



**CONCILIATION
RESOURCES**

PREVENTING ELECTION VIOLENCE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA'S HIGHLANDS

**THE ROLE AND NEEDS OF
COMMUNITY MEDIATORS AND
PEACEBUILDERS AHEAD OF
THE 2027 NATIONAL GENERAL
ELECTION**



PREVENTING ELECTION VIOLENCE IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA'S HIGHLANDS

The role and needs of community mediators and peacebuilders ahead of the 2027 National General Election

SEPTEMBER 2026

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Community mediators and peacebuilders play a vital, but often overlooked, role in preventing and responding to election-related violence in Papua New Guinea (PNG).

This study examines the experiences of such peace actors in both Hela and Southern Highlands Provinces ahead of the 2027 National General Election. The study draws on semi-structured interviews with 30 community peacebuilders, mediators and provincial government representatives, and highlights some key risks for the 2027 elections, while also identifying opportunities to strengthen locally led violence prevention. The study draws on 30 semi-structured interviews with community peacebuilders, mediators, and provincial government representatives.

KEY FINDINGS

1. Elections both exploit and amplify conflict

Political competition interacts with unresolved disputes, patronage networks, firearms, and longstanding grievances, intensifying existing tensions and increasing the risk of violence.

2. Election violence creates new grievances that persist beyond polling

Violence during elections can generate retaliatory cycles, fractured relationships, and new disputes that communities and peace actors must manage long after the electoral period.

3. The risk of violence increases with the value of the political office contested

Elected offices are associated with greater access to resources, patronage, and influence — particularly regional seats. The greater the access to resources, the higher the risks of coercion and violence.

4. Mediators and peacebuilders are most effective before campaigns begin

Once campaigning starts, political pressure, insecurity, and polarisation reduce their ability to mediate and prevent violence escalation, highlighting the importance of early intervention.

5. Elections follow a recurring cycle of escalating tensions

Participants described recurring patterns of violence before, during, and after elections, highlighting opportunities to intervene earlier through preventative peacebuilding rather than relying primarily on reactive security responses.

6. Conflict prevention remains underdeveloped

Despite their local knowledge and relationships, community mediators and peacebuilders are rarely integrated into formal election preparedness processes. Stronger coordination, early warning, and locally led prevention approaches are needed.

7. Risks ahead of the 2027 elections are concentrated in identifiable hotspots

Participants identified unresolved conflicts, highly contested seats, and ongoing insecurity as key drivers of potential violence. In Hela, priority areas included Magarima, Tagali, Tebi, Hayapuga, and Koroba, while in Southern Highlands, concerns centred on Mendi Central, Nipa-Kutubu, Kagua-Erave, Mendi-Munihi, and parts of Lai Valley, highlighting the need for targeted prevention and early action.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Community mediators and peacebuilders need support from the Government of PNG and from international donor partners, to prevent election-related violence in 2027. This report recommends the following actions:

1. Invest early and sustain locally led peacebuilding across the electoral cycle
2. Prioritise young men as key partners in violence prevention
3. Develop a coordinated election awareness and civic education strategy
4. Leverage and strengthen ward-level governance for election violence prevention
5. Establish provincial coordination mechanisms to strengthen collaboration, joint conflict analysis, hotspot identification, and locally informed early warning and early response
6. Strengthen election administration, prevention, and security responses in identified hotspots
7. Establish a locally led election-conflict monitoring and analysis mechanism to strengthen early warning, coordination and prevention



Pomberel Catholic Parish, Southern Highlands, Papua New Guinea © Conciliation Resources, photo taken by Laura Raicu

INTRODUCTION AND RESEARCH OVERVIEW

Elections in the Highland provinces of PNG have long been characterised by violence, electoral irregularities, and political instability, although the scale and nature of these challenges have varied across electoral cycles.¹

The two most recent national elections, held in 2017 and 2022, were marked by significant violence and electoral disruptions, including clashes between supporters, confrontations between voters and security personnel, civilian deaths, voter intimidation, and threats against election officials.² Women and marginalised groups have also experienced significant impacts, including intimidation, restricted voting choices, coercion, and physical and sexual violence.³

Election-related violence in the Highlands of PNG is shaped by a combination of structural and political factors, including weaknesses in electoral administration, allegations of electoral fraud, high competition for state resources, clientelist politics and limited institutional trust. In provinces with pre-existing conflicts — such as Hela and Southern Highlands — elections often act as a trigger that reactivates unresolved grievances, intensifies competition between groups, and contributes to cycles of retaliation.⁴ The availability of illegal high-powered firearms has further increased the scale and impact of violence associated with elections, contributing to armed mobilisation, intercommunal conflict, displacement, and loss of life.⁵ Importantly, election-related violence often extends beyond polling and counting periods, as disputed outcomes, perceptions of unfairness, and unresolved tensions continue to generate conflict after election results are declared.

Responses to election violence have traditionally focused on short-term security measures, including policing, security deployments, weapons control initiatives, election monitoring, and restrictions on activities perceived to increase risk, such as alcohol consumption. While these approaches are necessary to address immediate threats, these measures rarely address the deeper social and political drivers of recurring violence. Likewise, international and domestic reporting on elections has largely concentrated on electoral administration, security arrangements, and polling-day processes.⁶ Far less attention has been paid to pre-polling election preparation, including the role of Provincial Election Steering Committees and the extent to which civil society actors are involved in these

processes. Consequently, little is known about whether local peace actors, churches, women's organisations, and customary authorities are able to contribute their conflict and security perspectives to election preparedness and violence prevention.

