



# Addressing Fragility in Papua New Guinea

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AUGUST 2022

## THE ISSUE

- Papua New Guinea (PNG) is one of five priority countries under the U.S. Global Fragility Strategy. The U.S. government has made a 10-year commitment to addressing fragility in PNG and is currently planning its approach.
- PNG presents unique operating challenges for the U.S. government's implementation teams due to the complex factors driving fragility in the country and limited U.S. government presence on the ground.
- The key challenge facing policymakers is to generate clarity and consensus on what factors of fragility the United States will address, how the United States will develop a bespoke operating model in PNG, and who will be critical to these efforts.

The landmark **Global Fragility Act** (GFA) was signed into U.S. law in 2019. In April 2022, the Biden administration identified Papua New Guinea (PNG) as a partner country in a **prologue** it added to the 2020 U.S. Strategy to Prevent Conflict and Promote Stability, or "**Global Fragility Strategy**" (GFS). Under the strategy, the United States has committed to at least 10 years of programmatic efforts aimed at lowering violence levels and enhancing conflict-prevention efforts in PNG. U.S. officials have indicated they intend to benefit from "**lessons learned** from decades of U.S. involvement overseas, to enhance the way the U.S. Government engages in challenging environments and to jointly build resilience against political, economic, and natural shocks." The distinguishing feature of the GFS is its express intention to expand U.S. focus on preventing fragility, violence, and conflict.

For more details on the GFA and GFS, please see "**A Policymaker's Guide to the Global Fragility Act**" and "**The Global Fragility Strategy Gets a Refresh.**"

This brief provides policymakers with ideas on how to deploy U.S. conflict-prevention and peacebuilding capabilities in PNG. It outlines the strategic importance of PNG in the broader region, then canvasses four fragility trends to watch before discussing how to leverage U.S. strengths and avoid the pitfalls of those who have long operated in PNG. The brief concludes with recommendations on how to create a bespoke GFA operating model for addressing fragility focused on:

- Cultivating a deliberate and adaptive planning process;
- Embracing a localized and partnership-based implementation approach;
- Fostering the right enabling environment; and
- Leveraging U.S. comparative advantages.

## STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF PAPUA NEW GUINEA

PNG is one of the most **biodiverse** countries on earth. It is as diverse geographically—consisting of mountains, jungles, and valleys—as it is ethnically and linguistically. PNG is **rich** in gold, copper, silver, natural gas, timber, oil, and fisheries, bringing distinct economic opportunities not always available to the other Pacific Island states.

PNG has shown remarkable resilience despite much international analysis and discourse (including in this brief) focusing on the factors contributing to its fragility. For example, although the 1988–98 **Bougainville civil war** resulted in an estimated 20,000 deaths, PNG navigated a predominately peaceful independence referendum for the autonomous region of Bougainville in **November 2019** (see textbox). Despite extremely high levels of corruption and violence, its civil society discusses, reports on, and circulates instances of corruption and violence with significant energy and freedom—particularly through social media.

### Key Statistics

#### Demographics

- One Main Island and 600 Offshore Islands
- Population of Nine Million
- Over 800 Languages
- Over 600 Tribes

#### Development Indicators

- Australian Development Assistance: **US\$421 Million in 2019**
- U.S. Development Assistance: **US\$7 Million in 2019**
- Human Development Index 2019: 0.555, Ranked 155 out of 189 Countries and Territories
- Gender Inequality Index 2019: 0.72, Ranked 161 out of 162 Countries and Territories
- Population below National Poverty Line: **37.5%**

While PNG does not have an extensive breadth or depth of civil society organizations (CSOs), those that exist provide avenues for engagement with the government and, if

appropriately empowered, can generate better governance outcomes. **Dialogues** such as the 2021 **forum on gender and human rights** bring together government, civil society, and advocacy groups to assess the successes, failures, and opportunities for advancing human development in PNG. Civil society groups also fill in critical gaps in service delivery. Churches, for example, provide around **50 percent of healthcare services** and independently operate two universities. Additionally, while PNG's growing **youth population** brings significant employment and education challenges, it is also a great opportunity for a new generation to lead the country.

PNG is strategically relevant to the United States and its allies, Australia in particular. Its status as Australia's closest neighbor and its history as a former colony and site of Allied cooperation against Japanese forces during World War II means that it holds a place in both the strategic and nostalgic imaginations of many Australians and Americans who served in the Pacific theater. Australia is the single largest donor working in PNG and has been regarded by many U.S. administrations as key to engagement in Melanesia and the Pacific Islands, especially given the relatively light U.S. footprint in the region. While it was resoundingly rejected by many Australians and regional leaders at the time, the mid-2000s image of Australian prime minister Howard as "**Washington's deputy sheriff**" in the Pacific was a prevailing notion for years. Even now, there is a sense in some Australian foreign policy circles that signs of increased fragility in places like PNG do not reflect well on Australia's role in the country or region. It is easy to imagine that Australia would welcome increased U.S. focus on PNG and opportunities to collaborate on, among other things, violent conflict prevention programming.

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PNG is also a destination for Australian and U.S. businesses and is increasingly a place where rival geostrategic interests meet. Chinese communities have long been present in PNG, but recent fear of Chinese Communist Party (CCP) expansionism in the region has put it on the radar of U.S. and Australian officials, especially after the recent Solomon Islands–CCP **security pact** sent shockwaves through Washington and Canberra alike. Meanwhile, the ongoing process of Bougainvillean

independence and the possibility of similar movements from other provinces suggest significant potential for fragmentation within PNG.

