

How to address escalating violence in PNG

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Photo Credit: Philip Gibbs

There is currently a serious problem with tribal fighting and gang violence in some of the Highland provinces of Papua New Guinea. In many areas, the violence surrounding the July 2022 election has essentially continued as a series of rolling fights. The **most recent violent event** to hit the news is a kidnapping of women and girls in Hela Province. They were brutally raped and subjected to other unnamed horrors before being released.

The problem seems so intractable, widespread and repeated that it is hard to know where to begin. The dominant outcome is impunity for perpetrators. Impunity is justified by reference to difficulties of access and transport, of communication, scarcity of government resources, and the considerable firepower of the feuding parties and gang members. All these are truly difficult logistical obstacles.

But, they are less insurmountable obstacles if we stop viewing the incidents as isolated events, and start seeing them as repeated patterns of behaviour. Paying attention to the systemic and cyclical nature of intergroup fighting highlights two much underused resources in the intervention armoury: timing of interventions, and networks with local communities.

In regard to timing, we use as an illustration a tragic recent case in Enga Province that personally affected one of us. William's father was murdered, along with three other men, when he attended a peace mediation talk between two clans. This gave rise to immense pressure for payback from William's clan, but there were many level heads within the clan of the deceased who realised that this could trigger an ever-increasing cycle of violence. They put enormous efforts into containing the forces crying out for revenge – channelling their own resources, oratory skills and charisma towards this objective. Against all odds, clan and community leaders managed to stop the violence for 14 days while the *haus krai* and burial occurred. The immensity of this feat should not be underestimated.

The leaders knew that this temporary peace had an end date; they alone were not

strong enough to permanently stop the violence. So they actively sought out the state's police force to help them and, they hoped, take the burden from their shoulders by arresting the perpetrators of the original four murders. Unfortunately, the police did not intervene as hoped.

The force of those speaking for peace was eventually overwhelmed by those thirsting for war, and cycle after cycle of attack and revenge occurred, drawing in old conflicts from two or three decades ago. It turned out to be one clan who spoke for peace, against 18 others who mobilised for violence. At the height of the conflict, the state finally sent police and military personnel who were on the ground. They were quickly overwhelmed, as by that stage the violence had escalated with the use of high-powered weapons.

We see this pattern repeated again and again. The state only intervenes too late, when the incident has already got out of hand and is beyond its limited resources to contain. The lesson about temporality is clear: interventions need to be made before the escalation of violence occurs, or after the violence has petered out and before the next cycle begins.

How do we know about the timing of these cycles of violence? This is where the other resource in the intervention armoury comes into play – networks with local leaders.

The most significant resource to address such violence in PNG is not the police or the military, it is the actions of local leaders and their communities. We see this in the Enga example above, where clan leaders were able to contain the forces of violence for a period, and also in an earlier Hela kidnapping case, where local communities were instrumental in securing the release of academics and their assistants who had been kidnapped in February. Time after time, it is clan leaders, pastors, youth and women leaders who organise ceasefires, negotiate *bel kol* (temporary truce), and take public stands against violence.

Local leaders and peacebuilders have levels of understanding and knowledge of the perpetrators and the surrounding context that police and the state lack. They have detailed understanding of the historical background to conflicts, which requires mastery of the local language, cultural traditions, and oral histories of conflict. They also possess a range of non-conventional techniques that allow them to effectively utilise cultural nuances to build peace in ways the state cannot. Local knowledge and local leaders are crucial to finding a solution to conflicts in any society, and are responsible for the most successful interventions and peacebuilding in PNG.

Despite this, they are overlooked and underused in the country's response

framework. To be clear, the state relies upon them, and regularly acknowledges their work, but does not include them as key parties in strategic planning. Even more problematically, their ad hoc reliance but uncertain subsequent support (for example in terms of protection) means that, at the moment, communities and leaders supporting the state often risk placing themselves in an incredibly vulnerable and dangerous situation. The latest Hela kidnapping is a case in point: according to media reports, the women were targeted as a result of helping the state, which did not in turn protect them.

The state is seeking to significantly ramp up its response to such threats of what is now being called “domestic terrorism” through strategies such as [amendments to the Criminal Code](#), and [bringing together](#) PNG defence personnel, members of the Special Services Division and police investigators. Currently missing from this approach is reference to strategic engagement with local leaders and peacebuilders, whose participation would give some reassurance that this may not be empty words.

We argue that local leaders and local insights into the temporality of the cycles of violence in the Highlands are two resources that are currently being overlooked in responses to the ongoing violence.

What is urgently required is significant investment in the development of contact points, communication networks and coordination mechanisms with local communities. This should be a key new plank in the government’s strategic response to the escalation of violence in the country, and should also be on the agenda of non-state actors. One mechanism to consider could be to collaboratively engage in [peace mapping](#) exercises.

Interactions with non-state actors must be done in ways that prioritise the safety of local leaders. This may mean there is a need to wait for the right moment, to ensure confidentiality to the extent possible, and also to provide dependable and consistent support and backup for those who support the state.

The aim should be for communication in both directions in order to enable responsiveness by the police and defence force to emerging incidents of violence, so they can respond before they get out of control; and for the police to be able to quickly mobilise local leaders, magistrates, councillors and church groups in violence-prone situations to work effectively with the state.

In sum, the pathway forward should be to work strategically with an understanding of the cycles of violence as to when intervention is most likely to be successful, and in respectful and supportive partnership with peacebuilders at the community level.

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