Community peacebuilders and mediators — including community-based organisations and church, women and youth leaders — play a vital role in preventing, containing and addressing violent conflict.

They mediate disputes, support reconciliation, prevent retaliation and help communities recover.⁷ This study examines the role of community mediators and peacebuilders in preventing and responding to election-related violence in Hela and Southern Highlands, and how their work is shaped by the broader conflict and electoral environment. It explores the approaches they use, the constraints they face, and the institutional and practical support needed to strengthen locally led conflict prevention ahead of the 2027 National General Election.

This study involved semi-structured interviews with 30 stakeholders (13 women and 17 men) in Hela and Southern Highlands Provinces, primarily mediators, community peacebuilders, and provincial government representatives. Interviews were conducted over two weeks through individual interviews and small group discussions, allowing participants to reflect on their experiences of previous elections, risks ahead of 2027, and opportunities to strengthen violence prevention efforts.

The findings should be understood within the scope of the study. Data collection was limited to Hela and Southern Highlands provinces and did not include all districts or communities within each province. As such, the findings are not intended to be representative of the diversity of experiences across either province or PNG more broadly. Rather, they reflect the perspectives and experiences of participants in the locations in which they have lived and worked. To strengthen the applicability of the recommendations, the findings would benefit from further validation through a joint analysis workshop involving participants and key stakeholders.

Further details on the research methodology, including the interview guiding questions, are provided in **Annex 1**.

THE CONFLICT ECOSYSTEM AND ELECTION-RELATED VIOLENCE

1. Manipulation of the conflict system

Existing conflicts — whether linked to prior elections or to other disputes — create an ecosystem of vulnerability that electoral candidates can readily exploit to influence outcomes. **Divisions within communities, eroded trust and weakened governance provide the conditions for manipulation, intimidation and coercion.** Such an ecosystem is not unique to the PNG Highlands; it can be witnessed in many conflict-affected parts of the world.

In Hela and Southern Highlands, elections frequently resemble battlefields, with rhetoric and tactics that mirror warlike narratives. **Warlords and fighters are routinely employed to mobilise supporter bases, intimidate voters, hijack ballot boxes, and confront opponents' supporters.** Warlords already command authority within their communities and have access to followers, weapons and networks. For candidates, they therefore represent a readily available and strategically important resource within electoral campaigns. The ready availability of firearms in Hela and Southern Highlands provinces further enables these actors to instil fear, threaten and coerce communities, compounding the destructive interaction between electoral competition and ongoing conflict.

Elections also **tap into a cohort of young men who have been socialised into violent conflict**, face limited educational and employment opportunities, and adhere to certain masculinities. Political candidates offer these young men a combination of cash, transport, status, protection and a sense of purpose — incentives that may be difficult to resist when legitimate alternatives for income, status, belonging and participation are limited. Young men may therefore actively choose

to mobilise for the candidates who provide these incentives, engaging in violent behaviour, property destruction, hijacking and intimidation, even when benefits are modest and short-lived. While such participation can provide temporary access to resources, recognition and excitement, the lasting consequences of their actions tend to deepen and perpetuate cycles of violence.

Another conflict-related vulnerability that feeds election irregularities is population displacement. Conflict often displaces whole villages or local-level government areas (LLGs), scattering families across neighbouring LLGs or to urban centres such as Tari, Mount Hagen, Lae or Port Moresby. Although the Electoral Commission permits voters to transfer their enrolment after residing for six months in a new ward, due to usual roll update challenges,⁸ displaced voters are often unable to complete this transfer process, leaving many registered in their original wards. During elections, polling stations are sometimes established in places that no longer contain their registered communities, while displaced voters are unable to vote in their new locations. Unused ballot boxes and votes can be traded between candidates or hijacked, creating further opportunities for electoral irregularities.

Together, these dynamics show how the conflict ecosystem in Hela and Southern Highlands enables and amplifies electoral manipulation, with short-term tactical gains producing long-term harms which compound the difficulties faced by peace actors pursuing sustainable peace.

NATIONAL FIREARMS AMNESTY AND BUY-BACK PROGRAM 2026⁹

Study participants expressed limited confidence in the National Firearms Amnesty and Buy-back Program. Participants questioned the extent to which gun owners would genuinely engage with the program and raised concerns that it could have limited impact on the availability of weapons or the capacity for election-related violence. Some also expressed concern that the program could inadvertently feed an existing arms trade.

Participants linked these concerns to the broader political economy of election-related violence. They argued that better-resourced candidates who can mobilise warlords may have limited incentives to support disarmament or prevent the movement of additional weapons into their constituencies. Some participants also questioned whether the program represented a genuine commitment to disarmament and argued that, without accompanying peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts, removing firearms alone would be unlikely to address the underlying drivers of violence.

Several participants further alleged that the program could become politicised, including through the identification or mobilisation of political supporters under the guise of firearm surrender. These allegations were not independently verified through this study. Nevertheless, they indicate concerns among some participants about the integrity and potential political use of the program, and reinforce the importance of transparency, accountability and locally informed implementation alongside broader peacebuilding efforts.

2. Amplification of the conflict system

In Hela and Southern Highlands, elections can amplify existing conflict factors through a cascading series of interconnected mechanisms that entrench warlord power, institutionalise patronage systems through post-election pay-offs, weaken service delivery and generate new grievances.