## INDEPENDENCE AND AUTONOMY MOVEMENTS

In November 2019, Bougainville held a referendum on whether residents wanted greater autonomy or full independence from PNG. **Nearly 98 percent** of voters chose independence, with at least **85 percent voter** turnout. This historic event on the island, located nearly 600 miles east of Port Moresby, comes after decades of unrest and displacement. Tensions over control of the island's natural resources escalated into what became known as the Bougainville civil war, which lasted from 1988–98 and was the most violent conflict in the South Pacific since World War II. **As many as 20,000 people died, many were displaced, and social services in Bougainville were disrupted.** The Bougainville Peace Agreement that marked the end of the war stipulated that an independence referendum would be held **10–15 years** after the first Autonomous Bougainville Government was elected in June 2005. While it was successfully and peacefully executed, the referendum vote is nonbinding, and leadership from both sides will have to **negotiate a final agreement**, which could take years.

Similar movements exist in the New Ireland, Enga, and East New Britain provinces, which have called for greater autonomy for **over a decade**. Shared **grievances** over the national government's mismanagement of natural resources and failure to deliver public services have increased the prevalence of regional and provincial fragmentation. While there is no imminent threat of violence, the political legitimacy of these sentiments could generate greater factionalization throughout the country. It could also give prominence to political elites who exploit them to mobilize voters and create opportunities for geostrategic competitors to exert greater influence in newly formed nations.

The prospect of a PNG that is increasingly poor, susceptible to foreign interference, and fragile is a stark reality for Australia. Taken to its most extreme, fragility in PNG might precipitate external intervention—just as Australia intervened in the Solomon Islands **Regional Assistance**

**Mission** for a decade following civil unrest—and could also shift the balance of power in Melanesia against U.S. and allied interests.

Given the proximity of the Pacific Island nations to vital trade routes and relevance to U.S. and allied security assets, PNG's strategic profile is only growing. This is evident in the recent shift in rhetoric, funding commitments, high-level visits, and partnership-led tone of engagement by Australia's new Albanese **government**, which is echoed by a significant uptick in the **attention** Washington has paid to the Pacific Islands since the end of World War II.

## FOUR FRAGILITY TRENDS IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

PNG gained its independence from Australia in September 1975 after roughly seven decades of colonial rule. In the years leading up to independence, a Constitutional Planning Committee (CPC) was **tasked with** recommending priorities and mechanisms of implementation for an eventual PNG constitution. Following comprehensive, countrywide consultations, in August 1974 the CPC released its report, which recommended an **endogenous state- and nation-building process**, prioritizing human development over economic growth.<sup>1</sup> The 350-page report specified rights and freedoms and established five **national goals and directive principles** to achieve a free and just society in PNG. However, the constitution that was adopted in August 1975 was a watered-down version of the unique, autochthonous features of governance the CPC proposed. Instead, the new government approved a "**conventional Westminster-type constitution**," choosing to avoid contentious issues of citizenship and decentralization. Perhaps unsurprisingly, this did not translate into the nation-building process that many envisioned. This history contributes to the modern state of PNG not enjoying a high degree of legitimacy with its citizens—who, in turn, have only limited access to inclusive channels for engaging with the state. Democratic governance principles are not institutionalized, and legacies of colonialism linger, contributing to a general downward trend of instability and insecurity in PNG.

This brief focuses on four phenomena that are simultaneously the cause and result of shortcomings in PNG's development and the current dynamics of fragility. These include: (1) weak governance, (2) economic inequality, (3) vulnerability to climate change and limited adaptive capacity, and (4) intercommunal and gender-based violence.



## 1. WEAK GOVERNANCE

*Weak governance in PNG is a barrier to meaningful participation in civic life.* Over the past several decades, the tenets of personal and collective wellbeing envisioned by the CPC report—and engrained in the Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*<sup>2</sup>—have been replaced by a political-economic system that has proven corrupt and whereby citizens, especially women and youth, cannot fully engage in sociopolitical affairs. A **2019 survey** across six provinces of PNG revealed few citizens felt that they had “a lot of influence” over government decisionmaking at the national and local levels. Disempowerment was especially acute among women, who felt that patriarchal views and systemic gender inequality preclude their representation in leadership positions and engagement with political representatives.

The structure of the Papua New Guinean state makes it difficult for citizens to interact with national, provincial, and local-level governments. The diverse physical and human geography of PNG makes the functions of a central government uniquely difficult. PNG consists of the **main island and 600 offshore islands**, with a population of about **nine million** people who speak more than **800 languages** and make up about **600 distinct tribes**. The 1995 Organic Law on Provincial Government and Local Level Government and its amendments instituted a model of decentralization whereby provincial and local-level

governments were **allocated budgets to fund and deliver public services**. In principle, such a decentralized state facilitates citizen empowerment and development from the bottom up—especially considering the strong Melanesian traditions of consensus, reciprocity, and the harmonization of diversity. However, this technical and largely top-down process has failed to establish mechanisms for accountability and community participation, particularly ones that leverage the country’s latent dynamism. As a result, local governments have **limited capacity, weak accountability mechanisms, funding gaps, and unqualified staff**, making public administration primed for corruption and capturable by political elites.

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*Women face additional barriers to participation.* Women are historically underrepresented in Papua New Guinean politics and public administration. Since independence in 1975, only seven women have been elected to PNG’s National Parliament. Although 167 female candidates

are running in the 2022 elections, as of publication in August 2022, **two female representatives** have been confirmed in office. Additionally, women hold only 24 percent of administrative positions in **national public service**; that portion further decreases to 7 percent at the executive-appointment level. At the provincial and subnational levels, women's representation in public service is **marginal**, accounting for zero executive-level appointments, 6 percent of senior management, and only 10 percent of middle management.

