CONFLICT CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR BUILDING PEACE IN HELA PROVINCE, PAPUA NEW GUINEA

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INTRODUCTION

Violence in Hela Province has escalated in scale and intensity in recent decades. Reports depicting the nature and effects of violence have drawn in international and national support for law enforcement, development and peace-making initiatives. Since 2017, Conciliation Resources has participated in discussions around the need for systemic analysis of violent conflict to identify opportunities for violence reduction with peacebuilding practitioners, Papua New Guinean (PNG) civil society representatives and international donors.

This report presents preliminary findings of the underlying causes of violent conflict in Hela Province. The report also begins to map out opportunities for peacebuilding initiatives. The findings and recommendations are largely based upon a series of conversations with civil society, PNG local level government and international community representatives. These conversations were conducted in partnership with two experienced PNG-based peacebuilding practitioners in Hela from July to October 2021. Conciliation Resources conducted a follow up visit to Tari in January 2022 and a comparative learning and analysis workshop held in Bougainville in April 2022.

Conciliation Resources is an international peacebuilding organisation working with governments, civil society, communities and individuals to prevent violence, resolve conflicts and build sustainable peace. We work in conflict affected parts of the world and have been working in the Pacific region for over 25 years. Conciliation Resources emphasises the importance of understanding root causes of conflict, and of working in partnership to support and bring together community, civil society, government and international peacebuilding actors.

This preliminary analysis has received support from the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) and the Australian Government’s Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) with aims of better understanding the interconnections between factors driving violent conflict in Hela Province and to assess the potential for peacebuilding responses.

BACKGROUND TO HELA PROVINCE

Hela Province is both remote and one of the least developed provinces of PNG. Some communities are cut off from road networks and are only accessible by air. Hela Province was established in 2012, in part, formed by the Hela Gimbu Association, a historical movement of the Huli people, who are the largest ethno-linguistic group in Hela. Additionally, the Province was established to make way for a large resource extraction project, the PNG Liquid Natural Gas Project (LNG). The PNG–LNG project, a co-venture of ExxonMobil and other companies, has drawn considerable outside attention as one of the largest liquified gas projects in the world. The PNG–LNG promised to boost PNG’s economy, while the Hides Gas Conditioning Plant promised to bring social and economic development in Hela. The project has been met with complications, including the distribution of royalties to landowners, while promises of development have been largely left unrealised. Inequality and limited access to basic services such as healthcare and education, a lack of job opportunities and poor security underpin a sense of frustration felt across Hela Province.

High levels of violence have had devastating effects on the people of Hela, including death, physical suffering, trauma, destruction of property, mass displacement and gender-based violence. Intergroup violence is often inaccurately and simplistically understood as ‘tribal warfare’. However, the concept of ‘tribes’ is a foreign construct that fails to capture the complexity and dynamism within the Hela conflict system. Intergroup violence occurs between amorphous groupings of people that are constantly renegotiated within a complex web of relationships. The web of relationships has clan and family ties as a foundation, but also includes common interests and shared histories that create a sense of obligation.

Additionally, rates of family, sexual and gender-based violence are reportedly amongst the highest in the region. The 2019 massacre of 23 women of an enemy clan at Karida drew rare international media attention to the issue. Women and children suffer due to violence in the home, as well as intergroup conflict, where displacement and loss of livelihood results from a ‘scorched earth’ policy that often accompanies fighting.

Death and destruction have been exacerbated by the influx of modern weaponry. High-powered factory-
made firearms have increased stakes and losses and hardened the positions of fighting groups. The use of weapons has undermined the authority of customary leaders, who played a key role in dispute resolution traditionally. Changes brought through colonialism, modern statehood and the introduction of a capitalist economy, combined with deteriorating social conditions, ineffective rule of law and changing modes of political leadership forms the context in which the interconnected root causes of conflict detailed in this report are situated.

REPORT METHODOLOGY

The findings of this report are primarily based on field research conducted in select sites in Hela. The field research employed a tok stori or storytelling method to collect narratives from peacebuilding actors. The findings from the field research are supported by semi-structured key informant interviews undertaken with academics, peacebuilders and other relevant Papua New Guinean and International actors with research and/or practical experience in Hela, and a literature review of scholarly literature, policy documents and NGO and intergovernmental reports.

Hela participants were identified using a snowballing sample method, through key informant interviews, initial scoping and by the PNG-based research team. The PNG-based practitioners’ understanding of peace and conflict dynamics in Hela, as well as knowledge, experience and relationships with key actors, was instrumental in identifying relevant participants and collecting different perspectives. The stories collected focused on peoples’ personal experiences and understandings of conflict and peacebuilding. A first field visit engaged more than forty government and non-government stakeholders from Tari-Pori and Koroba-Kopiago districts through one-on-one or small group conversations. Participants included district government officials, security forces personnel, local level government representatives, community leaders, peacebuilders, local associations and faith leaders, 32% of whom identified as female, and approximately 27% who are considered young participants (under 35 years). Additionally, stories were captured from a meeting attended by 10 civil society representatives working in conflict resolution and peacebuilding.

During a second fieldwork visit, 16 participants took part in a workshop to validate findings and highlight gaps in analysis. Both the meeting and the data validation workshop provided an important opportunity for local peacebuilders to share perspectives, learn about different initiatives and think collectively about how to support one another. As one participant reported: “This is the first meeting ever to get us together to start thinking about working together as peacebuilders. We all are doing our own work in our groups, and NGO work in silo. No networking, no sharing of information.”

Following the field research, Conciliation Resources staff have conducted follow up scoping trips to capture recommendations for key peace actors, and in April 2022 conducted a comparative learning exchange with 12 participants from Hela in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, jointly facilitated with the Nazareth Centre for Rehabilitation and other partners.
Collective analysis from participants in all these forums also informs the recommendations included in this report.

