islands case, where people from the atolls have resettled on former church land on the large

island of Bougainville.<sup>29</sup> Great care has been taken with this movement of people, but there has been conflict with customary landowners in the resettlement location.<sup>30</sup> This conflict has been minimized by giving attention to the needs of the new host community, following customary protocols.<sup>31</sup> However, some Carteret Islanders have preferred to return to their homeland, an indication of the strength of attachments to place and the comparative security offered by customary land, even in fragile environments.<sup>32</sup>

### ***Conflict Arising in the Wake of Natural Disasters***

The evacuation of villagers from Manam Island (Madang Province) to the nearby mainland in response to volcanic eruptions has been a long-running example of social tensions and low government capacity creating the conditions for conflict arising from a major disaster. In 2004–05, eruptions required the whole population of Manam Island (some 10,000 people) to flee to emergency care centers set up on government-owned plantation land. Many remain there nearly 20 years later. These “temporary” evacuees have received inadequate support from authorities, and initial agreements with landowners in the resettlement areas have become unworkable, despite customary precedents and long-standing exchange relationships. The process of resettlement also has undermined customary authority, making it more difficult for the Manam community to manage internal disputes. Violent conflict has broken out between mainland communities and evacuees, largely over competition for land and associated resources that the mainlanders see as their customary birthright.

Many Manam Islanders have returned to their original homeland despite the ongoing risks from the active volcano, motivated not only by “push” factors such as the constraints and tensions of life in resettled communities but also by strong cultural and spiritual ties to place. However, because Manam has been assessed as a permanent environmental hazard, government services and transport have been withdrawn, adding to the vulnerability of returnees.<sup>33</sup>

### ***Climate-Change Responses Causing Conflict***

Adaptation programs need to pay close attention to local requirements, create space for local leadership, and be sensitive to local politics. Where external interventions are seen to privilege one group

over another or deliver goods that are not wanted, conflict can occur, as has been documented in a recent World Bank study of climate change in neighboring Solomon Islands.<sup>34</sup> “Top-down” approaches to climate change can dominate policy responses at the expense of alternatives and bypass local initiatives, again driving unequal distribution of power and resources. Poorly supported programs also can induce great resentment, particularly when associated with misappropriation of funds.<sup>35</sup>

### ***Climate Change and National Governance***

Conciliation Resources warns that climate change can provoke crises that create opportunities for misuse of power and marginalization of vulnerable groups. The Manam Island resettlement provides an example of misappropriation of relief funds that has fueled local conflict. Militarization of disaster responses also is risky, particularly in postconflict environments. Further, climate-change policies may provide new platforms for elite capture of state and donor resources that can entrench exploitative power relations, particularly in the forestry sector.<sup>36</sup>

### **Conclusion**

Seeing climate change as an amplifier of existing vulnerabilities and drivers of conflict helps shift attention away from a simplistic focus on climate as a kind of impending disaster evacuation exercise. While there are highly vulnerable populations that need urgent support to build resilience and, in some cases, to plan resettlement, the complexities of the types of climate impacts and their inter-relatedness require a highly nuanced and locally sensitive approach that recognizes the needs and interests of all stakeholders. In addition to the need for more localized community-based adaptation and disaster risk-reduction programs, climate and conflict risks have broader implications for the whole of PNG’s political economy. Climate- and conflict-sensitive programming from the PNG government and its development partners must include the role of extractive industries, national governance, the capacity of the state to deliver equitable services, supporting accessible and locally relevant dispute resolution processes, and civil society strengthening.

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# **INSECURITY AND LACK OF DYNAMIC DIALOGUE ARE PRIMARY CONTRIBUTORS TO FRAGILITY IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA**

**Dennis Kuiai**

*Editor's note:*

This paper offers cultural perspectives as to how insecurity and lack of dynamic dialogue are primary contributors to fragility in Papua New Guinea. Drawing on the experiences of Bougainville, security is conceptualized not in a narrow way associated with police and military but as a feature of wider family and clan obligations. The importance of dialogue as a form of security is emphasized. Given the experience-based analysis, this discussion recommends dynamic dialogue and consultation as the most profoundly effective approaches for addressing fragility and security in Papua New Guinea.

