**Submission on Ending Sorcery Accusation Related Violence (SARV) for PNG Special Parliamentary Committee on Gender-Based Violence**

This submission is prepared on behalf of the SARV research collaboration between Papua New Guinea’s National Research Institute, the Divine Word University and the Australian National University. It is based on a five year research project[[1]](#footnote-1) and most recently a two day online conference on SARV (22-23 June 2021) (unedited recordings available here).[[2]](#footnote-2)

**Background and nature of the problem**

Sorcery Accusation Related Violence (SARV) is a systemic form of violence across PNG today. Both women and men are accused and subjected to violence, but the impact of SARV is significantly higher on women than on men. Women are nearly twice as likely to end up dead. Women are also significantly more likely to sustain serious physical harm (other than death and permanent physical injury), and to be displaced from their homes than men.

SARV impacts the children of those accused, has devastating impacts on entire communities, leads to psychological trauma, erosion of trust and catalyzes violent reprisals. There is no reliable national baseline data on SARV as those suffering most are often afraid to let authorities such as hospitals and police know they have been accused for fear of further stigmatization or violence. No regular data on SARV is collected by any government department.

We have conducted a study of SARV based on collecting case decisions and reports in the newspapers over a 20 year period, and also an in-depth recording of incidents of SARV in four provinces (Enga, AROB, NCD and Jiwaka) over four years. This is the most comprehensive review of the incidence of SARV in PNG that has ever been conducted.

We found:

* An average of 388 people are accused of sorcery each year in the 4 provinces combined
* A third of these led to physical violence or property damage
* Amongst those accused, 65 were killed, 86 suffered permanent injury and 141 survived other serious assault and harm, such as burning, cutting, tying or being forced into water.
* Overall, 93 cases involved torture: 20 lasted several days and 10 lasted a week or even longer

Only 8% of the violent incidents and 17% of the incidents leading to death were reported in the newspapers at the time (for further details see <https://openresearch-repository.anu.edu.au/bitstream/1885/228692/1/DPA%20In%20Brief%2020215%20Forsyth%20et%20al.pdf>).

If we assume an even distribution, spatially and temporally, of the proportion of the different types of incidents reported in the media, we estimate the number of violent SARV incidents between the year 2000 and June 2020 to be over 6000, resulting in an estimated 3000 deaths nationally. Whilst these estimates must be treated with caution given the significant variance across time and geographical location in the cases documented, they indicate an alarming amount of SARV-connected harm.  The available data means a reasonable estimate of the national harm caused by SARV is that **12 people are killed and a further 14 suffer serious harm, including permanent injury as a result of SARV across PNG each month**.

We have also found that today SARV exists in places it did not exist previously and is affecting new classes of victims, such as children. Left unchecked, it is a wildfire that threatens the security of PNG citizens.

**What causes SARV and what stops it?**

SARV can be understood through imagining a wildfire. Many factors contribute to the overall burning inferno. There are often a number of stages: 1. The development of a landscape conducive to sorcery accusation due to the prevalence of a worldview that sees illness and misfortune as caused by individuals using supernatural powers; 2. The build-up of threat levels (such as jealousies or land disputes); 3. An ignition event (often a death or sickness); 4. The ‘fanning of the flames’ – the crystallisation of accusation against an individual and the gaining of public legitimacy/moral authority for a violent response (often involving a glasman/glasmeri); 5. Mob violence leading to destruction and damage.

Each of these stages also provides an opportunity for intervention. To date, those intervening the most and the most effectively are the community leaders, Human Rights Defenders, and other local actors who are busy pouring water onto glowing embers, or rescuing those who have been hurt in the inferno when it gets out of control. But they are not enough, and they are also being hurt in doing this work.

**PNG led the (modern) world with the government response**

PNG was the first country to create and pass a national action plan to address the issue.

On 21 July 2015 the government approved the SARV National Action Plan that set out a comprehensive and holistic approach to addressing SARV. The overall approach to the issue was that the people of PNG are free to believe whatever they like, but they are not entitled to use illegal violence against others as a result of those beliefs. This is how the term SARV was developed – it refers to the problem of the violence (including stigma and emotional & psycho-spiritual trauma) flowing from accusations of sorcery.