The design of the methodology ensured that the scoping project was sensitive to Hela’s contextual dynamics and that the research had been undertaken in line with a *do no harm* approach. The research team were trained in understanding and integrating conflict sensitivity and conducting, *do no harm* analysis processes.

**LIMITATIONS**

The report does not provide exhaustive analysis of how conflict manifests across the entirety of Hela Province. Given fieldwork was only able to be conducted with representatives from only two districts, the report cannot capture experiences of peace and conflict across all communities. While conflict drivers are interconnected, experiences of violent conflict are highly localised and unique to each community. Further analysis on a community-by-community basis is needed for contextualised peacebuilding responses. By making the choice to focus on people’s experience — based on a grounded theory and subject-orientated approach — this report may not capture every conflict dynamic at play. Finally, quotes from participants included in this report have been captured primarily in Papua New Guinean *Tok Pisin* and have been translated and transcribed by the PNG-based practitioners. They appear here in a translated English form, which may at times limit the depth of the message participants are wanting to convey.
In 2019, a fight escalated after a son took revenge for his father’s death. A government officer — also related to one of the parties — intervened. He explained: “the person who did the killing ran away. I stepped in to talk to the family of the dead person … and to [help them] understand that if they took arms, many more people would die. No, they decided to fight … [and] 14 people died … villages got burnt, food gardens destroyed, trees cut down …” Consequently, compensation was used to put an end — at least temporarily — to the killings. The officer recalls: “My people and I took the lead to negotiate for peace … We paid half of the compensation demand … The other half can be completed by the people who started the fight. Peace is maintained now, however … the guy who pulled the gun trigger is hiding away in Port Moresby. He may not return, and this may cause the family and clan who lost the most in the fight to retaliate one day in the future.”

**CUSTOMARY PRACTICES THAT CAN PERPETUATE VIOLENT CONFLICT**

**War Source**

Customarily, fighting has been a legitimate way to resolve conflict in Hela. Fights are started by individuals and are usually triggered by interpersonal disputes over land, adultery accusations, theft, compensation arrangements, gambling or insults. Insults of any sort demand redress in Hela.

Outbreaks of violence are often underpinned by long conflict histories of past grievances. As one scholar explains, “…fights are about other fights” and conflict histories can lie dormant for generations. A participant describes the intergenerational nature of violent conflict: “This 8th–9th generation custom … is one of the conflict triggers. Fights extend to other clans … and full-scale war begins.” Conflict histories that span generations are recreated in community narratives. For example, one participant observes that “…young children spend time with parents and relatives to learn about past tribal fights and it pollutes their mind.”

The individuals who start the original fight become known as the *wai tene*, which translates to ‘war source’ and means the ‘owners of a fight’. Customary values of reciprocity embedded within kinship and social groupings subsequently multiply the numbers of each party in a dispute. Traditionally, each man has the right to call on eight generations of supporters, four on the mother’s and four on the father’s side. Today, the fight supporters both include and extend beyond clan members to include friends and allies of the *wai tene*. The higher the individual’s social status, the larger the fighting party they can call on. In theory, people place great emphasis on individual choice in joining a fighting party. However, in practice, resisting participation can result in social isolation by failing to meet societal demands of reciprocity and masculinity. In one example, a fight that started during a dance between two men over a young girl transformed into a fight that would eventually last five years and cost 170 people their lives.

**Revenge Killings**

It is not only the initial dispute that sparks violence; new disputes emerge during fighting. Conflicts that originally began between two *wai tene* can turn into a multitude of conflicts between the *wai tene* and their followers. The death of a member of a warring faction demands, as one participant explains, a “balancing of the ledger” for the dead. This kind of “accounting” is preferably reached through compensation payments (see below), but can also be achieved through revenge killings.

Whole sections of the clan of the opposing *wai tene* can be held responsible and become victims of revenge killings. This self-perpetuating system of violence has “the obvious effect of encouraging the escalation of war, and of embedding unresolved conflicts for generations.”

**TOK STORI: REVENGE AND COMPENSATION**

In 2019, a fight escalated after a son took revenge for his father’s death. A government officer — also related to one of the parties — intervened. He explained: “the person who did the killing ran away. I stepped in to talk to the family of the dead person … and to [help them] understand that if they took arms, many more people would die. No, they decided to fight … [and] 14 people died … villages got burnt, food gardens destroyed, trees cut down …” Consequently, compensation was used to put an end — at least temporarily — to the killings. The officer recalls: “My people and I took the lead to negotiate for peace … We paid half of the compensation demand … The other half can be completed by the people who started the fight. Peace is maintained now, however … the guy who pulled the gun trigger is hiding away in Port Moresby. He may not return, and this may cause the family and clan who lost the most in the fight to retaliate one day in the future.”
One participant explains: “The mentality to pay back and support to others in fights must change … we have to stop supporting others because it increases the level of violence …”

While another states: “revenge killing is part of Hela culture we are trying to do away with. Some people don’t like to take revenge and they go for compensation payment”.

**Compensation**

Compensation is both a key mechanism for stopping cycles of killing, while at the same time is a conflict driver. As a conflict resolution mechanism, one participant explains, “custom ... demands compensation payment for bel kol — to cool the heart, for forgiveness, healing, acceptance to happen. Without some form of compensation payment, the ... issues are seen as being ‘still alive’”. Another participant agrees: “How can peace be achieved when genuine compensation for loss of lives and properties is not done?” Compensation tends to be employed in the case of death while properties destroyed are not compensated.

Changes in compensation practice have led to its role in feeding cycles of violence. Compensation is described by one participant as “tough on the family of the person who started the fight, because they have to put in the highest amount of cash and number of huge pigs. Where are they going to get these things from? Sometimes people feel sorry for them and help them out with cash and pigs.” The participant further adds, “how can we progress in life if we keep paying compensation?”