Candidates use cash, promises of contracts and appointments to enlist the support of warlords and their followers, consolidating their power. **Warlords and their supporters therefore become embedded stakeholders with a vested interest in defending the status quo**, reducing any incentives to surrender their guns and participate in genuine peace processes. Manipulated elections enable winners to repay supporters with both positions in the provincial administration and revenue-generating opportunities. However, appointments based on loyalty rather than competence weaken service delivery, divert public resources into patronage, and contribute to stifled development. This deepens mistrust in institutions and creates new grievances that fuel vulnerabilities to violence.

3. Driving new conflicts

The role of elections in driving conflict is particularly evident in the Southern Highlands and the Magarima electorate in Hela. Rivalries between candidates or their supporter bases often transcend the electoral period: election-related incidents can rapidly engulf whole communities in cycles of retaliatory attacks, drawing in larger groups and layering new grievances onto older ones.

The likelihood and intensity of election-related violence are closely linked to the value of the political office being contested. Study participants consistently described violence as increasing in proportion to the political influence, financial resources and patronage opportunities associated with an elected position. Consequently, regional seats were widely perceived as carrying a substantially higher risk of violence than open electorates because they provide greater control over provincial resources, appointments and decision-making. Rather than occurring randomly, violence was understood as a strategic response to high-stakes political competition, where the anticipated benefits of victory justify coercion and violence.

This relationship between political value and violence manifests through several recurring mechanisms identified by participants:

- Allegations of irregularity or illegal conduct by rival candidates or their supporters, which can spark immediate clashes and subsequent reprisals;
- Contests over control of ballot boxes — attempts to hijack, steal or tamper with ballot papers or boxes frequently escalate into violence;
- Vote-buying and payments to mobilisers: when those paid to deliver votes are believed to have failed, disputes can turn violent, with accusations of betrayal prompting retaliation;
- Disgruntled supporters who do not receive expected benefits may initiate attacks or switch allegiances, creating new fault lines;
- Domestic and gendered tensions: a voter acting against the wishes of a spouse can provoke gender-based violence that spills beyond the household and pulls wider family or clan networks into conflict.

THE ROLE OF MEDIATORS AND PEACEBUILDERS

1. Between elections

Within the dynamics of elections and violent conflict, mediators and community peacebuilders consistently identified the **period between elections as the time when peacebuilding efforts are most effective**. This 4–5 year period provides an opportunity to address underlying tensions and strengthen relationships before political competition intensifies and existing conflicts become more difficult to manage.

A central focus of this work is direct mediation and support for local peace processes. In Hela and Southern Highlands, many mediators occupy customary or community-recognised roles, drawing on their legitimacy, relationships, and cultural authority to intervene in disputes as they arise. Prior to and following the 2022 National General Election, mediators accompanied disputing parties through lengthy dialogue processes, facilitating negotiations and creating conditions for reconciliation. These processes can help contain immediate violence and resolve disputes, but participants also recognised that mediation alone cannot address the wider conditions that allow conflict to reoccur.

This study identified signs of a gradual shift in thinking among some local actors. Many **participants recognised that mediation alone is insufficient to build lasting peace** and described expanding their work, often in collaboration with others, to include reconciliation, youth engagement, peace education,

livelihood initiatives, healing and other activities aimed at addressing the underlying drivers and effects of conflict.

This broader approach was particularly evident in initiatives aimed at reducing the social drivers of violence among young men. Mediators and peacebuilders described programmes focused on behavioural and mindset change, strengthening critical thinking and decision-making, and creating positive alternatives to involvement in election-related violence. Participants observed changing attitudes among some young people engaged in these programmes, including a growing recognition of elections as an opportunity to strengthen democratic accountability. Some young people were beginning to question practices such as vote buying and candidate payments, recognising that short-term financial gains can come at the cost of longer-term accountability, service delivery and development. Livelihood initiatives, including supporting young people to engage in agriculture through activities such as planting kaukau and rice, were also described as providing constructive alternatives to political mobilisation.

Participants also highlighted the role of women peacebuilders in engaging young men. **Women leaders were described as combining credibility and cultural authority with practical interventions**, including livelihood activities and behavioural-change programmes.

CONFLICT MANAGEMENT AND CONFLICT TRANSFORMATION

The distinction between conflict management and conflict transformation helps illuminate the different functions undertaken by mediators and peacebuilders in responding to violence.

Conflict management focuses primarily on containing violence, preventing escalation and resolving specific disputes. This work is often associated with mediation. In Hela and Southern Highlands, mediators frequently draw on customary or community-recognised authority, combining customary conflict resolution practices with approaches learned through training provided by international NGOs. Their legitimacy, relationships and cultural authority enable them to intervene in disputes and facilitate dialogue between parties.

Conflict transformation seeks to address the structural, relational and systemic factors that generate and reproduce conflict. These functions are often associated with peacebuilding and can include reconciliation, youth engagement, peace education, livelihood initiatives, healing and community dialogue.

This distinction echoes previous studies by Conciliation Resources,¹⁰ which have observed that peace efforts in Hela have tended to focus on conflict management rather than conflict transformation. The distinction does not imply that mediators and peacebuilders are separate or mutually exclusive groups. In practice, the same individuals and organisations may undertake both mediation and broader peacebuilding functions, moving between responding to immediate disputes and addressing the conditions that contribute to recurring conflict.