## **Introduction**

Never ignore your history, it is your wisdom to walk your future with determination and certainty.<sup>1</sup>

In Bougainville and in the rest of Papua New Guinea, exclusion of ordinary citizens in decision-making creates suspicions, mistrust, disrespect, and insecurity. Exclusion is often seen by ordinary citizens as a threat to land, resources, culture, or identity. On the other hand, inclusive participation in decision-making provides ownership, responsibility, and security. In almost every rural community of PNG, effective inclusion and participation is attained through dynamic dialogue rather than consultation, negotiation, and even awareness.

Security in general is an international concern. In Papua New Guinea, security-inclined persons, including donors, agree that consultation is important to address security and mitigate fragility in the country. This undermines Papua New Guinea's historical experience in addressing and resolving Bougainville armed conflict through the Melanesian way: dynamic dialogue.



This paper focuses on how insecurity and lack of dynamic dialogue are primary contributors to fragility in Papua New Guinea. Learning from the experiences of Bougainville, security is discussed as the evolving responsibility of every individual person as their family and clan obligation. Dialogue is an immemorial method of resolving conflict and decision-making. It remains the most effective way of making all-inclusive and participatory decisions, giving ownership and responsibility to the people. Given the experience-based analysis, this discussion concludes in recommending dynamic dialogue as a profound approach of addressing fragility and security in Papua New Guinea.

## **The Melanesian Way**

Our history is preparation for today and the future is the testimony of our history. Without history we will be disintegrated and annihilated.<sup>2</sup>

In Bougainville and in the rest of PNG, when confronted by any situation, the foremost reference is Melanesian tradition, custom, and culture. Although Papua New Guineans are psychologically developed to understand the surrounding world and related modernization cycles, their decisions and actions are guided by their diverse Melanesian traditions, customs, and cultures.

Tradition consists of rituals, sacred objects, and beliefs that have their origins in the past and still are maintained and passed down within a clan. The general assumption is that traditions have ancient history, but in fact, some are invented for certain purposes (i.e., as in the introduction of a new practice or object in a manner that implies connection with the past).

“Custom” means a set of agreed-upon, specific, or generally accepted rules, norms (rules that are socially enforced; for example, kinship, incest), standards, or criteria, and laws and regulations established by common practice. Custom is generally developed from tradition and persists to evolve over the years. PNG has a diverse set of customs.

“Culture” is understood to be a person’s relationship with the environment within the living context. It is a combination of meta-narrative history, remembered history, past events, and present happenings that consequently results in rite; that is, daily routines and rituals and the “way to do things.”<sup>3</sup> These rites impact individual behavior by describing what it takes to be in good standing

(the norm) and direct the appropriate behavior for each circumstance. Culture changes with every shift in society, nature, and decision.

The “Melanesian way” refers to the management and practice of tradition, custom, and culture. In an expanded sense, it is about the totemic groupings and social fabric, including marriages; the rituals and methods of the chieftain system; the processes and procedures of appointing leaders other than the chief; ownership and transfers of land, knowledge, and property; communication; dialogue as a method for planning and decision-making; compensation as retributive and restorative justice; as well as security. Feasting is a symbol of accomplishment and a celebration used as a means of burying the past and moving on.

Land is recognized as highly valuable and forms the basis of social, economic, and political relations. It has a great influence on the existence, growth, and prosperity of all individual persons. Everything in the surrounding natural environment has a purpose for its existence. From infancy, one is made to learn and accept that one is part of and owes one’s existence to the land and environment. Natural law governs most of the daily activities. Attitudes and behaviors of individuals were and are still strictly guided by the customary rule of law. There are laws and rules for every aspect of life, including marriage, hunting, landownership, kinship, religion, leadership, socialization, economy, gardening, and feasting. This is the foundation of security that is collectively owned and managed by everyone having equal and responsive obligation.<sup>4</sup>

As in Bougainville, the PNG’s social structure is founded on Melanesian ethnicity, which comprises diverse customary groups. At the time of the declaration of the PNG’s independence on September 16, 1975, almost all the people lived in scattered villages in their totem groupings.<sup>5</sup> These villages were and are still very much governed by authoritarian but also consultative chiefs and elders. Today, the majority of the people still live in rural villages and are very much dependent on their land and natural environment. Their decision-making is guided and influenced by their belief and faith.<sup>6</sup>

It is important to acknowledge that colonization, then self-government and the independence of PNG, has brought in Christianity and modernization. Papua New Guinean, striving for progress and advancement, pursued civilization and saw the introduction and establishment of the concepts of central government, hospitals, schools, Christian beliefs, modern goods, large-scale mining,

cocoa, and coconut along with other foreign ideologies, concepts, and systems. The laws and sense of good-order introduced during that time gradually began to release clans and tribes from the tyranny of sorcery and tribal wars.