Given the high death tolls due to the increase in use of modern weapons (see below), compensation payments can be extremely high and difficult to pay. This results in conflicts remaining ‘alive’ for decades. An ‘alive conflict’ can trigger new interpersonal conflicts, which escalate into intergroup conflict and restart the cycle again between conflict and compensation. Negotiating the amount of the compensation can also be a source of conflict. Compensation demands are given according to the identity and status of the dead person. The demands are higher for the death of leaders, business people, the educated, tertiary students and public servants. As one participant observes “compensation payments in Tari are an expensive exercise; it’s cultural and therefore obligatory. There is no winner here as long as this custom is not broken.”

The primary form that compensation takes is the wai tene’s payment to their allies. Payments must be made to members of the fighting group if a clan or group member loses his life in battle, increasing the cost of fighting. The compensation payment process is complex. One participant explains the payment is given in three stages:

1. first the bel kol to keep the peace “to hold the stomach or keep it cool, so there is no anger” which consists of a huge live pig and some cash.
2. Second, “some pigs are slaughtered for the dead person’s ... relatives”.
3. The third stage is the bulk of the compensation.

A highly complex multiplication systems is used to calculate the number of pigs required for compensation, with equivalent calculations made for substituting pigs for cash. As noted above, compensation can be significantly lowered if the death of an ally is avenged. Revenge killing is, therefore, one effect of both the high cost and complexity of compensation payments.

Compensation negotiations are sometimes referred to as ‘peace agreements’, which often function as ceasefire agreements and should not be misconstrued as the final resolution of conflicts. One participant believes, “peace agreements ... [are] seen as a positive thing. However, many are still uncertain because compensation has not been paid yet for many fights, and fighting does erupt even after Peace Agreements”. Another believes “for real peace to happen, Hela people have to have their mind-set changed through education. Some traditional practices have to stop, such as paying compensation for someone else’s problem ... No one should pay compensation for a criminal activity”.

Compensation, revenge killings and customary norms around fighting contribute to the escalation of violence in Hela, but violence in Hela is not driven by these harmful customary practices alone. They operate in a system of interconnected factors that have arisen through the socio-economic conditions imposed by colonialism and state building, the erosion of customary authority of elders and the technologies of war introduced by outsiders.

“The mentality to pay back and support others in fights must change ... we have to stop supporting others because it increases the level of violence ...”

Participant
THE DETERIORATION OF CUSTOMARY AUTHORITY AND LIMITS ON VIOLENCE

Deterioration of community authority

In the past, fighting existed alongside other dispute management mechanisms such as mediations conducted by elders and public meetings. These efforts could last for years and interrupt fighting. One participant believes that in the past “elders were respected, leaders were respected. Children obeyed their parents. Life was good in the past. When there was fighting, the fights were contained. Spill over to other clans was quickly contained by leaders. But now, these spills overs get out of control … Many of these attitudes are not customary or traditional.”

If a conflict was sufficiently small, wergild (blood money) could be paid to the opposing party or a particular day was nominated to settle the scores between parties, after which no redress or compensation could be demanded. There is little evidence that the mechanisms that put limits on violence are functioning. The expansion of the nation-state and influx of money into the region have eroded the authority of community leaders and their ability to manage disputes using customary mechanisms. A participant observes: “Community leaders are powerless; the gunmen threaten them”. Another believes the “chief’s role is over. Now, the gunmen are seen as ‘influencers.’” As Hela governor Philip Undialu explains: “Gone is the ‘pasin’, the mutual respect. In its stead is the erosion of traditional limits, a dangerous time bomb with no rules, accelerated by weak law enforcement.”

Influx of modern weapons

High-powered firearms have hardened the positions of fighting and undermined community authorities. While modern weapons have been present since the 1970s, a large-scale introduction of guns began in the 1990s, leaked from police and military armouries. Later, high powered weapons were traded for marijuana to the Indonesian military on the West Papuan border, and through illicit market trades with Australia through the Torres Strait. The influx of guns has been linked to the influx of money and security needs related to the PNG–LNG resource extractive project. This is a dramatic change from traditional fights that took place on a battlefield. As one participant explains: “Traditional ways of fighting is with bows and arrow. Not many people died from wounds received. But guns kill everyone and cause massive destruction. Bows and arrows do not cause destruction.”

With the introduction of guns, pistols, pump action firearms, shotguns and MAG58 machine guns, high death tolls can result from a single man in a matter of minutes. For example, a report from the 1950s detailed a fight lasting more than six months and involving hundreds of fighters with a death toll of eighteen men. By contrast, in 2019, 24 people were killed over a weekend in an initial attack and subsequent revenge killing. Gunmen are now key actors within the economic, political and social context. As one participant explains: “[Fights] are facilitated by hired gunmen. These guns are very expensive, high-powered guns. Someone is funding these guns.” Furthermore, the influx of weapons has shaped local belief systems, as one respondent reports: “During fights, the gunman casts a spell on the gun; to kill as many people as he can. It’s a demonic power.”

Airstrip, Tari ©Conciliation Resources
LAND DISPUTES AND FAILED DEVELOPMENT

Complex land custodianship arrangements

As in other areas of PNG, intergroup and intragroup conflict over land custodianship underpins violent conflict in Hela. One participant explains: “Land is a valuable resource for the Hela people.” In Hela, rights to land are complex and involve a tiered system of overlapping claims. Primary rights to land involve men who trace paternal ancestry to an original ancestry — that is the ‘land fathers’. Secondary rights involve men who live on their wives’ fathers’ or mothers’ family land. These rights become stronger through the time and generations spent living and working this land. Third, rights are bestowed to individuals whom, through friendship, negotiate land from a primary landowner. Land passes through male lineage, is based on descent and tied to oral histories that include deep generational recall, as well as mythological understandings of clan origins. Land ownership is established through the narration of land histories and genealogies (dindi malu) in which older individuals recall the way land occupancy changed through wars and other events. The deterioration of customary authority, and the contestation due to fluid and overlapping land tenure systems, leads to contestation over land.