There are both institutional and cultural barriers to women's participation in government. There is no quota to ensure women are elected to the national legislature. Each one of **several attempts** to institutionalize women holding political office failed, most recently in March 2022, when a proposal to have 5 parliamentary seats out of 111 reserved for women **was shelved** until after the August general elections. PNG's patriarchal society and gender norms, which **colonial administrations reinforced**, also limit women's political participation and institutional seniority.<sup>3</sup> Threats of **divorce, public shame, harassment, and physical violence** prevent women from exercising political agency. Elections are also highly localized and personalized; political candidates must bargain for support among those who control voting blocs through patronage networks. Since women are mostly excluded from leadership hierarchies in the first place, they often lack the resources and networks to negotiate support among local leaders. Political and public administration systems favor so-called "**big men**" who cultivate patronage networks, reinforcing **citizens' association** of political authority with men and **view** of leadership as a masculine trait.<sup>4</sup> The disparity in women's engagement in sociopolitical systems and processes reinforces the conditions under which gender equality and gender-based violence (discussed in more detail below) persist.

**Weak governance and limited capacity hinder the state's provision of security and broader services.** Governance limitations have increasingly manifested in the inability of the state to provide safety in the face of growing intercommunal violence nationwide. In Hela Province in the highlands, for example, a land dispute in January 2021 between two relatives led to the deaths of **21 people**. At the time, there were only about **60 permanent police officers** in the province, which has a population of approximately **250,000 people**. The **July 2022 death tolls** from election-related assaults suggest intercommunal violence trends continue. This comes at a time when law enforcement is chronically underfunded, inadequately

resourced, and understaffed across the country. Nationally, the police force has only grown by **30 percent to about 7,400 staff** since PNG's independence in 1975 while its population has more than tripled. Limited institutional capacity, combined with the absence of community-based policing capabilities, undermines public trust in the government and lessens the visibility of the state in many parts of the country.

With police forces being overstretched, **private security actors** are an increasingly ubiquitous part of efforts to maintain stability in certain regions. These companies are often employed by businesses, community leaders, and politicians. Some government officials have significant interests in this industry, including as a **source of personal revenue and employment for constituents**. The official number of private security personnel is over three times that of police officers and surpasses the **sum** of all security sector forces.

Overall, government effectiveness is **unequal and limited across PNG**, with the reach of the state being practically undetectable in some rural areas and highland regions, despite **87 percent** of the total population living in such communities. The country's **fragile health systems, limited access to and quality of education, and low literacy levels** are **barriers to developing local capacity** to deliver and monitor service provision. Yet another colonial legacy is **uneven and underdeveloped** access to educational opportunities in PNG, with girls being highly underrepresented and several districts having very low participation rates. This reinforces the conditions under which citizens cannot cultivate human capital, achieve upward social mobility, and practice active citizenship. Without these opportunities, citizens often look to traditional systems over the formal state for governance functions and public services. These conditions also create a permissive environment for corrupt elites to act against the public good in pursuit of their interests, at times cynically perpetuating narratives that young and poor populations and the country's political immaturity, rather than their corruption, contribute to gaps in state governance.

**Systemic corruption limits inclusive and sustainable development, fuels distrust and frustration with political leadership, and generates apathy toward political participation.** The Papua New Guinean state is marred by endemic corruption, lack of accountability, and the privatization of security, all of which benefit the elite to the exclusion of the general public. Although the constitution provides a legal framework for government structures

at all levels, de facto national authority revolves around clientelism. Across the archipelago, most Papua New Guineans identify closely with their local communities and use the *wantok* (“one talk”) system of reciprocal obligations among people who share a common language, ethnicity, or community. While this system can be a resilient safety net that compensates for insufficient governance and inadequate state services, politicians have also exploited it to serve their interests. Elected officials routinely use their power to capture and disperse **state resources toward their narrow constituencies** in exchange for political support.

The **2021 Global Corruption Barometer** found that 54 percent of Papua New Guineans paid a bribe to receive a public service in the previous 12 months and that 57 percent were offered bribes for their votes. Frequent turnover among politicians and government officials compounds the highly personalized, “short-termism” nature of PNG politics, making what many consider to be bribery a highly normalized part of cultivating a voter base. Systemic, increasingly sophisticated, and entrenched corruption at all levels of government reinforces the conditions under which citizens are **excluded from providing input and oversight** on essential state functions.

## 2. ECONOMIC INEQUALITY

**Resource-based wealth is not widely distributed, and poor human development outcomes stunt the potential for women and youth to boost economic growth.** At a macroeconomic level, PNG’s **positive economic trajectory and resource-rich environment** suggest strong potential for international investment and engagement. In 2022, PNG’s economy is expected to grow by **4 percent**, driven largely by the industries sector, which accounts for about **43 percent** of gross domestic product (GDP). However, wealth and economic opportunities are concentrated among the country’s elites, who habitually engage in rent-seeking behavior by **facilitating grants and contracts** for foreign companies, particularly in the extractive industries sector.

PNG has **one of the highest levels** of economic inequality in Asia and the Pacific. In the wake of the initial stages of the Covid-19 pandemic, recovery in employment has been slower for the **bottom 40 percent of households**, and those with jobs have seen a significant share of their incomes fall. Profits from mining deposits and natural-gas reserves maintain the country’s middle-income status but are unevenly distributed and rarely enjoyed by average citizens. Foreign-owned businesses and corrupt officials are significant benefactors of the profits of these sectors.