Participants observed that many young men were receptive to this leadership and actively engaged with these initiatives, suggesting that women peacebuilders can play an important preventative role among groups frequently targeted for political mobilisation and election-related violence.

Peace education and community awareness formed another important component of preventative work. Participants described conducting community awareness sessions prior to previous elections, focusing on peaceful participation, conflict prevention and non-violent responses to political disputes. However, these efforts were largely ad hoc and fragmented, with activities undertaken independently by individual organisations or leaders rather than through a coordinated strategy or coalition of community-based organisations.

Despite these emerging approaches, participants highlighted the **absence of formal mechanisms to involve mediators and community peacebuilders in election preparedness and violence prevention**. Apart from a small number of faith leaders, most participants reported not being included in government-led election planning processes, working groups or taskforces. This creates a disconnect between actors working continuously within communities to prevent and address conflict and the formal structures responsible for election preparedness.

Taken together, these experiences point to a gradual shift among some community actors from managing immediate disputes towards addressing the conditions that sustain conflict. Although these peacebuilding efforts remain relatively limited and constrained by funding, capacity and institutional support, strengthening this preventative and systems-oriented approach may provide an important opportunity to reduce the recurrence of election-related violence in Hela and Southern Highlands.

2. During elections

The role of mediators and community peacebuilders becomes more complicated once elections begin. **Their influence, relationships and community trust make them valuable actors within the election process, but also expose them to political pressure and scrutiny.** At the same time, the conditions that enable their mediation and peacebuilding work during the inter-election period are significantly reduced once political competition intensifies.

Because peace actors are widely recognised as influential and trusted figures within their communities, some have previously been called upon to contribute to election administration and management. However, participants who had undertaken these roles described overwhelmingly negative experiences, citing intimidation, political pressure and attempts to influence their decisions. Few expressed a willingness to take on such roles again.

Peace actors also reported being frequently approached by political candidates seeking to secure their support or influence their communities in favour of a particular campaign. Participants suggested that male actors experience this more commonly than female peace actors, reflecting perceived differences in their relative ability to mobilise community support. However, even being seen speaking with a candidate could **generate rumours of political affiliation and undermine perceptions of neutrality**. Participants therefore emphasised the importance of carefully managing their positionality and public profile during elections in order to preserve the trust and impartiality on which their mediation and peacebuilding work depends.

These pressures are compounded by the fact that the election period itself significantly constrains opportunities for proactive peacebuilding work. Participants explained that community engagement becomes more difficult as public attention and community activity become focused on political campaigns, rallies and other election-related activities. The relationships and spaces through which peace actors normally conduct dialogue and community engagement can therefore become less accessible. Participants also reported being constrained in their ability to intervene when they witness electoral irregularities or escalating violence. Speaking out against misconduct, **challenging influential actors or attempting to de-escalate tensions was widely perceived as carrying significant personal and political risks**. Several participants noted that publicly opposing or questioning electoral practices could result in being politically labelled or marginalised, potentially undermining their future ability to operate, access support or maintain constructive relationships with authorities.

As a result, many mediators and peacebuilders described adopting a cautious approach during elections, prioritising their personal safety and protecting the relationships and perceived neutrality that enable them to continue their peacebuilding work beyond the election period. This creates a significant dilemma: **the actors who are often best positioned to prevent or de-escalate conflict may have the greatest constraints on their ability to act when electoral tensions are at their highest.**

STRUCTURAL CONSTRAINTS AND FACTORS AFFECTING PEACEBUILDING EFFECTIVENESS

Building peace in Hela and Southern Highlands is constrained by a combination of political, institutional, and operational factors that are compounded during election periods. These constraints affect both the capacity of local peace actors to undertake sustained peacebuilding and the broader enabling environment in which their work takes place.

1. Reactive and securitised approaches

Study participants described a broader institutional environment in which responses to election-related violence remain predominantly reactive and security-focused. Government responses often concentrate on containing immediate threats through the deployment of security forces into conflict-affected communities, including the Defence Force and specialised units such as Kumul 23. While such deployments can play an important role in containing immediate violence and maintaining security, participants contrasted this approach with the longer-term engagement they considered necessary to address the relationships, grievances and social and political dynamics that sustain conflict. Repeated reliance on security deployments also reinforces **perceptions of conflict as a security problem to be contained through force, rather than a set of underlying relationships and grievances requiring longer-term prevention and transformation**. This reactive emphasis can limit the space, resources and institutional support available for preventative and locally led approaches.

2. Fragmented peacebuilding

Peacebuilding efforts are also constrained by **limited and unpredictable funding, competition among community-based organisations for scarce resources, and weak collaboration between civil society and government**. Participants described an absence of joint election preparedness planning, formal coordination mechanisms, government-civil society partnerships and community-based early warning systems, limiting the ability of peace actors to share information, coordinate prevention efforts and respond to emerging risks before violence escalates.

Coordination among community peacebuilders has also historically been limited by low levels of trust between organisations and by the absence of platforms for trust-building and collective planning. As a result, organisations and individual peace actors often work independently despite operating in the same communities and addressing interconnected drivers of conflict.

This fragmentation limits opportunities to build on their complementary relationships, expertise and forms of legitimacy, and to develop more sustained and coordinated approaches to preventing violence.