Given the tiered system of land rights, people are historically highly mobile — they can maintain gardens in different areas. This mobility is constantly having to be renegotiated. People spend a few months here, and then a few months there. By living and working for a time in one area, they can cement their rights and will begin to claim higher status such as ‘land fathers.’ As people generate deeper connections to land through settlement and agriculture use over generations, claims over land ownership increases. Moreover, business people, politicians, and those with the means are gradually managing to buy customary land along the roads and near Tari town. This purchase has reportedly contributed to land disputes. Mobility, conflict related displacement and government mediation.

The number of mobile persons has also been exacerbated by displacement due to conflict. One participant comments: “Peaceful communities are no longer peaceful because of immigration from trouble spots. They take their culture of violence with them ... with movement of people displaced from [fight] areas, more people and places ... [are] also experiencing some level of unnecessary fighting, killing, and especially violence against women is on the increase now.” Another argues that “if the government is serious about peace and development, they have to arrange resettlement of the people who left their land, and are living on other people’s land.” In practice, the government system of land mediation that has been put in place is slow. It has also been accused of being biased and corrupt by some research participants. As one participant states, “land mediators are biased because of receiving bribes. Mediation is not based on facts. There are laws in PNG but they [the land mediators] are not upholding them.”

Resource extraction and failed development

Considerable international attention on Hela has focused on the establishment of the PNG–LNG resource extractive project. Resource extraction and conflict, and the LNG project, was not the focus of this research project, and most participants did not speak directly to resource extraction as a conflict issue. However, complex land arrangements have complicated the intended development potential of the project. One participant observes: “A few educated [people] claims to be land owners while the real land owners are confused back in the village.”

TOK STORI: LAND AND INTERGROUP FIGHTING

In 2017, a fight between two groups occurred after a ward councillor was killed. It occurred because the ward councillor’s father was allegedly involved in a previous fight. Compensation was paid and this issue seemed resolved until a boy was killed and his body left on the road. His people wanted to bury his body in disputed land. The ward councillor’s people disagreed with this request, which led to fighting re-erupting. The ward councillor’s people killed another man, which led to the other group chasing the ward councillor’s people off the disputed land. They burnt the cemetery to eradicate any trace of his people on the land. Eventually, compensation payments were made, weapons handed in, and peace agreements signed, but the underlying land conflict was not fully resolved and has the potential to spark future conflict.
The PNG–LNG project has had an effect of adding to a sense of neglect from the government. The promises of development which accompanied the initiation of the project — including sealed roads, schools, and electricity access — are still largely absent. Failure to deliver on expectations of development, combined with significant levels of inequality, continues to impact upon the peace and conflict system in Hela.

**COMPETITION FOR POWER IN A PATRONAGE-BASED POLITICAL SYSTEM**

**New sources of political power and leadership**

Set against growing inequality, competition for political and economic power fuels violence in Hela. There is a general atmosphere of fierce competition around political processes and control of state resources. As one participant believes, “Politicians are peace killers not peace makers”, while another states: “We used to say conflict triggers are women, land, pigs. But ... others have been added on. These are politics and greed and jealousy.”

Traditionally, there were two types of male leaders: ritual elders and charismatic leaders driven by ambition or talent. The latter generally fits the archetype of ‘Melanesian Big Men’ who established authority through oratory skills. Power was generated through material possessions — the number of wives they had, pigs they owned or land they controlled. Today this type of leader has evolved into a powerful businessman that also often holds, or aspires to, political office. Today, the material possessions they are measured against include money, mobile phones, electronics and cars, and increasingly, weaponry.

**Competition over state resources**

The provincial government political system has become an arena for existing patronage-based networks known in PNG as the ‘wantok system’. The wantok system is in built upon the mutual social obligations of kinship that provide social cohesion and welfare. However, the wantok system has shaped the political system within the modern nation-state and has led to widespread misunderstandings of democratic processes across PNG. When leaders are voted into office, they often only direct resources towards the constituents that supported them, resulting in a patchwork of infrastructure and government services. For example, roads stop in the middle of nowhere, where a clan land of constituents ends. This is true of Hela, where one participant comments: “A challenge and a need I see is the constant need for funding support; especially for logistics and communications. MPs are corrupt, they spend money and do projects with their con-men who are their supporters. Those who don’t vote them do not get support”. Likewise, when discussing why the election of Prime Minister James Marape, who is also from Hela Province, has not led to more development, one research participant explains: “We did not vote for him. So we have no right to ask for development projects.” This in turn leads to fierce competition and resentment over political appointments and power. Political and clan-based alliances overlap at the provincial and village levels, and political leaders can be tied to conflicts.