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These extractive industries have long caused friction and contributed to fragility in PNG. One of the most notable examples is the conflict between PNG and the Bougainville region described in the textbox above. Land disputes and **environmental degradation** caused by the **Panguna copper and gold mine** and **uneven distribution of the mine’s profits** significantly contributed to the outbreak of the 10-year civil war. Tensions still simmer in Bougainville, and its connections to the central government in Port Moresby remain tenuous at best. Mines throughout PNG continue to fuel disputes over land rights and profit distribution, environmental damage wrought by their activities, extractive profiteering of international companies, and the limited economic benefits reaped by local communities.

**Institutional economic challenges are significant, especially for women and youth.** These include low domestic resource mobilization, subpar human development outcomes, and limited economic growth outside the extractive resource sector. PNG’s 2019 Human Development Index score was **0.555**, ranking it 155 out of 189 countries and territories. Relatedly, PNG’s 2019 Gender Inequality Index score was **0.725**, ranking it 161 out of 162 countries. As detailed in the governance-focused section above, Papua New Guinean women are marginalized and excluded from the formal economy because of cultural customs and colonial legacies, which are reinforced by weak institutions, poor public service delivery, and the lack of gender-sensitive policy implementation. These conditions perpetuate health, education, and employment disparities that lead to unequal opportunities for men and women and limit overall economic growth potential.

Poor economic conditions are particularly acute for women in agriculture and for urban youth. Papua New Guinean women are overrepresented in the informal and agricultural sectors, which have both been significantly affected by the pandemic; this will undoubtedly deepen economic gender inequalities. Globally, only **4 in 10 women** in fragile settings are formally employed, leaving the majority more vulnerable to economic shocks. Women engaged in unpaid labor are consistently excluded from social protection measures targeted at the formal workforce, and with limited avenues for skills development, they are left with few options.

The proportion of youth in the population of PNG is large and growing: **31 percent** of the population is between the ages of 10 and 24, and **62 percent** is between 15 and 64. In urban areas, **60 percent** of youth are unemployed, and less than 7 percent are employed in formal jobs. Young people, especially young women, transitioning from childhood to adulthood have **less personal agency** because they rarely participate in community decisionmaking processes and have limited access to educational and vocation opportunities, yet are still expected to find formal work in the modern economy. In the absence of formal social safety nets and the informal protections wantoks provide, the growing urban youth population could be an indicator—though not a precondition—of civil unrest and political violence. Disengagement and discontent can lead to **increased youth involvement in criminal activity**, especially if social protections, educational pathways, and economic opportunities remain limited.

Significant international research shows that youth and women’s empowerment can be drivers of overall economic development, so these challenges—and PNG’s ability to overcome them—are foundational to the country’s development and resilience. Minimizing gaps in human-capital development, including expanding health services and continuing education, could cultivate a skilled workforce that is less vulnerable to economic shocks. Additionally, improving access to production inputs and financial services could shift imbalances in decisionmaking and create new business opportunities. In particular, a young, educated, and empowered **workforce could bring new investment opportunities**, creating a virtuous cycle of formal employment. With **67 percent** of businesses in PNG identifying crime as a constraint for further investment and expansion in 2014, there are both public and private incentives to improve livelihoods and opportunities for women and youth.

The PNG government aims to address some of these institutional issues by transitioning to a fully industrialized economy, using evocative slogans such as “**Take Back PNG**.” At the same time, foreign actors are seeking regional influence through political and economic investments. In June 2022, Papua New Guinean prime minister James Marape and Chinese foreign minister Wang Yi **announced a potential free trade agreement**. This development follows PNG becoming the **second Pacific Island country** to sign onto China’s Belt and Road Initiative in 2018. In 2019, China imported seafood, wood, and mineral products from the region (including PNG), amounting to about **\$3.3 billion** in trade flows.

### **3. VULNERABILITY TO CLIMATE CHANGE AND LIMITED ADAPTIVE CAPACITY**

*PNG’s agriculture-based economy is highly vulnerable to climate change, and women are likely to be disproportionately affected.* Two sectors **dominate** the Papua New Guinean economy: (1) subsistence agriculture, forestry, and fishing, which account for the majority of informal employment; and (2) the minerals and energy extraction sector, which accounts for most export earnings and GDP. These sectors are **highly vulnerable** to natural hazards and climate-related disasters, including floods, droughts, and landslides.

PNG ranks **22 out of 191 countries** on the 2022 European Union’s INFORM Risk index; in other words, it is high on the list of countries at risk of humanitarian crises and disasters that could overwhelm national response capacity. PNG’s resilience to potential climate change–related disruptions is low. With highly **dispersed populations** that are often remote, accessing communities and assessing damage in the event of a natural disaster is extremely challenging. Moreover, the prevalence of poverty, poor infrastructure, corruption, and insecurity—among other factors of fragility—heighten local populations’ vulnerability to climate change.

*As with most places, climate change disproportionately affects women.* Female labor participation in PNG is concentrated in rural work, mainly in **subsistence agriculture** rather than commercial farming. More than **50 percent** of the female labor force is engaged in unpaid agricultural work. In addition to ensuring their families’ nutritional needs are met, women are involved in growing, harvesting, and selling crops. While selling this food in local or urban markets generates some income, **women lack opportunities** to engage in the more lucrative production and export of cash crops (such as coffee and cocoa) and intensive forms of agriculture because of the familial and community roles they are expected to fulfill. Because of women’s reliance on informal agricultural production, their means of food and economic security are increasingly vulnerable to climate shocks.