However, most ordinary citizens still argue that PNG's leadership during the period of self-government did not adequately prepare the people for independence. The challenges of determining a balance between Christianity, democracy, and custom still persist. The approaches used in planning and decision-making undermine the essence of democracy: government of the people, by the people, and for the people.

### **Dynamic Dialogue and Consultation—The Ordinary Citizen's Understanding**

In Bougainville, dynamic dialogue is the most relevant approach in conflict resolution, planning, decision-making, and sustaining security. In dynamic dialogue, a safe space is created for all the citizens to openly dialogue on an issue presented as an all-inclusive theme.<sup>7</sup> Although dynamic dialogue may seem time- and resource-consuming, the advantage is that every citizen is given the opportunity to speak and be heard. This dissolves blame and promotes trust, respect, ownership, and responsibility; hence, it is self-sustaining regarding peace and security. Dynamic dialogue is the foundation and stepping stone for consultation, negotiation, mediation, and almost all other forms of public engagement in the pursuit of planning and in any decision-making process.

On the other hand, consultation is understood as an approach for engaging with citizens and gauging their views on defined issues and proposals. It focuses on, includes, and engages with activists, immediate stakeholders' representatives, academia, and influential individuals and organizations, as well as other people within easy access. Often, however, citizens in rural and remote communities are not included.

In considering consultation in PNG and other Melanesian societies, it is important to learn from the Bougainville experience. It was ordinary citizens from rural villages who followed late Francis Ona in a rebellion against the government of Papua New Guinea.<sup>8</sup> The ongoing dialogue that began in June 1996 among ordinary Bougainvilleans paved the way for the August 30, 2001, Bougainville Peace Agreement (BPA), which stands as a self-sustaining peace accord.

The BPA was founded on the three pillars of peacebuilding, including disarmament and reconciliation, the Autonomous arrangement, and the referendum on Bougainville's future political status. The success of this dialogue among Bougainvilleans and with the government of PNG resulted in the United Nations Observer Mission on Bougainville (UNOMB) being declared to be in substantial compliance on disarmament in 2004, and Bougainville was qualified to establish the Autonomous Bougainville Government (ABG).

The establishment of the ABG was another success to come of dialogue among Bougainvilleans. It contributed to the framing of the autonomous government and the homegrown constitution, which was ratified by the PNG National Parliament. The first inauguration of the ABG was held on June 15, 2005. The referendum on Bougainville's future political status was, critically, a challenging agenda. Again, dialogue among Bougainvilleans and with the government of PNG facilitated and delivered a democratic and credible referendum with an overwhelming 97.7 percent in favor of separate independence of Bougainville.<sup>9</sup>

Today, not much emphasis is placed on dialogue to decide the result of the referendum. The strong desire of the people of Bougainville is for the government and people of PNG to accept and respect the result of the referendum. However, the question for Bougainville is: Why must the leadership and people of PNG accept and respect the choice of the people of Bougainville for a separate sovereign, independent state of Bougainville? Through dynamic dialogue, the considerations are that Bougainvilleans made democratic choices for a separate sovereign independent Bougainville; the option on a separate independence is constitutional;<sup>10</sup> and the overwhelming choice for a separate independence was made by Bougainvilleans while fully exercising their human rights. These, among other considerations, should be processed through dynamic dialogue to sustain peace and security in Bougainville.

Too often, ordinary citizens deem stand-alone consultation as a daily business for the experts, donors, and those in leadership positions. The primary reason for negligence and renunciation of government policies, decisions, and directives by ordinary citizens is insecurity arising from lack of dynamic dialogue.<sup>11</sup>

## **Consideration for Addressing Fragility and Security in Papua New Guinea**

Giving voice to the citizens through dynamic public dialogue to address fragility and security in Papua New Guinea.<sup>12</sup>

Fragility in Papua New Guinea is a result of political inconsistency caused by numerous political parties and groupings and philosophical clashes among national, religious, and tribal leadership. It is caused by economic injustice, environmental destruction, tensions, and ethnic clashes in an ill-informed citizenry in a society of cultural diversity.