**Influence of weapons on politics**

With material wealth defining political power, gun ownership makes fighters incredibly powerful in political terms. Owning and distributing guns among supporters is being associated with clan leadership. Guns have replaced pigs as the highest commodity in defining political power and leadership in communities. Guns provide protection from rivals, as one participant explains, “leaders have to watch their back; they have to carry weapons on their bodies afraid of unexpected attacks.” However, guns are also equated with power and this has led to a type of arms race between leaders. Hiring guns out to other fighting groups during conflicts has also become a lucrative business. Crime gangs known as raskol gangs now transcend clan lines, forming new and shifting allegiances underwritten by money and guns. Mercenaries are now part of the political economy and hire themselves out in fights. Given the money needed to hire mercenaries, those with political influence and resources tend to have more access to guns for hire. There are hundreds of clans without centralised leadership and so the intragroup power dynamics are constantly shifting.
IDEALS OF MASCULINITY AND GENDER NORMS AS MOTIVATORS OF VIOLENCE

Masculinity, war and peace
Society in Hela is highly patriarchal. Men control clan and family. Land and material possessions are inherited through the male lineage of the family. Men engage in fighting, although with some exceptions. For example, one woman reports that she acted as a spy in a fight after her brothers were killed. She was able to enter the battlefield to see if enemies were present and identify the direction in which they were attacking. However, overall ideals of masculinity in Hela demand engagement in war. Forms of masculinity linked to honour and respect can play a role in promoting and legitimising the use of violence.28 Men are also said to dominate the conflict resolution processes. One participant believes: “Male[s] are the peacemakers. There is no space for women peacemakers ... Women eat the food at the training but go home and do nothing ... Men are the real active peacemakers.” A male church leader believes that targeting masculine attitudes is important: “If the men change, women and children will also change.”

Expectations of young men and intergenerational trauma
Masculine cultures surrounding violent conflict affect young men in particular. The naming of a male baby is often used to remember vengeance, by giving him the name of an ancestor that needs avenging. Names like tipaja (they cut him), tipule (I will cut him), parikuopele pole (if you kill me, I will kill you) are given to boys to remind them of the vengeance they owe to their kin. The current generation of youth in Hela have grown up in a context of heightened levels of intergroup violence. One respondent observes, “children of this generation grew up seeing images of violence, and they partake in violence, they swear, take drugs, smoke, make and drink homebrew, and they take arms and run with the warriors. Each young boy has a task to do in fighting.” Another notes “Children, they are the lost generation. They grew up around violence ... and they grow up with hate and violence. They are a frustrated generation who [do] not have a future. Schools get burnt down. The churches are doing their best ... [but] too many children just hanging around in villages, Tari town, and getting involved in petty crime.” Trauma experiences are potentially linked to drug, alcohol use and gambling, which are reportedly widespread amongst young men, and which often lead or feed into interpersonal conflicts that can then escalate into intergroup conflict.

The absence of education and economic opportunities means that, for many young men, fighting is one of the few pathways to realise their masculinity. The introduction of outside pop culture and notions of masculinities that glorify violence has increased.29 “The people with guns are treated as heroes” one participant explains.

Women’s role in reinforcing violent masculinities
Women play a key role in maintaining the link between masculinity and violence by ritualistically demanding retaliation from men during conflicts. In addition to naming children to promote future vengeance, women generate support for fights through taunting men and demanding them to join in battle. One participant explains that the paint and songs are actions which tell the men “I am in pain, I am hurting, I am angry, and you are not doing anything about it. Are you a woman so you cannot fight back?” This demonstrates the ways in which women play a role in the transformation of interpersonal fights to intergroup violence.

Gendered impact of violence
All people suffer due to violent conflict, however, one participant believes “Women and children bear the brunt of ... fighting. They are abused physically, socially, mentally and suffer the most when displaced. There [are] no protection mechanisms for them. Another explains “in any fight ... people run away, especially women and children run for safety. You cannot ... try to
A peacebuilder conducted a study of the role that women play in encouraging men to take part in fighting. The peacebuilder belongs to a women’s group that carries out peace awareness in conflict sites, particularly in areas where fighters remain in isolation due to fear of their enemies. She reports the story of one woman: “At the funeral of kin, as part of our culture, I painted my face with red paint, dressed in red shirt and skirt. I held a small kitchen knife in my hands and sang and danced all day and night around the dead body. The traditional dressing and words in the songs were to provoke and instigate the men to take revenge. The men took revenge eventually and killed two men from the enemy side.” The red and white paint symbolises the pain of loss of kinsmen while the songs act as war cries, a challenge to men to retaliate. On the results of her study, she concludes, “Women do play a role in instigating fights.”

help them ... This will be seen as ‘helping the enemy’ so they will attack you and burn down your house.” The participant adds that in terms of violence against women “All domestic violence is seen as a marriage problem. You cannot step in to ... help the victim who may be suffering from grievous bodily harm ... We act as if we do not know ...” This is consistent with findings from the literature review, which notes that the rates of family, sexual and gender-based violence are also amongst the highest in the region leading to ongoing trauma for women and children. 

Displacement from fighting also results in the displacement of children, which, according to a participant who manages an orphanage, also results in widespread trauma that serves to reinforce existing conflict systems.

INEFFECTIVE RULE OF LAW AND INADEQUATE STATE-BASED JUSTICE MECHANISMS

Criminality and lack of policing presence

The conflict drivers described above unfold in a context of lawlessness and lack of government presence, especially outside the provincial capital Tari. Not only is the PNG Government mostly absent from Hela, past failures in the establishment of effective justice mechanisms now prevent building trust in police and judiciary processes. Yet, there is a desire of participants for more prosecutions of violent conflict: “Violence will be prevented and Hela will be peaceful if all the troublemakers are put behind bars ... All troublemakers must face the law.” Despite a high number of casualties and widespread property destruction, perpetrators of violence are rarely prosecuted by police. As one research participant explains, “Criminals are walking around freely. They are not arrested.”

State security consists of the PNG Defence Force and The Royal Papua New Guinea Constabulary (RPNGC). The RPNGC includes the regular police and a specialised ‘paramilitary’ force known as the PNG Police Mobile Squad. The regular police force is hindered by underfunding and understaffing. Following a series of murders in January 2021, Prime Minister Marape acknowledged that there are only about 60 permanent police officers for the whole of Hela Province, an area of roughly 10,500 square kilometres. Inaccessibility and an underdeveloped road network also play a key role. With many regions being remote and isolated, the police force is unable to police communities or investigate crimes comprehensively. One participant explains: “Police are only present in Tari town and the district headquarters, they are not going to the remote villages”. Another notes: “There are two to three Police Officers in each District. Many of them are past retirement age”.

