



| POLICY BRIEF

Building Peace Amidst the Papua Conflict: Supporting Grassroots Protection and Peacebuilding Agents



**CREATING
SAFER SPACE**
STRENGTHENING CIVILIAN PROTECTION
AMIDST VIOLENT CONFLICT



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Introduction

Armed conflict and violence in Papua have been ongoing since the region was integrated into Indonesia in 1964. Studies and reports show that the conflict has claimed lives among indigenous Papuans, Indonesian transmigrants, and members of the Indonesian military. This situation prompted the International Centre for Aceh and Indian Ocean Studies (ICAIOS), Nonviolent Peaceforce Philippines (NPP), and Nurani Perdamaian Indonesia (NP IND) to jointly explore two questions:

- 1) What has caused and prolonged the conflict?**
- 2) How do civilians protect themselves and others from the violent armed conflict?**

The researchers conducted fieldwork from mid-October to mid-November 2022 and in July 2023. Data was collected through face-to-face interviews with representatives of local civil society organisations (CSOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs), church organisations, activists, students, and academics in Sorong, Wamena, Jayapura, Jogjakarta, and Jakarta. In Sorong, our team also worked with internally displaced people (IDPs). Data was additionally collected through focus group discussions and a hand-drawing and storytelling research method with research participants from the above-mentioned groups in Jayapura and Sorong.



Findings

1. Conflict Causes

Our research found that natural resources are not the only cause of prolonged conflict in Papua. One of the main points of contention between Papuans and the Indonesian government, which is of fundamental importance to the Papuans, is land. Meanwhile, the traditional state security-centric approach employed by Indonesia to quell Papuan discontent, in which the government uses the military to violently suppress (un)armed protests and threats, has prolonged and worsened the conflict.

Indigenous Papuans and the Indonesian government have incompatible conceptions of land. The Papuans call their land “mama” or “mother”. This cultural concept differs from that of many other ethnic groups in Indonesia as well as from the government’s approach to land. The concept of land as “mother [nature]” is the core of Papuan culture, cosmovision, and identity, and of their social arrangements and politics. As a “mama”, the land cannot be traded. As the basis of social arrangements and politics,

the land is collectively owned by a group [clan]. Papuans do not recognize individual ownership over land. In this understanding of land ownership, there is not a single square centimetre of land without a rightful owner, even though this land may be located far from any settlement.

This Papuan understanding of land contrasts sharply with that of the Indonesian state, whose concept of land is enshrined in Agrarian Law No 5/1960. According to this law, the Indonesian government is the first owner of right to land in the country and everything above and underneath it. For the sake of development and the common good, the government has the right to appropriate uncertified and unpopulated land such as jungle. Neglecting the local concept of collective land ownership and its significance, the government has expropriated Papuan land for development purposes. This has exacerbated the conflict and escalated the armed violence in Papua.