3. Peacebuilding disruption during elections

Election periods disrupt ongoing peacebuilding efforts and weaken the continuity on which longer-term relationship-building depends. As communities become absorbed by campaigning, political rallies, and candidate activities, participation in mediation, dialogue, and reconciliation processes declines. Some people involved in mediation and peacebuilding shift their attention to electoral politics, travel with candidates, or become less available for community activities. This can stall or reverse progress made between elections, particularly where peacebuilding processes depend on sustained engagement and relationships.

Peace actors face a structural disadvantage during election periods. **Political candidates arrive with substantial financial resources, vehicles, large campaign events, and material incentives that attract significant community participation**. In contrast, the benefits of mediation, reconciliation, and non-violence are generally less immediate or materially tangible. Without adequate resources and sustained support, community peace actors struggle to maintain visibility and engagement in an environment where political actors command far greater influence over people's time and attention.

As with warlords' interests in maintaining the status quo (see 'During elections' above), some study participants perceived limited political commitment to addressing the underlying drivers of violence, suggesting that established patronage networks and political incentives can work against efforts to change the conditions that sustain conflict. Together, these material and political dynamics constrain the space for locally led mediation and peacebuilding efforts and make it difficult to sustain preventative approaches through periods of heightened political competition.

RISKS, CONCERNS, AND VULNERABILITIES AHEAD OF THE 2027 NATIONAL GENERAL ELECTION

1. Perceptions of risk

Reflecting these concerns, several mediators provided their own assessments of the likelihood of election-related violence across Southern Highlands Province. Some estimated that there was an **80% or greater likelihood of violence occurring in key electorates, including Mendi Central, Nipa-Kutubu, Kagua-Erave, and Mendi-Munihi**. Mediators were even more certain about the provincial contests: many judged violence linked to the Hela and Southern Highlands provincial seats to be almost inevitable given the resources and power at stake. While these estimates are subjective perceptions rather than predictive measures, they illustrate the high level of concern among experienced local mediators and peacebuilders. These perceptions also underscore the widespread expectation that, without significant preventive action, many of the conditions that fuelled previous election violence are likely to persist into the 2027 elections.

2. Unresolved conflicts remain flashpoints

Participants consistently expressed concern that many of the structural vulnerabilities that contributed to violence during previous elections remain unresolved, increasing the risk of renewed violence during the 2027 National General Election. While efforts have been made since 2022 to address insecurity and support peacebuilding, participants generally viewed these as insufficient to address the underlying drivers of conflict. Many therefore anticipated that existing grievances, political competition and insecurity could once again converge as the 2027 election approaches.

Participants emphasised that addressing these vulnerabilities requires sustained engagement and relationship-building over extended periods. **However, they expressed concern that progress made through peacebuilding and reconciliation efforts remains fragile and could be disrupted as political competition intensifies.** This is particularly significant where peace processes remain incomplete and underlying grievances have not been fully addressed.

Across Hela and Southern Highlands, participants identified a number of long-running conflicts that remain unresolved despite sustained mediation and reconciliation efforts. Disputes arising from the 2017 and 2022 National General Elections also continue to generate tension, with several locations identified as potential flashpoints for renewed conflict.

In Hela, these included the conflict surrounding the Magarima Open seat, as well as ongoing tensions in Tagali, Tebi, Hayapuga and Koroba. In Southern Highlands, participants identified Mendi Central, Nipa-Kutubu, Kagua-Erave, Mendi-Munihi and parts of Lai Valley.

While mediation has prevented further escalation in some locations, many peace processes remain incomplete. Participants warned that these unresolved conflicts could become points of renewed mobilisation as political competition intensifies, highlighting the importance of sustained preventative engagement ahead of and throughout the 2027 election period.

3. Contested seats and emerging competition

Study participants also identified several electoral contests that are expected to heighten tensions. The creation of the new Mendi Central electorate in Southern Highlands was widely anticipated to generate intense competition over a newly established parliamentary seat, with many expecting this to become a source of violence. Similarly, the Hela Regional seat was expected to be highly contested, with participants attributing this to widespread dissatisfaction with the current Governor and expectations of a competitive race. The Southern Highlands Regional seat was also identified as a significant area of concern. Participants reported that communities within the Nipa-Kutubu electorate were already preparing for potential violent conflict, with some alleging that groups were arming themselves in anticipation of defending or securing the regional seat during the election period.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Study participants consistently emphasised that community mediators and peacebuilders possess the local legitimacy, relationships and contextual knowledge needed to play a significant role in addressing the above risks and vulnerabilities and preventing election-related violence.

However, they also highlighted that these **strengths are not matched by the resources, coordination, and long-term support required to maximise their impact and sustain their work.** Rather than calling for entirely new interventions, participants emphasised the need to strengthen and sustain existing local peacebuilding capacities ahead of the 2027 National General Election.

1. Invest early, strengthen and sustain locally led peacebuilding

Outside of electoral periods, study participants emphasised the need for sustained investment in locally led peacebuilding. They advocated for a longer-term approach that recognises peacebuilding as a continuous process with local actors supported to build relationships, address underlying drivers of conflict and sustain reconciliation efforts over time. Participants identified ongoing mediation, reconciliation, youth engagement, peace education, healing, community dialogue and livelihood initiatives as important components of this work.

A demand that emerged from interviews was training and capacity strengthening, with participants seeking to expand their own skills in areas such as election preparedness, conflict analysis and youth engagement. This would enable them to respond to evolving political dynamics and engage groups frequently targeted for mobilisation.

Participants also highlighted the need for greater financial and material support. Many described undertaking mediation, reconciliation and awareness activities on a voluntary basis or with minimal external assistance. Limited funding constrained their ability to travel, convene dialogue, support community activities and sustain programmes over time.