In addition, women’s coping capacity is limited because of gender-specific barriers to accessing fixed and financial assets. Although women traditionally have access to customary land—which comprises **97 percent** of PNG’s land area—this does not always extend to having ownership and decisionmaking power over the use of that land: Only 1 percent of women in PNG report being the **main decisionmaker** at home. Additionally, PNG has the highest gender gap in financial inclusion in the Pacific

region, with women being **29 percent less likely** to access formal financial services. The gap in control over land and finance means that women are more dependent on natural resources even as they have limited agency to adapt to climate change-related threats to those resources and cope when natural disasters strike.

### *Women are more dependent on natural resources even as they have limited agency to adapt to climate change-related threats.*

However, women have strong knowledge in sustainable resource management and disaster mitigation within their communities. Integrating climate considerations into gender programming—and gender considerations into climate-adaptation work—is critical to identifying and addressing the specific vulnerabilities women face in PNG. Ensuring women’s equal access to assets, information, and services can also increase the coping capacity and decisionmaking powers necessary for climate resilience.

#### **4. INTERCOMMUNAL AND GENDER-BASED VIOLENCE**

*Intercommunal and gender-based violence (GBV) are both symptoms and causes of state fragility.* PNG has hundreds of ethnolinguistic groups, and **research** shows a long history of conflicts among them, typically over land ownership since **97 percent** of the land in PNG is customarily owned.<sup>5</sup> These conflicts have typically been managed and resolved through traditional mechanisms, such as **village courts**, which were seen as **legitimate channels** to address perceived wrongdoing in many communities. However, as PNG modernizes, traditional rules and customs surrounding conflict and violence are eroding; elders and authorities who once held power in their communities have seen their influence diminish over time. This has, in turn, reduced the capacity of traditional means to resolve contemporary conflicts in PNG. Rather than invoking culture as a legitimate and often singular explanation for violence in PNG (as is often the case), the authors of this brief suggest that the structural and institutional shortcomings discussed above are more significant drivers of fragility and conflict in the country.

The deterioration of traditional conflict-resolution systems coincides with other trends such as shifting gender roles, increased foreign involvement, the influx of smuggled modern firearms, and climate variability. The interaction

between these dynamics has led **to increased violence** and the displacement of tens of thousands of people. Approximately **30,000 people were displaced in 2021** alone due to communal violence, **triggering further conflict** between resettled populations and host communities despite strong cultural norms of **shared land use**.

Intercommunal conflict in PNG coincides with interpersonal violence, particularly gender-based, sexual, and family violence. Here culture and changing traditions do play a role. Intercommunal conflicts, once fought primarily between men, **now increasingly target** women and children. More than **two-thirds of women** in PNG are victims of domestic violence, and one woman is beaten **every 30 seconds**. Additionally, violence related to **sorcery accusations** against men and women is increasingly prevalent. Domestic violence has also increased during the Covid-19 pandemic: Between March 2020 and April 2021, the national helpline for those experiencing family violence or sexual violence, “1-Tok Kaunselin Lain,” saw a **75 percent increase in demand**. This aligns with global trends, where **emerging data** shows that Covid-19 has resulted in an increase in cases of gender-based and domestic violence.

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There are movements within PNG to address GBV, including the government’s **National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender Based Violence 2016–2025**, which aims to coordinate anti-GBV efforts across the country, and the **2002 Sexual Offences and Crimes Against Children Act**. These efforts, while important, have had limited impact due to weak state capacity to enforce them. Even when cases of domestic violence are reported, very few are investigated. As of 2020, there were only **150 staff** in the police force’s Family and Sexual Violence Unit across the whole country. Meanwhile, of **15,444 cases of domestic violence** reported in 2020, only 250 people were prosecuted and fewer than 100 were convicted. The police

force, lacking the resources to properly support survivors of GBV, relies on partnerships with non-governmental organizations to fill this gap in service provision.

## LEVERAGING STRENGTHS AND AVOIDING PITFALLS IN A CHALLENGING ENVIRONMENT

As the previous section indicates, there is significant potential for the United States to address a broad range of fragility factors over the medium-to-long term via the Global Fragility Strategy (GFS). To do this effectively, the United States should be clear-eyed on the challenges ahead, six of which are presented below. It should be deliberate in deciding how to address them and cognizant of its unique capability to deliver on its GFS mission in PNG.

### SIX CHALLENGES IN FOCUS

In ideal circumstances, the United States could deploy the GFS's whole-of-government strategy and trust that its execution stays true to the mission. But lessons from Iraq and Afghanistan, combined with the complex operating environment in PNG, suggest that whole-of-government efforts, while attractive for their potential, are challenging to implement in practice. These challenges will manifest in at least six broad ways for the United States in PNG:

**1. *The drivers of fragility discussed above are complex.***

PNG is distinct from fragile places in which the United States generally operates. It is also unlike the other three GFS partner countries (Haiti, Libya, and Mozambique) and partner subregion (coastal West Africa). PNG is not in a state of civil conflict, terrorism has not taken root, and a significant cause for concern is personal safety (e.g., GBV). U.S. operations in the region will unfold against a backdrop of such PNG provinces as Bougainville seeking various forms of autonomy and independence, as well as analyst **predictions** that fragility indicators are trending in the wrong direction. This means the United States cannot bring a templated stabilization mission to PNG, nor can it rely on experience from other places. It will need to take a deliberate and iterative approach to address proximate triggers of fragility, structural causes, or a combination of both.