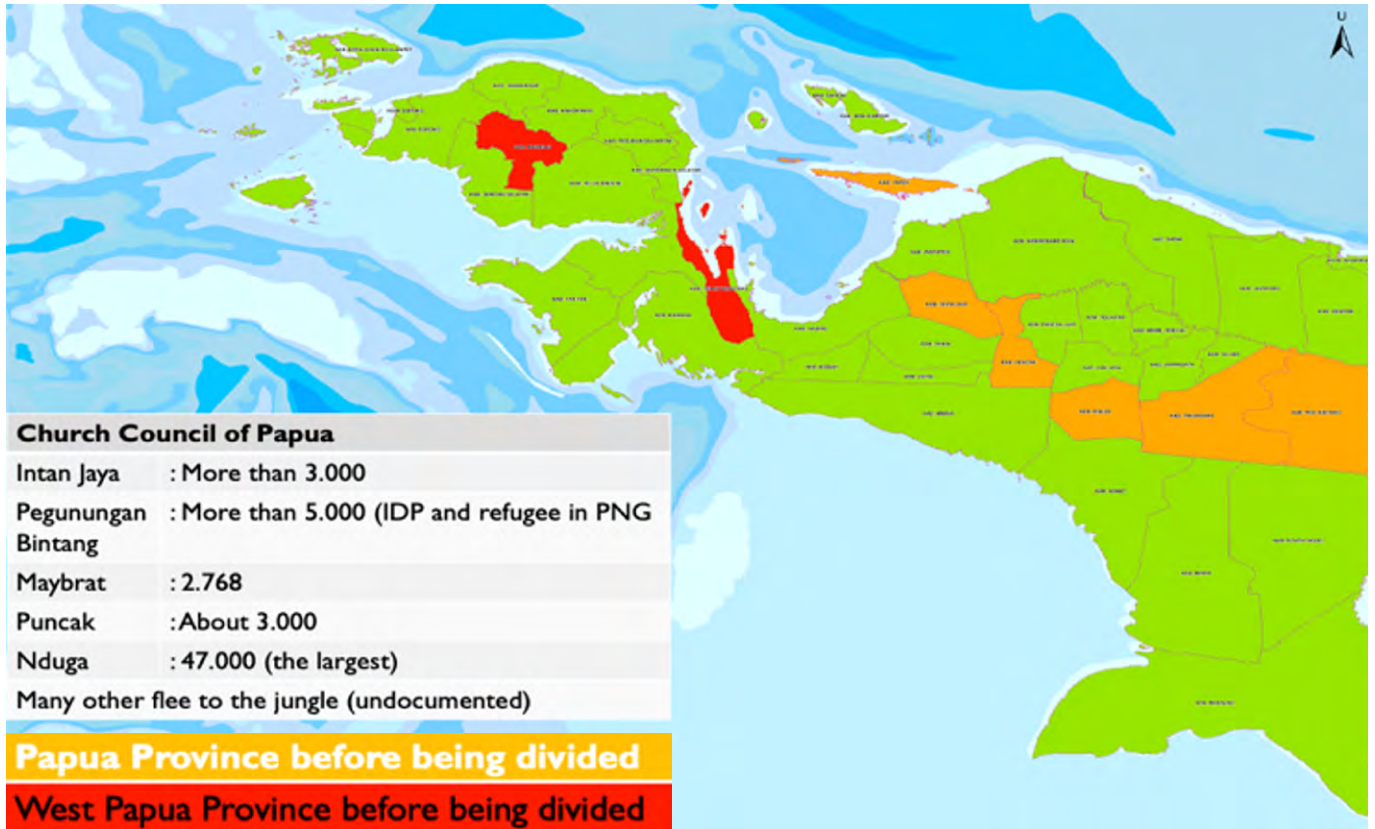
For the sake of development, the Indonesian government has also sponsored internal



No, it is not for sale. The land is mama. It symbolizes mama. Meaning that we are created from land, grow from the land provided, and shall be buried into the land. So we have to protect the land at any cost just as we protect our mother. As a mother who gives birth and raises kids, the land has its sons. Every Papuan connects spiritually to any element of the land [in terms of totem]. No matter how far away the land is [located], it is not without a right owner. There is no free land in Papua. And there isn't [any land] for sale.

Ariki, Chief of Lapago tribe





Distribution of IDPs in Papua since 2018 (sourced from the Church Council of Papua)

migrants (transmigrants) and confiscated and converted land for mining, large-scale plantations, and transmigrant settlements, which have grown and expanded into transmigrant-dominated cities. This has harmed Papuan identity, culture, social organisation, and politics. It has also worsened the conflict and expanded it from conflict between military forces and Papua's insurgency armed groups to conflict between civilians (indigenous Papuans and transmigrants).

Civilians have been the most affected group since the start of the armed conflict in 1962. A large number have sought shelter in the neighbouring country of Papua New Guinea, become IDPs in cities like Sorong, Jayapura, and Wamena, or fled to the jungle to seek protection from the nature they call "mama". The latter IDP group has not been documented and cannot be accessed for aid distribution.