Issues with state security forces

Another concern raised by participants is the effectiveness of the national police. With the introduction of high-powered rifles, local police forces are often “reluctant to act because they are outnumbered and outgunned.” Unable to confront fighting groups, police have been reported to encourage groups to solve conflict by themselves, advising the use of compensation payments. As one person believes “… [it] seems like the Police have no plan.” Police across Hela typically come from local clans, which means officers may also be personally invested in conflicts. One participant believes: “They cannot arrest locals because they are relatives. People do not see them as public servants but as a clan’s man.”

Social isolation of police officers from their kin may be the result of cases where relatives are involved and police may have their own obligations within fights themselves.

It is believed by some that policing and military support
is too focused around the PNG–LNG extractive project. Some members of the PNG Police Mobile Squad are referred to locally as the ‘LNG Police’, as ExxonMobil covers logistical costs of deploying both these forces to protect PNG–LNG operations based on a standing memorandum of understanding between the PNG Government and ExxonMobil. One participant believes, “[t]here are too many of the [police] providing escorts for the PNG–LNG project. Why is the government neglecting its people and letting them provide services to a foreign company?” Another participant asks questions of the PNG Defence Force, “There are more than 500 of them. What are they doing in Hela? They do not go out to stop fighting, yet they are paid K200 per person per day for simply being present in Hela Province.” This leads to a further sense of neglect by the population over the response to violence.

The “paramilitary” Police Mobile Squad operate on a three-monthly rotational basis, are armed and have a reputation for using disproportional force and abuse. In some places, state security forces in general have also been reported to condone violence and support fighting by actively taking part in the fighting or providing weapons and, especially, ammunition.24 One participant believes: “Local Police and Army are contributing guns, bullets and taking part in conflicts”. Another states: “All the warlords and killers or gunmen should be jailed by the police. Surrendering guns will only promote violence. The warlords are not punished but are praised by the government. They are given money, living in hotels, travelling and enjoying privileges.”

“THEY CANNOT ARREST LOCALS BECAUSE THEY ARE RELATIVES. PEOPLE DO NOT SEE THEM AS PUBLIC SERVANTS BUT AS A CLAN’S MAN.”

Participant
“MEDIATORS NEED TO BE PROPERLY TRAINED TO BE FAIR AND MAKE DECISIONS BASED ON FACTS. NO BRIBERY AND BIASED DECISIONS. THEY NEED TO BE PROFESSIONALLY TRAINED TO PROMOTE JUSTICE.”

Participant

A struggling judiciary

As with the police, the judiciary is struggling to meet the needs of the Province. There is a reported confusion over responsibilities. For example, one participant states: “The police station is becoming a courthouse. The police are hearing complaints and making decisions on cases and imposing fines”. In communities, Village Court Magistrates and Land Mediators are tasked with mediating disputes. However, court officials receive little training and are often unaware of their constitutional duties. Overlapping authority and a lack of understanding mean that local arbitrators perform duties that should be handled by a District Court Judge. While village courts should only consider matters where the fine is PGK1,000 or less, they are currently dealing with cases that should be at the District Court level, which can review matters with fines over PGK10,000.

Participants also believe that bribery is undermining the effectiveness of the judiciary. One believes, “justice is only served for those with money. They can bribe the court officials or the arresting officer to have anyone released from jail. The system is corrupted with bribery.” Ineffective rule of law is linked by scholars to the changes brought by colonial authority. Since the early colonial period, district officers known as kiaps sought to maintain justice in the Southern Highlands region. Overlapping authorities of the kiaps made it an autocratic institution, rife with conflicts of interest. From the 1950s, and with the introduction of the local government system in PNG, magisterial and police functions were withdrawn from kiaps and transferred to district commissioners. Initial successes of the state justice system were undermined by a subsequent “declining effectiveness of courts, the police, and other law-enforcement agencies of the central government.”

Western legal concepts often clashed with the dialogical nature of conflict management in Hela societies and continue to do so. For example, historically, the literature has noted that penalties enforced by the judiciary have lacked legitimacy as a deterrent to violence. Participants noted the ongoing challenge in the difference between how people in Hela conceptualise justice and that of western statehood. Retaliation is embedded in understandings of justice, with an emphasis of “accounting” for instances of violence. This has fundamental implications for how the conflict resolution mechanisms are employed, especially those of the state.

Perception of corruption within existing conflict resolution mechanism

Compensation payments are generally negotiated by all-male Peace and Good Order Committees, which employ customary, non-legally binding mechanisms to negotiate the price. Committees are accused by some as not being fair, of accepting bribery and, often, of negotiating compensation claims in favour of the most powerful party. One participant notes: “Mediators need to be properly trained to be fair and make decisions based on facts. No bribery and biased decisions. They need to be professionally trained to promote justice.”

As with police, representatives are part of the same social fabric as those they persecute or adjudicate against, are subject to social pressures, threats of violence and often sway on the side of the most powerful parties. In some cases, participants have described village courts as outright corrupt, claiming the courts accept bribes. As one participant put it: “Magistrates and mediators are involved in bribery and make biased decisions that frustrate the people and perpetuate violence”. As a result, trust in police and local courts is low amongst the population, meaning that where the rule of law prevails, the population tends to mistrust the process.
Peaceful management of conflicts has always existed alongside fighting in Hela. Customary mediation and reconciliation — while complex and having had mixed results — has saved countless lives. Many community elders or faith leaders intervene in conflicts to broker solutions through a multitude of conflict management practices. While these practices, including compensation, can be problematic, no practice is fixed and can, therefore, be changed and influenced. In engaging with existing approaches, conflict resolution mechanisms can be complemented with restorative justice and peacebuilding approaches that seek to transform relationships in order to break down the cycles of violence.

