

Building peace from the ground up: a call for a peace strategy in PNG

by Miranda Forsyth and Sinclair Dinnen

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Exchanging gifts at a peace ceremony at Par, Enga Province, PNG

Photo Credit: Philip Gibb

A recent appeal from sixty Peace Officials in Jiwaka Province sounds an urgent alarm about the crumbling foundations of grassroots peacebuilding in Papua New Guinea.

These frontline mediators recently threatened to abandon their vital work entirely. The officials had gathered for a workshop hosted by the NGO Voice For Change to discuss the challenges and successes they face in their essential role. Statistics shared during the meeting revealed a concerning situation. Between January 2024 and February 2025, Peace Officials mediated 277 cases across the province, including 54 murders, 30 incidents of sexual violence (rapes), and 24 cases of sorcery-accusation-related violence.

Disturbingly, 99% of these cases saw no formal justice-system response, with resolutions limited to compensations mediated by the officials due to systemic barriers in accessing the legal system. A key demand arising from the meeting was the establishment of an Act or other legal framework to govern peace operations in Jiwaka Province. The officials emphasized the need for a proper organisational structure to formalize their work and ensure recognition and support from authorities.

The meeting also brought attention to the inadequate remuneration Peace Officials currently receive — only K80 per month — with no provision for risk allowances despite their operating in high-conflict areas. Officials often work long hours, travel great distances and take on significant personal risk without adequate compensation or support. Their ultimatum reveals how this critical infrastructure — which contributes to maintaining what little peace exists — is dangerously close to collapse.

This situation is particularly alarming given what our research has consistently shown: that the most effective peacebuilding in PNG relies heavily on local

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champions and coalitions of civil society and faith-based organisations, as exemplified by [recent peacebuilding initiatives](#) in Enga province.

Peacebuilding is needed because violence continues to be [a terrible problem](#) across many parts of the country. It destroys lives and communities and undermines economic and social development.

The Jiwaka peace officials are right that PNG urgently requires formal structures around peacebuilding. There is a need for a national strategy that integrates local knowledge, fosters community resilience and is responsive to the socio-cultural realities of the different regions in the country. It must also emphasize youth engagement, as well as women's participation in peacebuilding and conflict resolution, consistent with the Women, Peace and Security agenda established through [UN Security Council Resolution 1325](#).

One example of a holistic approach to peace can be seen in the comprehensive peacebuilding strategy [followed by the city of Hiroshima](#) following the devastation it faced when the US dropped an atomic bomb on it during WW2. Rather than responding with vengefulness, the city embraced advocacy for peace as part of its new identity and adopted a range of peacebuilding initiatives, starting with training in peace in primary schools.

The absence of a long-term, comprehensive peacebuilding strategy within both state institutions and the security sector in PNG leaves significant gaps in efforts to effectively respond to violence and build peace. There is an over-reliance on a highly punitive and militarised approach to addressing violence, as illustrated by the [Counter Terrorism Bill in December 2024](#). One of [the many problems](#) with "law and order" as the only modality of responding to civilian violence is that PNG (like almost every country in the world) simply does not have the capacity to enforce peace through force.

A comprehensive peace strategy would require significant reforms in how state security institutions operate. Currently, there are no training programs, courses or study programs offered at any PNG training or educational institution in peace and security studies. The training academies for PNG's security forces, such as the police and military, do not include peacebuilding or conflict resolution modules in their curriculum. This represents a critical gap in the country's educational and security training landscape.

The development of a national peacebuilding strategy should be done in an inclusive and participatory way. This requires space to hear the voices of youth. They are disproportionately impacted by violence and have enormous potential to

steer a new course towards peace.

A good start would be the convening of a series of dialogues to produce consensus on the key values that the peace strategy should be based upon. Centring the voices of youth and acknowledging the lessons to be learned from those who are already working tirelessly on the ground to bring about peace is critical. An excellent role model is the work that has been done by the NGO PACSIA in Bougainville, which has convened **ongoing dialogue forums** about peacebuilding and, more recently, the referendum and transition. These bring together youth, women and civil society groups, along with relevant government representatives and local businesses. Such dialogues are not just about reducing violence but about building the conditions for communities to thrive.

The Peace Officials of Jiwaka are sending us a clear message — the foundations of peace are crumbling, and we must act now to rebuild them from the ground up. The upcoming celebration of 50 years of Independence would be a good time to start.

Author/s:

Miranda Forsyth

Miranda Forsyth is a professor at the **School of Regulation and Global Governance (RegNet)** at ANU and ARC Future Fellow.

Sinclair Dinnen

Sinclair Dinnen is Emeritus Professor in the Department of Pacific Affairs at the Australian National University.

Link:

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