Poverty caused by the conflict has resulted in crime and communal conflicts as people and communities compete for scarce resources to survive. In their new places, IDPs restart their lives with minimum assistance from local governments and civil society. It is indeed difficult to recognize them as IDPs as there is no specific temporary shelter provided. In Sorong, we found that IDPs stay in rented houses inhabited by a minimum of four IDP families. The IDPs are stigmatised as rebellious against the state rather than being recognized as victims of the conflict. This makes them vulnerable to other forms of harm and violence. Since IDPs' needs are not adequately addressed, they sometimes contribute to social and economic problems in the host communities, as their need to survive prevails over respect for law and order.

2. Civilian Protection from Violent Conflict

In the absence of peaceful resolutions to the conflict, there are nevertheless infrastructures and initiatives that protect civilians from violent armed conflict. The most well-accepted infrastructure is provided by both the Catholic and Protestant churches. Due to their extended historical services to the Papuans, the priests have been the main peace and protective actors in the field. The IDPs in both Wamena and Sorong, and Papuans in general, find comfort and trust in priests. The priests also protect civilians in conflict zones. Given their strong presence and influence within the community and their recognisable religious attributes and appearance, they have played a significant role as protective agents for civilians trapped in the middle of armed clashes between conflicting parties. Some have bravely walked into the middle of armed clashes to save and protect frightened civilians. They have also turned churches into safe havens for civilians in conflict zones.

Local civil society organizations (CSOs) have also played a fundamental role in reducing violence and leading conflict management efforts. CSOs address different issues, depending on their mission in the field. Some

manage conflict over land, for example, while others prepare youth for conflict management tasks. Their most significant role has been in reducing social violence and intra- and interethnic conflict in Papua. They have also supported IDPs by collecting and distributing aid.

Both religious authorities and CSOs have been subject to harm and violence from the conflicting parties, the Indonesian military and the armed wing of the Free Papua Movement. They have been under tight surveillance and, being aware of the risk of their work in conflict situations, have adopted strategies to protect themselves. Nonetheless, many of the peace and protection actors, including priests, have been killed while carrying out their nonpartisan and humanitarian duties. This situation jeopardises other civilians in need of protection.

Priests and CSOs have developed mechanisms to protect themselves and others based on their experiences and observations of conflict situations and threats. However, their strategies and mechanisms are unsystematic, unorganised, and dependent on individual capacity, on which the community then relies for protection.