The following section details some of the key actors engaging in peacebuilding actions. There are undoubtedly others. These actors can be better supported to build peace in Hela. Types of support are detailed as part of the recommendations that conclude this report.

**GRASSROOTS PEACEBUILDING GROUPS AND INDIVIDUALS**

Peacebuilding initiatives appear to be growing in number and reach in Hela. Many research participants are working on community-based initiatives to mediate fights, provide assistance to victims, work with women to transform masculinity norms and promote peaceful conflict resolution. Hela has a rich and diverse conflict management capacity, and peacebuilding initiatives can draw upon the patchwork of past and present approaches relevant to peacebuilding.

Peacebuilding actors are employing local knowledge mixed with approaches from international peacebuilding practice. For example, a well-known community leader and activist convened a Province Peace Conference in December 2018. This conference involved community leaders from across the province to discuss priorities for peace. In another example, during the Women’s Development Forums held in Tari in 2020 in 2021, women decided to make community reconciliation one of their priorities. Other community leaders and peacebuilding actors are working to provide mediation support, lifeskills training and have organised grassroot peacebuilding action plans. A more formal initiative has been organised by the Melanesian Institute, who have helped to form peacebuilding action teams based in Tari. This initiative has a current membership of approximately 50 people.

**TOK STORI: MOBILISING WOMEN**

In 2019, a group of women started meeting every Sunday in Tebi, seeking solutions to the violence in the region. Meetings grew and grew until they eventually comprised a thousand women from around the region. During one meeting, the Hela Women for Peacebuilding was formed, and eventually registered as a formal NGO. These women started analysing their role in conflict with an aim to transform the fighting from a position of female agency. They drew up strategies to stop women’s ritualistic dance that reinforces violent masculinities and to stop giving revenge related names to boys. The group has developed a policy statement for the government to endorse and make into law. In this way, they are trying to transform problematic customary practices from the inside out.
Furthermore, individuals have received training in non-formal education and human rights, although peacebuilding and mediation training is still rare.

Women have been active in responding to violence in Hela. For example, the Hela Meri Centre engages in peacebuilding and support for victims of violence. The Centre provides a range of different responses including couple counselling sessions for gender-based violence cases, assists women and children affected by inter-group fighting through the provision of food, accommodation and school fees, and raises awareness on the negative impacts of fighting in communities. The founder explains: “Even though there’s a challenge ... we deliver services with a complete love, joy and peace, by doing this small, we invest [in] success.”

CHURCHES

In many parts of Hela, churches are the only institutions that provide services such as healthcare and education. A Church Partnership Program (CPP), supported by the Australian Government and established over 15 years ago, aims to strengthen the contribution of PNG Churches to peace and development and actively work towards social stability and good governance programmes to support peacebuilders in Hela.

Key individuals in churches have supported mediation processes between individuals and groups, often with very little resources or support. Examples include a Uniting Church worker, who was trained in peacebuilding and mediation over 12 years ago and who has undertaken peacebuilding activities across Hela. The initial training was supported by Uniting World, an Australia-based NGO and their partner, Young Ambassadors for Peace, who ran a programme focused on trauma, empathy and peacemaking training in Tari. Their work has continued beyond the programme.
The Catholic Diocese of Mendi has led initiatives that facilitate local conflict mediation, some of which have been supported by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Since 2019, the Diocese has successfully mediated four long-standing conflicts in Hela Province leading to cessations of violence, commencement of compensation processes and peace agreements.

**PNG GOVERNMENT: PEACE AND GOOD ORDER COMMITTEES, GUN SURRENDER PROGRAM**

Peace and Good Order Committees negotiate compensation payments between feuding parties. Committees are ordinarily composed of 15 different community members (although many are smaller) including a ward councillor, village leaders, village court magistrates and others. Operating on principles based primarily on custom, these representatives are involved in a kind of shuttle diplomacy between warring parties. Emotions are calmed through a process called *nogo nigi*, which aims to heal the immediate pain of loss (also known in other PNG contexts as *bel kol* or ‘cooling the heart’). *Nogo nigi* involves the giving of pigs and money to show good will.

The committees help involved parties agree on a price, and formal agreement forms must be signed and witnessed by the magistrate and provincial police officer. As noted above, Peace and Good Order Committees face many challenges, one of which is that even after formal agreements are signed, they can be challenged in the formal courts.

Hela Province has a *Hela Province Law and Justice Strategic Plan*, which aims to create a “Safe, Secure and Peaceful Hela Province.” The strategic plan includes law, justice and peacebuilding actions, including a *Peace Management Plan* aimed at intergroup violence. The provincial government plans to develop law and justice infrastructure while strengthening capacity of...
law and justice. It establishes measures to deal with “serious crimes”, including family and sexual violence (FSV). It also seeks to investigate means of reducing the number of high-powered weapons, including an assessment of gun surrender programs. Since 2017, the government has extended to Hela its nationwide National Firearms and Ammunition Disposal Amnesty and Arms Surrender Program, which provide a moratoria for the surrender of arms. The provincial government is currently setting up a Peace Agreement Template to accompany the Peace and Gun Surrender program based on mechanisms employed by Peace and Good Order Committees. The template is aimed at providing a mechanism for the cessation of violence.

The Hela Province Law and Justice Strategic Plan aims to audit and consolidate the work of peace and good order committees so that they can be formally coordinated by the Province, and continue to support village courts and land mediators. Finally, the Province plans to continue and expand support to training community leaders with an emphasis on the involvement of youth.

In partnership with the United Nations, a roadmap towards a peaceful Hela has been produced. The roadmap emerged from the Hela Peace and Development Workshop, which was jointly held by the United Nations (UN) and Governor Undiualu in 2019. The workshop brought together the Hela Provincial Government, National Government agencies, including representatives of the Governments of Australia and New Zealand, the private sector, including ExxonMobil and Oil Search Foundation, civil society, development partners and churches, to build strong resilient communities, effective rule of law and strong social cohesion, maintaining peace and strong and effective leadership and services.