A SARV NAP committee under the leadership of DJAG was also established in 2015. The promised government funding to support the SARV NAP (3 million kina) never, in fact, eventuated. However, for the first 5 years of after the plan was endorsed, there was progress made under the SARV NAP, particularly in terms of:

* Networking many of the stakeholders working on the issue across the country
* Keeping the issue on government and donor agendas
* Supporting development partners and DJAG to conduct training in some parts of the country on SARV for the police and village court magistrates
* Developing the terminology of SARV to enable the issue to be more easily discussed without confusion

Since 2020 however, the work of the SARV NAP steering committee seems to have halted, and funding to support the plan has still not been forthcoming.

At a provincial level, attempts were made by the national SARV NAP committee to set up provincial SARV NAP committees, but this initiative largely foundered due to lack of financial support. In recent years, the Engan provincial Government is exercising leadership in this space through devising a more co-ordinated response.

The law and justice sector have also ensured that prosecutions for SARV continue to progress through the courts, but not at sufficient rates. On average, 19 individuals were convicted of SARV related offences (mostly murder and wilful murder) each year over the past decade. However, there is almost no general knowledge about these convictions. This has contributed to a sense of impunity with regard to SARV, as there are frequently no negative consequences for accusing others of sorcery.

Lack of education and awareness-raising about the amendments to the law in 2013, namely the repeal of the Sorcery Act 1971 and the new s299A offence in the Criminal Code have resulted in widespread confusion.

**Church response**

Under the leadership of the CLRC, the National Churches Strategy to address SARV was developed and was signed in 2019 by representatives of the four groups of churches in the country – the mainline churches, the Pentecostal churches, the Evangelical Alliance and the Body of Christ.

The strategy affirmed the Christian duty to addressing Sorcery Accusation Related Violence as follows:

Speak strongly against accusations of Sorcery that causes fear, loss, pain, and death with key messages from God’s word that outline that only God can:

• Place judgement

• Take a life

 • Give deliverance, salvation, peace and good order

It sets out a detailed strategy but there is little evidence of implementation. While many churches, notably the Catholic and Lutheran churches, are actively engaging in support for victims of SARV and prevention and awareness activities, others are not. Many would argue in fact that pastors who purport to heal those accused of sorcery through prayer or exorcism in fact contribute to the problem of SARV by reinforcing the belief that those accused are possessed by evil spirits.

**Civil Society response**

There is an amazing range of civil society organisations and individuals around PNG who daily struggle to prevent and respond to SARV. In the words of one of these individuals “We are doing the government’s job”. These organisations rely on support from international organisations such as Oxfam, and Caritas and donor programs like *Pacific Women*. Despite their hard work, there is a noticeable erosion in the resilience of these organisations. There is increasing recognition of the real risks to the personal safety and mental health of those working on the frontlines as Human Rights Defenders, as well as their increased frustration at the lack of support and leadership by government departments and agencies.

**International Donor response**

The Australian Aid program has supported significant activity under the SARV NAP. Through the Justice Services and Stability for Development program they funded the Village court and police workshops and through the Pacific Women Shaping Pacific Development program also funded our research (see <http://stopsorceryviolence.org/>) and also another action research project led out of QUT (see <https://yumisanapstrong.org/>) and Oxfam’s repatriation and reintegration funding and support for local human rights defender organisations in the Highlands region to prevent and respond to both gender based and sorcery accusation-related violence.

**SARV across the world**

PNG is not alone in facing the challenges of SARV. The conference heard from activists and academics working in India, Nepal and Sub-Saharan Africa. Recent research has found that SARV exists in 60 countries around the world, impacting 20,000 people in the last decade (see <http://www.whrin.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/Concept-Note-23-November-2020.pdf>).

Many other countries across the world struggling with this issue have viewed PNG as exercising important leadership in developing the national action plan and have been watching closely to see what has eventuated as a result. PNG should aim to keep its international leadership in this regard through maintaining the momentum to address the problem.

**Recommendations for the Committee**

We make recommendations under the following headings: Government Leadership, Prevention, Response and Prosecution and Research.