Study participants viewed these resources, alongside stronger skills and capacities, as necessary to maintain locally led peacebuilding efforts beyond individual projects or election cycles.

Along with this need for sustained support across the electoral cycle, there is also a need to increase investment ahead of an election. With the 2027 National General Election approaching, support needs to be increased well before campaigning begins, when peace actors still have greater access to communities and space to build relationships and address underlying tensions. As discussed above under 'Amplification of the conflict system', once campaigning begins, political competition can absorb community attention and reduce opportunities for mediation, dialogue and reconciliation.

Early investment would therefore enable local peace actors to strengthen existing peace processes and conduct violence prevention work before this window narrows, while sustained support would help protect and build on this progress across the election period and beyond.

RECOMMENDATION 1. INVEST EARLY AND SUSTAIN LOCALLY LED PEACEBUILDING ACROSS THE ELECTORAL CYCLE

Overall, shift investment from short-term reactive responses towards sustained, locally led prevention across the electoral cycle. For the upcoming 2027 National General Election, investment should be substantially increased before campaigning begins, when peace actors still have greater space to engage communities and address underlying tensions. Investment should include targeted training and capacity strengthening in areas such as election preparedness, conflict analysis, youth engagement and peacebuilding, alongside adequate financial and material resources to support ongoing mediation, reconciliation, peace education, healing, community dialogue and other locally led initiatives.

2. Prioritise young men as key partners in violence prevention

Young men should be a primary focus of election violence prevention efforts. Participants identified them as a group frequently targeted for political mobilisation and often involved in election-related violence, while also highlighting their capacity for leadership and collective action. Importantly, participants described programmes in which young men had developed greater critical thinking, changed their attitudes towards political violence and engaged in constructive activities, including livelihood initiatives. These experiences suggest that the same networks, leadership and agency that can be mobilised for political purposes can also contribute to peace when supported with appropriate skills and opportunities.

Prevention efforts should therefore support programmes that strengthen leadership, promote behavioural and mindset change, build peacebuilding skills, foster civic responsibility and engagement, and expand livelihood opportunities. Initiatives should be designed and delivered in partnership with trusted local civil society organisations and community peacebuilders to ensure they are culturally appropriate, locally grounded and responsive to the realities of Hela and Southern Highlands.

RECOMMENDATION 2. PRIORITISE YOUNG MEN AS KEY PARTNERS IN VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Support programmes that strengthen leadership, peacebuilding skills, civic responsibility, critical thinking and positive behavioural change, while expanding livelihood and other constructive opportunities. Initiatives should be designed and delivered with trusted local organisations and community peacebuilders to ensure they are locally grounded and responsive to the realities of Hela and Southern Highlands.

3. Strengthen election awareness and civic education

Participants identified community awareness as an important but currently fragmented component of election preparedness. Previous awareness activities have promoted peaceful participation and non-violent responses to political disputes, but have generally been conducted independently by individual organisations or leaders. Participants saw value in more consistent and coordinated messaging delivered through trusted local actors.

A coordinated election awareness strategy should build on lessons from previous elections and draw on the experience of community mediators, churches, civil society organisations, and electoral stakeholders.

Messaging should be consistent, locally relevant, and evidence-informed, addressing democratic participation, voting rights and responsibilities, peaceful elections, the consequences of electoral malpractice and violence, and strategies for preventing conflict within communities. Awareness activities should commence well before the election campaign begins and be delivered through trusted local actors with strong community relationships. Coordinated messaging across organisations will help reinforce common peacebuilding messages, reduce duplication, and maximise community reach and impact.

RECOMMENDATION 3. DEVELOP AND IMPLEMENT A COORDINATED ELECTION AWARENESS AND CIVIC EDUCATION STRATEGY

Develop a coordinated strategy drawing on the experience of community mediators, churches, civil society organisations and electoral stakeholders. Messaging should be locally relevant and address democratic participation, voting rights and responsibilities, peaceful elections, electoral malpractice and violence, and practical approaches to preventing conflict within communities. Activities should begin well before campaigning and be delivered through trusted local networks to maximise reach and reinforce consistent messages.

4. Leverage and strengthen ward-level governance for election violence prevention

Participants highlighted the potential role of existing local governance structures in preventing election-related violence. Ward councillors and ward presidents have recognised legitimacy and influence within their communities and are well placed to identify emerging tensions, promote peaceful participation and support local conflict resolution. Greater engagement with these structures would also provide a mechanism for connecting formal governance with existing community mediation and peacebuilding capacities.

Ward councillors and ward presidents should be recognised as important partners in preventing election-related violence.

As elected representatives with recognised legitimacy, local authority, and strong influence within their communities, they are well positioned to shape community decision-making, promote peaceful participation, identify emerging tensions, and support local conflict resolution. Targeted engagement and capacity-building should equip these leaders with the knowledge, skills, and resources to champion peaceful elections, work alongside community mediators and peacebuilders, and encourage non-violent responses to political competition. Investing in these local leaders also provides an opportunity to strengthen community leadership and reinforce locally owned approaches to election violence prevention.

RECOMMENDATION 4. LEVERAGE AND STRENGTHEN WARD-LEVEL GOVERNANCE BY ENGAGING WARD COUNCILLORS AND WARD PRESIDENTS AS KEY PARTNERS IN ELECTION VIOLENCE PREVENTION

Engage ward councillors and ward presidents as partners in election violence prevention, providing targeted capacity-building and resources to enable them to promote peaceful elections, identify emerging tensions, work alongside community mediators and peacebuilders, and support non-violent responses to political competition.