**UNITED NATIONS**

The UN has increased their presence in the Highlands region. Following the devastating effects of an earthquake in 2018, the UN Peacebuilding Fund implemented a project aimed at preventing and responding to conflict by developing community-level peacebuilding mechanisms and making local institutions such as village and district courts more inclusive of women and youth. The Highlands Joint Programme targets women and youth, employment and livelihoods, disaster risk management, rule of law, governance, leadership and social cohesion.

The UNDP also organised a Komo Peace Conference in 2019, which brought together local leaders and community representatives from Komo Rural Local Level Government (LLG). Over the two-day dialogue, participants articulated the causes and effects of local conflicts in Komo and identified ways for communities to contribute to peace and development. The UNDP is implementing numerous peacebuilding initiatives in partnership with local NGOs, including strengthening capacity of traditional/local leadership in conflict management, enhancing intra- and intergroup dialogue, supporting community-level conflict mediation and facilitating local peace conferences.

The International Organization for Migration (IOM)’s Partners for Peace Programme supports conflict-affected communities by providing a series of trainings on peacebuilding and gender equality, developing community action plans (referred to as Community Peace for Development Plans) and giving material assistance to execute community led priority projects sessions in the Hela and Southern Highlands province.

**INTERNATIONAL COMMITTEE OF THE RED CROSS (ICRC)**

The ICRC is attempting to address the humanitarian impact of violent conflicts through a project seeking to bring back “traditional rules” of fighting. The ICRC facilitated discussions with community leaders to draft traditional fighting rules around not targeting civilians (especially the elderly, women, children and people with disability) and prohibiting the destruction of public property such as schools, health facilities and roads. The draft have been presented to the provincial authorities, before going back to the leaders for their feedback. ICRC intends to conduct similar projects in additional districts of Hela as well as other Highland provinces.
RECOMMENDATIONS

1. **Support peacebuilding practitioners with skills enhancement and create opportunities for joint analysis and collaboration**

Facilitate participatory conflict analysis with actors working for peace — including government, civil society, church, community and international partners — to overcome the challenge of civil society and peacebuilding practitioners working in isolation. Support the development of knowledge and skills in peacebuilding approaches to identify entry points for building peace, enabling the development of local and creative solutions for addressing conflict challenges. Support joint analysis to enhance the integration of different responses and nuance understandings of the ways in which conflict manifests across diverse communities within Hela.

2. **Enhance understanding of conflict drivers and peacebuilding approaches through the facilitation of comparative learning with government, civil society and peacebuilding leaders**

Facilitate learning on peace and conflict themes from other conflict contexts to enable people to gain broader perspectives and insights and come up with creative strategies to build peace. Examples of comparative learning areas may include the links between group violence and ideals of masculinity, land and resource extractive conflicts, and governance relationships. These are examples of themes relevant to PNG, the Pacific and other global conflict contexts.

3. **Enhance peacebuilding leadership and community conflict management mechanisms**

Support community leaders, including village elders, church leaders, women, youth and government officials to understand conflict drivers and ways to prevent violence. Enable community leaders to analyse the role they play in ensuring conflict sensitive decision making and leadership. Recognise community governance structures so as to develop contextualised conflict prevention mechanisms and solutions to conflict issues.

4. **Strengthen conflict sensitive mechanisms that redress grievances and work to transform practices that exacerbate conflict**

Create platforms to enable the development of locally embedded alternative mechanisms for dealing with violence to avoid retaliatory fighting or ongoing cycles of expensive compensation. Complement existing compensation mechanisms with parallel restorative justice mechanisms and community peacebuilding to transform relations and break down cycles of violence.

5. **Complement existing disarmament and conflict resolution mechanisms with initiatives focused on transforming relationships between conflict parties**

Support locally appropriate reconciliation and other peacebuilding practices in parallel with arms surrender and peace agreements (ceasefires) for fighters. Employ gender and masculinity lenses to assist with strategies that assist men and boys to transition out of fighting. Involve civil society [including church leader] in the transition process, drawing upon their legitimacy and relationships to support these processes.

6. **Increase synergy between different justice mechanisms to strengthen governance and policing outcomes**

Increase understanding of the role that different (state and customary) justice mechanisms play, and which mechanisms community members draw upon. Increase understanding of conflict sensitive decision-making within state institutions and create platforms that enable state actors to seek advice for more effective community engagement on peace and security issues. Promote community policing and trust building measures to enable police to better respond to violence, providing communities with viable alternatives to vigilantism, and to place checks on the illegal ownership of weapons. As part of ongoing strengthening of the village court system, conduct awareness raising around rights and responsibilities of village court officials and develop mechanisms to increase accountability of justice services to communities.


8. Ibid.


10. Ibid.

11. Ibid. p.121


14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

16. Jorari, ‘PNG Mistakes Massacres as Tradition’ (n 5). Translation — Pasin in Tok Pisin is custom or way.


19. Main and Fletcher, On Shaky Ground [n 3].


24. Ibid.


27. Goldman, ‘Hoo-ha in Hulu’, pp.1–14 [n 6].


29. The influence of the film ‘Rambo’ is so significant that the term is now used in Papuan dialects to describe hired mercenaries who are paid to support local combatants in violent tribal disputes. See: Phillips, C. (2019) 'Lost Rambos', the Guardian, October.


34. Kopi et al, 'Insecurity in the Southern Highlands' [n 17].


36. Ibid.


Conciliation Resources is an international organisation committed to stopping violent conflict and creating more peaceful societies. We work with people impacted by war and violence, bringing diverse voices together to make change that lasts.

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