**Govt Leadership:**

*There is an urgent need for courageous and consistent, public leadership from PNG’s political, church and business leaders speaking with the same voice and message that it is time to end SARV. This should include:*

* Reinvigorating the SARV NAP Committee and funding it to employ full-time staff;
* All provinces need to identify a focal point for addressing SARV to ensure that appropriate networks are in place to connect government with civil society and churches, and these must be adequately resourced; and
* Maintaining the StopSorceryViolence website or a similar online presence with accurate information and resources.

**Prevention:**

* Support local human rights defenders and organisations to carry out community awareness on the laws relating to SARV, GBV and human rights to increase community and community leaders understanding that violence is against the law.
* Update and rollout training for health providers, village courts magistrates and police to increase understanding of impacts of SARV, laws against SARV, their duties and responsibilities (ie descriptions of causes of death or illness by health providers can lead to SARV)
* Require Churches to implement their SARV strategy and encourage them to display commitments to working to end SARV in church buildings.
* Engage youth as change makers to prevent SARV and GBV. The National Youth Development Authority could be tasked with developing a coordinated approach with youth leadership organisations in Provincial and Districts levels.

**Response:**

* Ensure police have resources to respond to emergency SARV calls, including consideration of a special squad.
* Create an emergency fund to support survivors escape violence and re-establish their lives (or contribute to the Oxfam managed repatriation and reintegration fund). Ensure this fund is able to support the safe and long-term reintegration of victim/survivors of accusations back into their communities.
* Govt funding of Safe houses in each province for survivors of SARV and GBV.
* Govt to fund counselling services in each province for survivors of SARV and GBV.

**Prosecution:**

* Improve timeliness of prosecutions and increase awareness of convictions and punishments to perpetrators.
* Increase use of Protection Orders against people accusing others of being or using sorcery or witchcraft. Training of District and Village Ct magistrates and police as well as communities.
* Pursue prosecutions of glasman/glasmeri eg: for defamation or criminal charges when they accuse people of sorcery/witchcraft and it results in death or serious harms.

**Research:**

Fund PNG NRI to maintain database on SARV incidents.

**Possible budget for 2021**

* K100,000 for SARV NAP Committee including K50,000 for emergency funds, to cover maintaining StopSorceryViolence website, quarterly meetings, low cost pubic campaigns of Govt and MP commitments to #Ending SARV.
* K80,000 for each Provincial SARV Focal points including K60,000 for support to local human rights defender organisations, counselling services, safe houses, rest to contribute to meetings, trainings, emergency funds, data collection (ie, prevention and response initiatives).
* K750,000 for DJAG to rollout training to police and village courts magistrates and district court magistrates
* K250,000 for Department of Health to update and rollout training to health providers, including village health volunteers
* K100,000 for National Youth Development Authority
* K50,000 PNG NRI to maintain incident database

**Key contacts**:

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* William Kipongi, PNG NRI
* Anton Lutz
* Dr Miranda Forsyth, Australian National University
1. Selected recent publications: Miranda Forsyth, Ibolya Losoncz, Philip Gibbs, Fiona Hukula and William Kipongi, ‘Sorcery accusation-related violence in PNG, Part 7: The harm of SARV’, In Brief 2021/7, available at <http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/experts-publications/publications/7989/ib-202107-sorcery-accusation-related-violence-png-part-7-harm>; ‘Sorcery accusation-related violence in PNG, 6: Catalysts of accusation and violence’, In Brief 2021/6, available at <http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/experts-publications/publications/7988/ib-202106-sorcery-accusation-related-violence-png-part-6>; ‘Sorcery accusation-related violence in PNG, Part 5: Incidents and victims’, In Brief 2021/5, available at <http://dpa.bellschool.anu.edu.au/experts-publications/publications/7987/ib-202105-sorcery-accusation-related-violence-png-part-5> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/133kg7bHHSBje1ihAmNnSb4YWLTr8SJKt/view?usp=sharing> <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1OcH8D0WWCSO66Az9NUF0KFmRc88IZwE3/view?usp=sharing> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)