

Post-conflict Bougainville part 1: the Crisis and its legacies

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Buka Harbour, Bougainville
Photo Credit: Sinclair Dinnen

Bougainville’s decade-long conflict formally ended with the signing of the 2001 Bougainville Peace Agreement (BPA). This established the Autonomous Region of Bougainville (ARB) and set in train a complex pathway towards possible independence that continues to play out today.

However legacies of “the Crisis” continue more than two decades later. One way to understand this is to go beyond the popular framing of the Crisis as having been between armed separatists and the PNG state and see it as one that also involved multiple local-scale conflicts between Bougainvilleans themselves. Its legacies today include individual and collective trauma and enduring divisions and animosities that affect the wellbeing of communities and the ability of the ARB to move forward. The sons of combatants are now starting to ask questions about settling old scores. For many orphans and widows, the search for the bones of their lost ones continues to haunt them.

In the first of this two-part series, we look at some of these legacies through the lens of current social-order problems in the ARB. Our argument is that what today tend to be framed as “law and order” issues, such as violence and endemic drug and alcohol abuse, are often linked in complex ways to the earlier crisis. Rather than relying on punitive policing responses, as is increasingly advocated, there remains a critical role for peacebuilding if underlying issues are also to be addressed. While new priorities are emerging, we contend that peacebuilding should continue as a major focus in Bougainville.

In Part 2, we discuss a concrete example of an initiative that seeks to combine peacebuilding and justice approaches. This is the Bougainville Community Peace and Security Task Unit proposed as part of a new architecture of community peace and security for the ARB.

Bougainville conforms to a broader pattern in “post-conflict” societies where **violence persists** long after formal declarations of peace. Signs of unresolved

trauma and other stresses are evident in many of today's social-order problems including marijuana and alcohol abuse, high levels of gender, family and sexual violence, sorcery accusation-related violence (SARV), and land disputes. These are often inter-related and compounding; for example, substance abuse aggravates family and sexual violence.

Although systematic evidence is lacking, the Crisis had diverse and complex **mental health and psychosocial impacts**. A 2012 UN survey found that mental ill-health was "highly prevalent" among both men and women in Bougainville and associated with a high incidence of rape, intimate partner violence, substance abuse and depressive and suicidal symptoms. Many respondents disclosed difficulties with intimate relationships and controlling aggression, and continuing community and family strife related to the conflict. Similar findings emerged from **a study of family health and safety**. Large numbers of **missing persons** are another source of unresolved grief among relatives unable to say proper farewells and conduct burial ceremonies.

Trauma is not confined to those who directly experienced, witnessed or engaged in violence during the Crisis. Trans-generational impacts are palpable among many born after the conflict, stemming from **their exposure to trauma-related behaviour** by parents, relatives and others in their communities. Particular concerns have been raised about Bougainville's so-called "**lost generation**". As well as trans-generational trauma, the post-conflict generation faces severely constrained educational, employment and livelihood prospects owing to the devastating economic effects of the Crisis.

Endemic substance abuse is occurring in the context of the acute socio-economic precarity experienced by young Bougainvilleans. The Crisis is also implicated in this abuse in other ways. Little heard of in pre-crisis days, marijuana and homebrew became major items of trade and exchange during the PNG Government-imposed blockade.

Community breakdown and the erosion of traditional leadership associated with the Crisis are also contributing to current social-order issues, including those affecting youth. As in other post-conflict settings, this has included reshaping social relations. For young Bougainvillean men today, role models for masculine leadership are more likely to be ex-combatants than traditional leaders. With reputations built on wartime exploits, such role models can enhance perceptions about the efficacy of violence as **a viable pathway to status and power**.

Although not new to Bougainville, SARV increased markedly during the Crisis and has persisted as both a major source and symptom of social discord in the years since. The Bougainville Revolutionary Army (BRA) sought to instrumentalise **sorcery**

as a weapon of war in the early phase of the conflict. Dissatisfied with the contribution made by the sorcerers to the war effort, BRA leader Francis Ona is widely believed to have issued a standing order to use violence against suspected sorcerers. In the present context of limited government services, including health and education, accusations of sorcery have proliferated. Current ARB President [Ishmael Toroama](#), a former senior BRA commander, has [publicly condemned](#) sorcery-related killings and reportedly tried to rescind Ona's standing order at a [reconciliation ceremony at Panguna](#).

In the years before and after the BPA, Bougainville was suffused in peacebuilding initiatives and training by skilled local practitioners, often volunteers. From 1994, [Peace Foundation Melanesia](#) (PFM), a grassroots NGO, spent years training village leaders to be peacemakers. The Nazarene Rehabilitation Centre, led by Sister Lorraine Garasu, also established its formidable peacemaking programs at this time.

Over the following two decades, the attention of Bougainville's leaders moved on from peacebuilding. New priorities arose, and skills that were widely embedded in communities started to atrophy. Social-order issues that were previously viewed through a peacebuilding lens are increasingly seen [as law and order problems in need of resolute law enforcement](#).

Fortunately, the past few years has seen a small resurgence of interest in peacebuilding. As well as the continuing efforts of Sister Lorraine and her team, a new group of peacebuilders has emerged: the ex-combatants themselves. Chris Uma, a renowned former BRA leader, is an excellent example. Following reflection upon his and his comrades' actions during the Crisis, he has established a safe village for men fleeing from accusations of sorcery, settling the accusations and enabling the men to be reintegrated into their communities. Another example is the program of community dialogues led by the Brisbane-based NGO, [Peace and Conflict Studies Institute Australia](#). Like the PFM, they both provide capacity building and forums for public dialogue about the issues that continue to haunt Bougainville's communities. Inclusive dialogues are the best mechanism for ensuring a peaceful outcome to the referendum process.

Former combatants and the successful referendum following an intensive participatory process tell us that continued peacebuilding is still needed in Bougainville. While effective law and justice responses are also needed, that should not be the only lens through which current social-order issues are viewed. Justice and peacebuilding are intrinsically linked, with the former aimed at stopping and deterring harmful behaviour, while the latter helps address the deeper causes of such behaviour.

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