Papua New Guineans have three methods of addressing problems. First, they resolve to engage in revenge and rebellion, allowing the escalation of conflict into violence. Second, they withdraw and take flight, resulting in the formation of rival groups, contributing to community instability and insecurity. Finally, in rare cases, they settle for dialogue and reconciliation, resulting in a renewed relationship, unification, and security. In that approach, the chief and elders arrange formal moots to discuss and resolve major issues, including land disputes, health issues, wars, compensation, and, in rare cases, intermarriages. Every individual is given an opportunity to share ideas and contribute toward the resolution of the issues.

Drawing from the Melanesian ways of conflict resolution, “dynamic public dialogue” should be considered as the foundational entry point in developing an all-inclusive and participatory strategy to address fragility and security in Papua New Guinea.

Dynamic public dialogue is a process that involves the public in providing their views and aspirations and in seeking consensus in an identified problem or issue (e.g., security, economic advancement, constitutional reform, security-sector reform, etc.). Dynamic public dialogue includes and enables public participation to provide ownership, legitimacy, security, sustainability, and responsibility in upholding stability and responsibility in both state and nation-building (e.g., security is a joint responsibility of the state and the people rather than a state-owned and driven task). If and when ordinary citizens are recognized as members and custodians of society, they will ascertain ownership and responsibility for effective law and order, bringing about peace and security for a stable society.

It is important to know that the public is more than just the citizens. It is essential to accept the reality that every individual expects to be recognized and protected by the mandated government even though the government does not always do that. Individuals also belong to a family in a clan lineage of a totemic tribe. They belong to organizations, secular groups, political parties, and Christian denominations. These individuals will be directly or indirectly affected by decisions; hence, their inclusion and engagement through dynamic public dialogue is vitally important.

## Notes

1. An old wise men's saying in the Sibe language of the Nagovis people in Bana District, Bougainville.
2. Teachings of late James Sinko, cofounder of the Bougainville Revolution.
3. "Meta-narrative history" refers to legendary origins and rationalization, while remembered history refers to happenings that an individual person witnessed during childhood or adolescence. "Past events" refers to events that an individual person physically experienced, while "present happenings" refers to current events, including planning into the future.
4. Security in PNG is centered on popularity and development, kinship and population, ownership of land and resources, education, and wealth and luxury, as well as feasts and feasting ceremonies.
5. The totem is the foundation of the tribes and the social structure. Totems may be birds, fish, or reptiles, which can be cosmic or ancestral spirits, with their genesis in some historical force.
6. The people of PNG believe what they have experienced or what has been passed on to them by a relative they trust. They tend to have faith in something that has a connection to their belief system derived from their traditions, customs, and culture. Anything not connected is neglected and unwelcomed.
7. A safe space is a conducive environment for all citizens where everyone is equal and free to engage and participate substantively. There are no feelings of superiority and inferiority. There should be no right and wrong. An all-inclusive theme should not pinpoint or marginalize individual persons or groups. It must be a broadly invitational theme; for example, escalating criminal activities or including murder at all levels of our society.
8. The late Francis Ona was a Bougainvillean surveyor who graduated from the PNG University of Technology and was employed by the Bougainville Copper Limited Company at the Panguna Copper Mine. He was the founding father of the Bougainville Revolutionary Army, which took up firearms to exterminate foreign exploitation and pursue Bougainville's self-determination.
9. More than 180,000 enrolled, and almost 98 percent (176,928 people) voted for independence. Less than 2 percent (3,043 people) voted to remain part of PNG but with "greater autonomy." There were 1,096 informal ballots.
10. This is enshrined in Section 399 (c) of the PNG national constitution as amended to give effect to the 2001 Bougainville Peace Agreement.
11. Exclusion of ordinary citizens promotes negligence because of a perceived threat to their resources, culture, and identity.
12. Giving voice to ordinary citizens recognizes the Melanesian way. Also, it is a requirement under the concepts and obligations of democracy. If there will be any positive change in Melanesian society, it will have to work its way from the bottom up, with the people, from the people, and for the people themselves.



