



**CONCILIATION
RESOURCES**

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

Summary Report

Hela Province in Papua New Guinea is experiencing significant rates of violent conflict. This report presents preliminary findings of the underlying causes of violent conflict in Hela, and begins to map opportunities to support peacebuilding initiatives.

The report is based on stories captured from key individuals and groups working to build peace in Hela Province. Participants in this research include civil society (including church-based actors) who are seeking to build peace in diverse ways including mediating and negotiating conflicts, raising awareness on the impacts of violence, and aspiring to transform norms around the use of violence. They are doing this work amidst significant conflict challenges, a lack of resources, and limited opportunities for collaboration. The full report details some of the peacebuilding efforts taking place in Hela in more detail.

As violent conflict is highly localised in Hela, this report cannot capture every conflict dynamic at play. Further analysis is needed on a community-by-community basis. Below is a summary of some of the overarching factors driving conflict in Hela. Following this summary are key recommendations for supporting peace efforts in Hela. The recommendations suggest ways to move beyond efforts to bring about a cessation to fighting, and to transform relationships in order to breakdown cycles of violence.

CONFLICT DRIVERS

Hela Province is experiencing a range of factors which underlie why violent conflict occurs. These conflict drivers are interconnected and operate together to exacerbate the levels of violence experienced by people in Hela.

1. Customary practices that can perpetuate violence

Intergroup conflict, which often stretches back generations, is the most prominent type of violence in Hela. Fighting is a legitimate means with which to solve disputes in Hela. Fights start between two individuals, known as the “war source” or *wai tene*. These individuals pull supporters into their fights through both kinship and other social networks. Accounting for deaths leads to either revenge killings, thus perpetuating cycles of violence, or complex and expensive compensation agreements. Disputes over compensation agreements can often themselves fuel cycles of violence.

2. Deterioration of customary authority and limits on violence

In the past, limits on violence and fighting existed alongside other dispute management mechanisms such as mediation and public meetings held by elders. These mechanisms no longer appear to be functioning. By far, the greatest change has been the influx of modern weaponry. With the introduction of factory-made firearms, high death tolls can result from a single man in a matter of minutes. Gunmen are now key actors within the economic, political and social context. Gunmen also hire themselves out in fights and contribute to the constant shifting of intragroup power dynamics in operation.

3. Land disputes and failed development

As in other areas of PNG, intergroup and intragroup conflict over land custodianship underpins violent conflict in Hela. In Hela, rights to land are complex and involve a tiered system of overlapping claims. People in Hela are highly mobile, and as people generate deeper connections to land through movement, settlement and agricultural use over generations, claims over land ownership increases. Mobility is further exacerbated by displacement due to conflict, where people have fled from trouble spots, and end up living on someone else’s land. Complex land arrangements also mean that resource extractive projects – including the PNG-LNG liquified natural gas project – can exacerbate land issues, especially around who receives benefits. The PNG-LNG project created expectations of development, and the failures to deliver on these promises continues to underlie a sense of frustration.

4. Competition for power in a patronage-based political system

Set against growing frustration and inequality, competition for political and economic power drives violence in Hela. There is a general atmosphere of fierce competition around political processes such as elections, and control of state resources. When leaders are voted into office, they often only direct resources to those constituents that supported them, resulting in patchwork of infrastructure and government services. Guns have typically overtaken pigs as the highest value commodity in defining leadership in communities and access to guns generates influence within the political system.

5. Ideals of masculinity and gender norms as motivators of violence

Ideals of masculinity in Hela typically demands engagement in fighting. Forms of masculinity linked to honour and respect can play a role in promoting and legitimising the use of violence. While customarily there is an emphasis on individual choice, in practice resisting participation can result in social isolation. Cultures of violence are embedded in the social fabric, for example, boys are sometimes given names which remind them of the vengeance they owe their kin. Women may encourage violence through ceremonial acts which demand that men join battles.

6. Ineffective rule of law and inadequate state-based justice mechanisms

Conflict drivers unfold in a context of limited policing capacity, especially outside the provincial capital, Tari. With many remote and isolated regions, the police force is unable to police communities or investigate crimes. Police may be “outgunned” by fighters, or may have kinship ties with fighting parties. Some police have been accused of using disproportionate force, and supplying guns and ammunition to fighters. Justice is contested as there remains ongoing challenges in how people in Hela understand justice in relation to ideals of western statehood. Within the judiciary itself, there is a confusion over roles and responsibility of different court officials, accusations of bribery, and often large time-delays in cases of land mediation.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SUPPORTING PEACEBUILDING

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.

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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