**2. *The United States has limited experience, presence, and networks in PNG.*** Melanesian expertise within U.S. government, security, and development circles is scant, and the United States has little presence on the ground in PNG. Papua New Guineans place great value on

**relationships** and build trust slowly over time, often outside of formal interactions or business dealings. The initial budget allocated to this work will partially dictate the scale of relationships and impact the United States can generate, but the temptation in new contexts is to rush in with money, ideas, and projects without carefully setting goals and understanding the operating environment. Both implementing partners and U.S. government officials will need to invest significant time in building the community and individual connections that will be critical to any conflict-prevention and resilience-building efforts. Failing to invest in relationships at the start of the process could have longer-term consequences.

- 3. *The whole-of-government ambition of the GFS will produce a unique set of operational challenges in the field.*** The GFS asks the Departments of Defense and State and the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) to identify areas of common interest and collaborate, so their work adds up to more than the sum of its parts. Interagency collaboration is hard enough in environments where there is a need to respond to easily identifiable threats (e.g., violent extremism); it is always easier to address known threats rather than ones on the horizon. However, coordination is more complicated when, as is likely to be the case for GFS implementation in PNG, the goal is to address elements of fragility so they prevent the expansion of conflict and violence. This means the United States will need to be clear in setting out the challenges it seeks to address, how agencies will be accountable for aligning their work, and how individual and collective efforts demonstrate impact.
- 4. *GFS implementation in PNG involves diverse stakeholders.*** These stakeholders will be found in countless time zones and include local Papua New Guinean communities, public leaders, private-sector actors, and government officials; bilateral partners such as Australia, New Zealand, and the European Union; and multilateral entities such as the United Nations and World Bank Group. GFS implementation will also require coordination among U.S. agencies, as well as between Port Moresby and Washington, presenting the risk that U.S. activities do not achieve coherence and effectiveness. This means that stakeholder management and engagement will be a critical feature of U.S. implementation and should be considered central to the strategy.

5. **The United States will not be the most significant donor to PNG.** Australia is by far the largest contributor of development assistance to PNG, accounting for **49.6 percent** of all aid spent in 2019. Australia’s fiscal year 2021–22 budget reflects the prioritization of gender equality, committing **\$120 million** to its flagship program Pacific Women Lead. Funding and resources for PNG’s development agenda have concentrated on women’s empowerment. This means the United States will need to determine how to complement existing PNG leadership priorities, when to lead versus support initiatives, whether to finance efforts through existing Australian mechanisms or fund projects separately, and how to foster effective working relationships with other donors.

6. **Engagement with PNG also relates to the broader geostrategic context of competition between the United States and the People’s Republic of China (PRC) and Australia-PRC relations.** China has historically taken an active role in the Pacific and will likely continue to do so in the future. Increased regional engagement by the PRC may also shape the nature of fragility in PNG in the coming years. The United States should respect PNG sovereignty and policy but be attuned to the dynamics of PRC operations there, and be respectful of the Chinese community’s long history in the country but ready to calibrate its interagency response according to emerging dynamics. This means the United States needs to **avoid its penchant** for prioritizing short-term security gains at the expense of sustainable peace. The United States should also be self-aware of its own (unintentional) contributions to fragility in PNG, including through the presence of multinational corporations and their operations, as well as the reverberations of its domestic and international politics.

## **TOWARD A BESPOKE OPERATING MODEL FOR ADDRESSING FRAGILITY IN PNG**

In anticipation of the challenges discussed and to avoid the pitfalls of previous efforts to prevent conflict and violence in PNG, the United States should consider developing a bespoke operating model centered around deliberate and adaptive **planning** and **implementation** efforts that creates an **enabling environment** for violent-conflict prevention and builds on U.S. **comparative advantages**.

## **CULTIVATE A DELIBERATE AND ADAPTIVE PLANNING PROCESS**

**Learn first, program second.** Time spent learning about the context during the establishment phase of U.S. presence in PNG will be time saved in the longer term. Extensive lessons learned from Australia, New Zealand, and other partners in PNG will be a rich source of guidance for the United States. Still, the most valuable lessons will be drawn from extensive engagement with PNG stakeholders, particularly at the local level.

**Consult widely but prioritize PNG stakeholders, especially those outside Port Moresby.** Operating in PNG will necessitate close cooperation with like-minded donors, including Australia, New Zealand, South Korea, Japan, the European Union, and multilateral agencies. But there is a risk that consultation with these stakeholders becomes a proxy for consultation with PNG stakeholders. This should be avoided to ensure the United States builds robust and legitimate stakeholder relationships that are complementary to—but independent of—other donors. Care should be taken to look beneath the surface and recognize that usual “interlocutors” for the U.S. government, such as key private-sector entities or donors, may be critical to some solutions but at times also contributors to corruption or broader fragility.

**Expect the unexpected from the outset.** Change does not occur in linear ways in any country; given the complexity of PNG, this non-linearity is a certainty. Challenges and opportunities will arise, often at unexpected moments. The United States should place a high value on being informed through church, community, and people-to-people networks, finding ways to adapt quickly as contexts shift. Adaptation and flexibility should be embedded into all planning and management approaches.

**Prioritize diplomatic boots on the ground as a first-order mission,** even over programming if necessary. Building and sustaining the local knowledge networks needed to operate in PNG requires an on-the-ground presence. This should be a first-order priority and will enable better USG coordination, decisionmaking, and engagement. Program funding and operation in the absence of significant diplomatic engagement are likely to be ineffective or even potentially counterproductive.