5. Strengthen coordination and coalition-building

Participants identified weak coordination as a major constraint on peacebuilding effectiveness. Community mediators, civil society organisations, churches, women and youth groups and other local actors often work independently, while formal mechanisms for connecting them with government-led election preparedness remain limited. Participants called for stronger networks and more systematic collaboration to enable joint conflict analysis, information sharing, coordinated planning and collective identification of emerging risks.

Strengthening these relationships could also support locally informed early warning and early response, enabling peace actors to identify emerging hotspots earlier and coordinate prevention and de-escalation efforts. Participants emphasised that this requires stronger collaboration both among peacebuilding actors themselves and between community peace actors and government. Provincial and national authorities should recognise community peacebuilders as ongoing partners in prevention, drawing on their contextual knowledge, relationships and community-level presence rather than engaging them only after violence has occurred.

RECOMMENDATION 5. STRENGTHEN COORDINATION AND COALITION-BUILDING AMONG PEACEBUILDING ACTORS AND BETWEEN PEACEBUILDERS AND GOVERNMENT

Establish inclusive provincial election peace and security coordination mechanisms bringing together government agencies, community-based organisations, churches, women and youth representatives, community mediators and other local peacebuilding actors. These platforms should support joint conflict analysis, identification of emerging hotspots, early warning and early response, coordinated planning and collective action. Government and provincial authorities should recognise community peacebuilders as ongoing partners in prevention, rather than engaging them only after violence has occurred.

6. Strengthen election administration, prevention, and security responses

Participants identified gaps in formal election preparedness and security responses in high-risk areas. Some expressed frustration that election observers can document problems without this necessarily leading to timely preventive action, creating a perception that monitoring has limited impact on violence. Participants therefore called for stronger electoral administration, security planning and response capacity in identified high-risk areas, alongside appropriate observation and reporting.

Prevention and security measures should be context-specific and developed in consultation with communities and local peace actors. Participants highlighted the importance of measures that can deter violence, reduce opportunities for intimidation and conflict during polling, and enable timely responses when tensions escalate, including gender-sensitive arrangements where appropriate. Enhanced national and international support in high-risk areas should strengthen prevention and rapid response and support the safe conduct of elections, while complementing rather than replacing locally led peacebuilding capacities.

RECOMMENDATION 6. STRENGTHEN ELECTION ADMINISTRATION, PREVENTION AND SECURITY RESPONSES IN IDENTIFIED HOTSPOTS

In high-risk areas, strengthen electoral administration, security planning and rapid response capacity alongside appropriate observation and reporting mechanisms. Context-specific measures to reduce intimidation and conflict during polling should be considered in consultation with communities, including gender-sensitive arrangements where appropriate. External electoral and security support should complement existing local peacebuilding capacities and be coordinated with community actors.

7. Establish a locally led election-conflict monitoring and analysis mechanism

Participants highlighted the importance of peace actors having a shared understanding of emerging risks and how electoral dynamics interact with existing conflicts. They emphasised the need for actors to share information, monitor changing risks and work together to identify and respond to emerging tensions throughout the election cycle. Building on this need, a longer-term, locally led monitoring and analysis mechanism could provide a practical way to support collective analysis, strengthen coordination and inform preventative action.

The mechanism could operate for 12–18 months, beginning before the 2027 campaign and continuing through campaigning, polling, counting, results and post-election reconciliation. It should be led by community mediators and peacebuilders, with technical support where needed, and designed to strengthen local capacity for collective monitoring and analysis.

Participating peace actors could meet regularly to monitor agreed indicators, including intimidation, mobilisation events, arms movements, displacement, reports of vote buying and mediation activity. This would enable them to identify emerging hotspots, assess changes in conflict dynamics and track how the relationship between elections and existing conflicts shifts across different electoral phases.

By placing community peacebuilders at the centre of monitoring and analysis, the mechanism would build on their existing relationships and contextual knowledge while strengthening their capacity to generate timely, locally informed analysis. It would complement formal election observation and security monitoring by providing a longer-term, conflict-sensitive focus on prevention. Findings could feed into provincial election preparedness and peace and security coordination mechanisms, providing locally generated analysis to inform joint planning, early warning and early response, as outlined in Recommendations 5 and 6.

RECOMMENDATION 7. ESTABLISH A LOCALLY LED ELECTION-CONFLICT MONITORING AND ANALYSIS MECHANISM TO STRENGTHEN EARLY WARNING, COORDINATION AND PREVENTION

Establish a 12–18-month mechanism beginning before the 2027 campaign and continuing through campaigning, polling, counting, results and post-election reconciliation. The mechanism should be led by community mediators and peacebuilders, with technical support where needed, and monitor agreed indicators of changing conflict and electoral risks. Its findings should inform provincial election preparedness, early warning and early response, and be linked to the coordination mechanisms proposed in Recommendations 5 and 6.