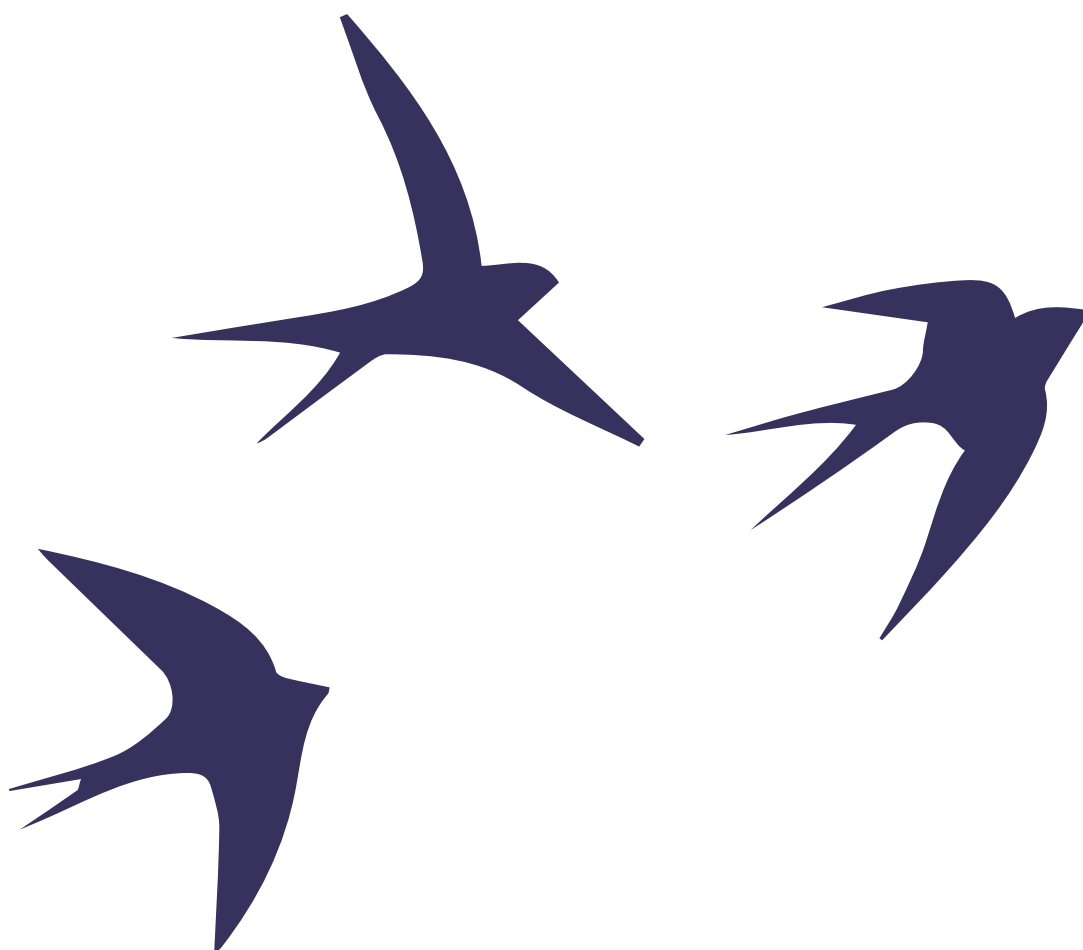
To increase their capacity to protect, protective actors and community groups

“By the military forces, we are threatened. By the police, we are threatened. And by the OPM [Papuan Freedom Organization], we are also threatened.”

Ambros Yulusat, Papuan Activist

and leaders (religious, social, and cultural) should be introduced to systematic strategies and mechanisms for unarmed civilian protection. Such capacity building may include, among others, protective accompaniment and presence, proactive engagement, community-led safety and security mechanisms such as structured early warning and early response (EWER), conflict de-escalation techniques, and the establishment of weapons-free zones. This approach is successfully practised in other countries that have experienced unrest, including Myanmar, the Philippines (Bangsamoro), and Thailand (Pattani). In these areas, the protection mechanisms help reduce violence and, at the same time, create dialog routes between multi-level leadership structures, thereby also increasing the chance for peacebuilding.

Our research found that local civilians, especially members of CSOs and NGOs, must be capacitated in these aspects, to offer them recognition of their work and support them in their humanitarian and protection mission. There is a great opportunity to lead civilians from merely being concerned about their grievances with respect to the conflict in Papua, which potentially drives them to take sides, to focusing on humanitarian and civilian protection work. These civilian actors are fundamental to peacebuilding processes at the grassroots level. Experienced external non-governmental actors can play an important role in enabling local civilians to be proactive peace and protection agents. It has been proven by now that relying only on a military approach does not deescalate the violence and conflict in Papua. An alternative approach of civilians protecting civilians should be introduced by capacitating local actors to be agents of protection. This would also pave the way for peace in Papua.



Conclusion

Scholars and experts have suggested that the Indonesian government should not solely maintain its military approach to address the armed conflict in Papua. It has been observed that this state security-centric approach has not changed the situation for the better but for the worse. As long as the armed conflict continues, civilians will be the primary victims of miscalculations by the conflicting armed parties.

Activists from religious and other civil society organisations have played a fundamental role in protecting other civilians from further harm and violence in the absence of official peace initiatives. They have established protection mechanisms based on their experiences and observations of the conflict situations, but with limited awareness of unarmed civilian protection in other contexts. In doing this,

they have themselves been subject to threats and different forms of violence.