**Mainstream gender and youth inclusion in every program activity.** Violence against women is often a leading **indicator of insecurity and instability** within a state, acting as an early warning for potential widespread conflict. Increasing gender equality generally has a **positive effect** on preventing

and countering corruption and **rebuilding institutions and legal frameworks**. The United States should look to mainstream gender and youth inclusion in its work to address factors of fragility in PNG within informal and formal processes, systems, and institutions.

### **EMBRACE A LOCALIZED AND PARTNERSHIP-BASED IMPLEMENTATION APPROACH**

**Work with existing momentum.** U.S. officials should identify and cultivate relationships with church, civil-society, and public service leaders in order to work within and strengthen functioning policy architectures. They should seek out and help accelerate positive momentum in local communities. This effort should include aligning efforts with existing Papua New Guinean strategies such as the National Strategy to Prevent and Respond to Gender-Based Violence, the National Anti-Corruption Strategy, and anti-money laundering frameworks.

**Lead from behind when appropriate.** Under the GFS, the U.S. approach to conflict prevention and stability in PNG should bolster Papua New Guinean leadership and complement work by other donors and partners. Doing so is not only practical, it aligns with the U.S. government's commitment to localization and effective fragility practice, which empower women and youth in particular.

**Coordinate and co-finance rather than co-deliver with like-minded donors.** Co-delivery of projects is good in principle but often challenging in practice. Issues of procurement, embassy coordination, and branding requirements can challenge otherwise well-intentioned co-leadership of projects between donors. While interoperability and coordination with other key donor partners should be a high priority, in the shorter term, co-financing rather than co-delivering will likely be an easier means of operating in-country. That said, the United States should not overlook the possibility of working in co-leadership structures with Papua New Guinean stakeholders in areas of comparative strength over the medium-to-long term, including in areas of private-security sector reform, civil-society support, anti-corruption efforts, anti-money laundering measures, digital development, and peacebuilding.

**Do not avoid structural issues.** With a limited budget and presence, it will be necessary to make clear choices about what the United States supports and what it does not. However, this risks focusing on proximate triggers to the exclusion of addressing structural drivers of fragility. U.S. officials should be receptive to opportunities that intersect and extend beyond whatever core areas of focus it identifies.

### **FOSTER THE RIGHT ENABLING ENVIRONMENT FOR ADDRESSING FRAGILITY**

**Develop integrated analysis and leadership among the United States, PNG, and like-minded allies.** For U.S. engagement to be effective, it needs to be grounded in a shared understanding of the factors of fragility in PNG and connected to political and community leadership at all levels. Investments in trilateral fragility assessments, Track 1.5 dialogues, and U.S.-based research institutes' increased engagement with those in the Pacific Islands and broader Oceania will improve the enabling environment for program implementation and ensure PNG analysts are connected to decisionmakers in Washington, Canberra, and other capitals through communities of practice.

**Institute a clear monitoring and performance framework that tracks the impact of work done under the GFS and the country's eventual implementation plans.** Priority feedback on program impact should be sought first and foremost from PNG communities.

**Codify and communicate strategies for implementing the GFS to key stakeholders in PNG.** Local events, newspaper articles, radio interviews, and other efforts to communicate the mechanisms through which the United States intends to achieve its goals will go a long way toward ensuring broad-based buy-in from geographically and linguistically diverse stakeholders.

**Invest heavily in whole-of-government coordination efforts to ensure coherent U.S. engagement in PNG, as well as buy-in from key U.S. stakeholders in the agencies involved in implementation.** U.S. officials across the interagency should be incentivized to participate meaningfully in these efforts under the auspices of the chief of mission. These efforts should be tracked, assessed, and adjusted as needed.

### **LEVERAGE U.S. COMPARATIVE ADVANTAGES**

**Emphasize the length and seriousness of commitment.** Papua New Guineans prioritize relationships built over time and may be sensitive to the perception that the United States is only engaging because of its regional geopolitical or geostrategic interests. The longer-term horizon of the GFS and whole-of-government approach to implementation are assets the United States should communicate clearly—alongside core GFS tenets that speak to a broad set of Papua New Guinean interests in security, economic development, and international engagement.

**Lead in areas of comparative advantage.** The United States has significant experience in development, security, and

fragility that will complement the predominately economic development-focused footprints of other donors. Injecting this expertise, for example, in private security sector reform, civil society support, combating corruption, and anti-money laundering efforts may be a refreshing and welcomed approach in the donor community in the Pacific Islands. USAID's recently released **2022–2027 Strategic Framework for the Pacific Islands** sets out the agency's comparative advantages as an “innovator and convener” working through “people-to-people programming” and “building institutional and human capacity,” all efforts that align well with an eventual GFS country strategy for PNG. Other agencies involved in PNG should consider reaching similar levels of clarity; however, more important than this is the overall coherency of the U.S. comparative advantage, including the need to avoid individual or uncoordinated agency activity.

**Sport the brand.** The United States has strong diplomatic, development, and security brands. It should use these to call international attention to issues, convene a diverse range of stakeholders, and engage in policy dialogue with PNG-based politicians and civil society leaders. The sheer fact that there will be a sustained U.S. presence—beyond a programming footprint managed by a regional USAID mission—will be a significant asset.

**Take important stances that others might not.** While care should be taken that the U.S. approach to democracy, corruption, and human rights is not regarded as an “ill-fitting” imposition in the context of Papua New Guinean society and state, the United States has a stronger appetite for work in areas of anti-corruption, civic space, human rights, and principles of democratic accountability than most other donors operating in PNG. This may benefit its efforts to address drivers of fragility and offer unique opportunities for it to achieve impact in areas where other donors have not.