Endnotes

1. See Terence Wood, Maholopa Laveil and Michael Kabuni, 'Troubles and Puzzles: The 2022 General Elections in Papua New Guinea', *The Journal of Pacific History* 58(4) (2023), 444–66.
2. See Nicole Haley and Kerry Zubrinich, *2017 Papua New Guinea General Elections: Election Observation Report* (Report, 2018); Radio New Zealand, 'PNG PM condemns shooting of returning officer' (7 June 2022).
3. See International Foundation for Electoral Systems, *Violence Against Women in Elections Papua New Guinea: An IFES Assessment* (Report, June 2023).
4. See Special Parliamentary Committee on 2022 General Elections, *Report to Parliament: Inquiry into the 2022 National General Elections* (Report, November 2023); Australian Broadcasting Corporation, 'Tribal fighting over PNG election leaves dozens dead and villages deserted' (3 May 2023).
5. See International Foundation for Electoral Systems, *Violence Against Women in Elections Papua New Guinea: An IFES Assessment* (Report, June 2023); United Nations, 'UN condemns election-related violence across Papua New Guinea Highlands' (UN News, 21 July 2022).
6. See Transparency International PNG, *TIPNG Domestic Election Observation Report 2022* (Report, 2022).
7. See Miranda Forsyth and Sinclair Dinnen, 'Building peace from the ground up: a call for a peace strategy in PNG' (Devpolicy Blog, 15 April 2025); Conciliation Resources, *Conflict Challenges and Opportunities for Building Peace in Hela Province, Papua New Guinea* (Report, 2022).
8. Wood et al., 'Troubles and Puzzles', 2023.
9. In February 2026, the Papua New Guinea Government launched the National Firearms Amnesty and Buy-Back Program to reduce the number of firearms in communities ahead of the 2027 elections. As part of the program, citizens are offered cash in exchange for surrendering illegal firearms.
10. See Conciliation Resources, *Conflict Challenges and Opportunities for Building Peace in Hela Province, Papua New Guinea* (Report, 2022); Conciliation Resources, 'Wai manga! We want a peaceful Hela!' – Perspectives and Experiences of Peace and Justice in Hela (Report, 2024).

ANNEX 1:

STUDY METHODOLOGY

This study adopted a qualitative research design to examine the role of community mediators and peacebuilders in preventing and responding to election-related violence in Hela and Southern Highlands Provinces. The research explored four broad areas:

- how elections shape local conflict dynamics;
- the roles of mediators and community peacebuilders before, during, and after elections;
- the challenges and risks they face; and
- the support needed to strengthen locally led peacebuilding ahead of the 2027 National General Election.

A cross-cutting focus examined the gendered dimensions of election-related violence and peacebuilding.

1. Literature Review

A targeted review of academic literature, policy reports, and grey literature was undertaken to examine existing knowledge on election-related violence in Papua New Guinea, with particular attention to Hela and Southern Highlands Provinces. The review explored the drivers of election violence, previous violence prevention initiatives, and the role of local peacebuilding actors, helping to identify evidence gaps addressed through this study.

2. Semi-structured Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 30 stakeholders, including mediators, community peacebuilders, and provincial government representatives in Hela and Southern Highlands Provinces.

Ten individual interviews and six group discussions were conducted over almost two weeks using open-ended questions that explored participants' experiences of previous elections, anticipated risks ahead of the 2027 National General Election, their peacebuilding roles, challenges, and support needs.

Participants were initially identified through the UNDP Joint Highlands Programme network of mediators, with additional participants recruited through purposive and snowball sampling in collaboration with provincial government representatives and local organisations.

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed with participants' consent. Transcripts were analysed using thematic analysis to identify recurring themes, patterns, and perspectives across participants' experiences.

The interview guide covered five broad areas of inquiry, outlined on [the following page](#).

3. Sense making

Preliminary findings were presented to a small group of Conciliation Resources staff through a facilitated sense-making session. The discussion was used to test emerging themes, refine interpretations, explore implications for future programming, and strengthen the report's recommendations.

Areas of research

Guiding questions

1. Impact of elections on peace and conflict

- What has been your **experience** of elections in your province?
- How did previous elections **impact** peace and conflict in your community? Did anything change in the lead-up to, during or after? How and why?
- What are your main **concerns** regarding the 2027 elections? How do you think these elections will go in your region?
- How do you see the election driving **violence**?
- Are there any areas that are more **vulnerable**?

2. Peacebuilders' roles during elections

- What was your **role** during the last elections?
- What do you think will be your role during **2027**?
- How do you see your role in supporting the upcoming elections particularly in terms of **managing risks of violence**?
- What do you think will be important for you to do/ you can do during elections to **support** your community?

3. Impact of elections on peacebuilders

- Have previous elections **changed** the way you approached your peacebuilding or leadership role in the community? How and why? (e.g. pause work, intensify, shift focus on new issues, added safeguards)
- Do you think the upcoming **2027** election will affect your leadership or peacebuilding role in the community? How and why?
- What **risks** do peacebuilders face when engaging in election-related and non-election-related mediation (e.g. retaliation, political pressure)?
- How do mediators navigate **neutrality**?
- What coping strategies do you use to manage personal **safety** and community **expectations**?

4. Support needed

- What **support** and **resources** (training, networks, funding, protection mechanisms) do you currently rely on for your peacebuilding work, and where are the **gaps**?
- What would you **need** to help you in that role? (e.g. financial resources, emotional, practical, safety, skills)
- In your experience, how effective is the **coordination** and collaboration between different stakeholders during elections?
- Are peacebuilders/mediators **included** in coordination mechanisms with other actors?

5. Recommendations

- Is there anything else that we haven't covered?
- Are there any recommendations for **improving** the **effectiveness** of peacebuilders in preventing and managing violence during elections?

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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