These actors are a great resource for conflict management and future peace initiatives to end the Papuan conflict, but they would benefit from training and knowledge of civilian protection work in other contexts. The conflicting parties, particularly the government and military forces, should offer them recognition for their presence and work in the conflict zones. Such recognition would allow civilian actors to contribute more to the reduction of violence and to peacebuilding in Papua. The involvement of external NGOs specialising in civilian protection is crucial as medium between the local actors and the external context, as an important step to prepare locals to be agents of protection.

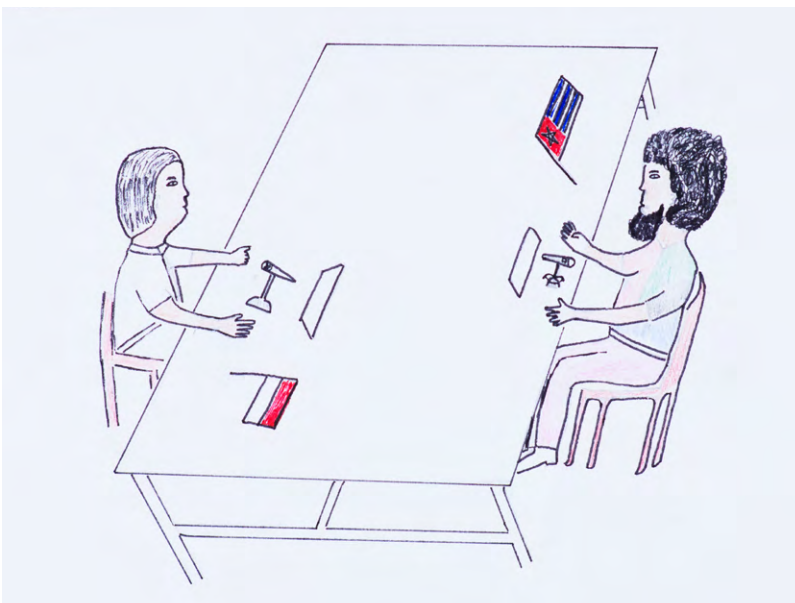


A hand drawing by one of our research participants, calling for civilian-to-civilian protection as an alternative approach to military protection.

Recommendations

In view of the lack of new initiatives for the peace, the Indonesian government should focus on a new approach to managing the conflict in Papua. To this end, **the Indonesian government should:**

- 1. Change its security paradigm** from its current state security-centric to a human security-centric approach in order to address the complexity of conflict in Papua. This new paradigm should highlight the interface between security, civilian protection, development, human rights, and fundamental freedoms that is the essence of human life. **Support and protect civilians working on civilian protection and humanitarian assistance.** They are the frontier in these fields where and when the state's presence is limited and should be recognised as true partners for peacebuilding efforts in Papua.
- 2. Allow external non-governmental organizations** focusing on unarmed civilian protection and humanitarian assistance **to work in Papua** to enhance capacity, assist, and prepare local civilians to be agents of protection and peacebuilding.
- 3. Reconcile the contradictory land concepts** between the state and the Papuans and avoid forcing the state's concept of land onto the Papuans. Since no agreeable and workable concept currently serves the interests of both the state and the Papuans, the government should postpone all large-scale projects expropriating land and affecting the environment, until a workable concept is mutually agreed and implemented.
- 4. Start dialogue with the armed groups and local civilian leaders** to diagnose the fundamental causes of the Papuan grievances. There is no constructive dialogue and workable agreement of dialogue without involving the armed groups, as they are able to either stop the violence and support the outcome of dialogue or to frustrate any dialogue that does not include them and continue their insurgency.



A hand drawing by one of our research participants, which depicts a call for constructive dialogue to diagnose Papua's fundamental issues and to address the question of why, after a huge fund of special autonomy was disbursed to Papua for development, the armed conflict still continues and even escalates.

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About the research

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