**Establish international precedent for effective whole-of-government engagement in a conflict-prevention setting.**

The U.S. mobilization of development, diplomacy, and defense capabilities should be aligned with,

complementary to, and increasingly integrated into its operations and leadership. There is some risk that GFS engagement in PNG is only seen through a development prism; this would miss an opportunity to leverage U.S. security and diplomatic capabilities in support of conflict prevention in PNG in ways that other countries have not been able to do. With an increasing appetite for whole-of-government engagement emerging in the United Kingdom and Australia, this is an opportunity for the United States to set an international precedent for whole-of-government approaches, especially in contexts experiencing fragility.

**Work the international system.** While much of the focus under the GFS will naturally be at the community level, U.S. engagement with the government of PNG will be integral—as will international collaboration with other donors such as Australia, the United Nations, the Asian Development Bank, and the World Bank. The wording of this recommendation is deliberate; while the United States should work *within* the international system, it should also *work* the system to achieve its GFS-related goals. ■

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*The authors would like to thank the many contributors and reviewers of drafts of this brief in Papua New Guinea, Australia, and the United States.*

*This brief is made possible by generous support from the embassy of Australia in Washington, D.C.*

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 From May to August 1973, the CPC toured the country, hosting public meetings in subdistricts that were attended by an estimated 60,000 people. The CPC also formulated discussion groups throughout the country, which provided over 2,000 submissions on six discussion topics such as citizenship and public service. CPC staff also consulted with officials from the House of Assembly, the Public Service Board, and other government departments, as well as academic staff from the University of Papua New Guinea and the Australian National University, among others. For more information, see “Constitutional Planning Committee Report 1974,” Pacific Islands Legal Information Institute, updated July 2009, <http://www.pacii.org/pg/CPCReport/Cap1.htm>.
- 2 Though there are variations, *gutpela sindaun* (“abundant life”) refers to fulfilling relationships and material wellbeing that contribute to a holistic earthly existence. See George Mombi, “The Melanesian concept of *gutpela sindaun*,” *Synkrêtic* 1 (February, 2022): 34–45, <https://www.synkretic.com/issue1/the-melanesian-concept-of-gutpela-sindaun>.
- 3 Colonial policies of industrial training for men—including recruitment for plantation work—rooted in Western cultural norms also reinforce women’s roles in the private, domestic sphere as well as men’s dominance of the public spaces of business and politics. However, there are also examples of women’s leadership within matrilineal communities. See, for instance, International Women’s Development Agency, “#Ourmoment: the Matriarchs of Papua New Guinea Shutting Down Land Developers,” International Women’s Development Agency, May 3, 2018, <https://iwda.org.au/the-matriarchs-of-papua-new-guinea-shutting-down-land-developers/>.
- 4 The “big man” concept of leadership customarily involves assessment of an individual’s actions that elevate his personal and political status within the community. However, under the current Westminster political system, this indigenous custom for social structure has been exploited by opportunistic elites, who use it to cultivate political power and influence. See International Public Policy Association, “Big Man and Patronage System: Its Role in the Public Administration of Papua New Guinea,” International Public Policy Association, 2017, <https://www.ippapublicpolicy.org/file/paper/593a1ca700ebb.pdf>.
- 5 Customary tenure is the set of rules and norms that govern community allocation, use, access, and transfer of land and other natural resources.

# ADDRESSING FRAGILITY IN PAPUA NEW GUINEA

## Six Challenges the United States Will Face Implementing the Global Fragility Strategy (GFS) in Papua New Guinea (PNG)

1. The drivers of fragility in PNG—including weak governance, economic inequality, vulnerability to climate change, and intercommunal and gender-based violence—are complex.
2. The United States has limited experience, presence, and networks in PNG, a country where people place great value on relationships.
3. The whole-of-government ambition of the GFS will produce a unique set of operational challenges in the field.
4. GFS implementation in PNG involves diverse stakeholders, including local communities, public leaders, private-sector actors, government officials, bilateral donor nations, and multilateral entities.
5. The United States will not be the most significant donor to PNG or the most significant donor concerning gender.
6. Engagement with PNG also relates to the broader geostrategic context of competition between the United States and the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Australia-PRC relations.

## Toward A Bespoke Operating Model for Addressing Fragility in PNG

*To address these challenges and avoid the pitfalls of previous efforts, the United States should develop a bespoke operating model for GFS implementation centered around the following regularly asked questions:*

### Are we setting ourselves up for success through a deliberate and adaptive planning process? Are we focused on:

- Learning first, programming second;
- Consulting widely but prioritizing PNG stakeholders;
- Expecting the unexpected from the outset;
- Prioritizing diplomatic boots on the ground as a first-order mission; and
- Mainstreaming gender and youth inclusion in every program activity.

### Are we being pragmatic and local partner-led in our implementation? Are we focused on:

- Working with existing momentum;
- Leading from behind when appropriate;
- Coordinating and co-financing rather than co-delivering with like-minded donors; and
- Not avoiding structural issues.

### Are we fostering the right enabling environment to address violence and fragility into the future? Are we focused on:

- Developing integrated analysis and leadership among the United States, PNG, and like-minded allies;
- Instituting a clear monitoring and performance framework;
- Codifying and communicating strategies to key stakeholders in PNG; and
- Investing heavily in whole-of-government coordination efforts.

### Are we leveraging U.S. comparative advantages? Are we focused on:

- Emphasizing the length and seriousness of commitment;
- Leading in areas of comparative advantage;
- Sporting the brand;
- Taking important stances that other might not;
- Establishing international precedent for effective whole-of-government engagement; and
- Working the international system.