

Implementing the Sorcery National Action Plan (SNAP): The Need for Coordinated Participatory Research and for the Development of Effective Communication Strategies

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Abstract

The Sorcery National Action Plan (SNAP) is an analytical policy document developed as an intervention strategy in response to increased accounts of sorcery and witchcraft-related violence in Papua New Guinea (PNG). SNAP's mission is to make PNG society free from sorcery and witchcraft-related violence through strengthened partnerships among relevant stakeholders. It is a five-part strategy that focuses on care and counselling, advocacy and communication, law and protection, and health and research. Research, communication and advocacy have been identified in SNAP as the critical components needed to establish an evidence-based framework that will address violence related to sorcery and witchcraft. Methodical implementation of strategy has been recognized as the key to achieving the projected long-term outcomes envisioned in SNAP. This article emphasizes the importance of a coordinated participatory approach to research and reporting. With such an approach, SNAP will be continuously supported with evidence-based information for planning, incremental policy development and implementation. The paper also highlights the need for developing effective communication strategies as a vehicle to drive community advocacy to transform conflict and bring about social change.

Keywords: coordinated research, effective communication, sorcery and witchcraft, sorcery national action plan

Introduction

Papua New Guinea (PNG) continues to experience a high rate of torture and killings related to sorcery and witchcraft. Media coverage of sorcery and witchcraft-related violence in PNG, including such headlines as “Burnt alive” (*Papua New Guinea Post-Courier*) and “‘Sorcery’ leads to killing” (*The National*), has received much attention at local and international levels (Botu, 2014). Gibbs (2015) argues that the deaths of two women in PNG accused of witchcraft in 2013 shocked the world and prompted strong calls for action. He further argues that such violence continues to be reported in the media, prompting questions about what additional steps could or should be taken (Gibbs, 2015). Several studies have confirmed that violence related to sorcery and witchcraft is having a negative effect across a range of essential areas such as human life and social security, social support systems, governance, socio-economic development, community development, education, household food security, land resource conflicts and human rights (see Tanassa, 2012; Sohkin, Elliot & Chandler, 2013; Botu, 2014; Urame, 2015).

Despite the numerous intervention efforts by government agencies, police, civil society organizations, community-based human rights defenders, community leaders and churches that endeavour to contain violence related to sorcery and witchcraft, such violence is actually increasing (Botu, 2014; Gibbs, 2015; Urame, 2015). Traditionally, different types of punishments have been practiced, but the types that prevail at present are especially brutal and atypical (Botu, 2013). These include burning people alive, extreme torture, maiming, ostracism, public accusation and humiliation, home destruction, destruction of properties and of public infrastructures and food gardens, all having serious socio-economic consequences (see Botu 2014). The great majority of the people of PNG depends entirely on subsistence farming as a source for food and as a source of income, as surplus food is usually sold. People also engage in small informal economic activities such as livestock farming, broiler production and trade store entrepreneurship. The generalized destruction of food gardens and homes, as well as of informal markets and businesses, curtails of the ability to produce goods in significant sectors of the population. The severe physical and mental injuries and the ostracism levelled against so many people also impinges extensively on household food security, family unity, social support systems, child education and informal income-generating opportunities. Another obvious consequence is child orphanage, which is a growing problem¹. In addition, violence engenders fear in affected members of the community, restricting their freedom of movement and greatly curtailing their daily business activities. Furthermore, reports and observations of many cases of violence betray a trend in the type of violence related to sorcery and witchcraft: such violence is increasingly gender-biased (see Zocca 2010; Tanassa 2012; Urame 2013). Ume Wainetti, Executive Director for Family and Sexual Violence Committee in PNG, characterises the violence inflicted by men on women and girls suspected of sorcery and witchcraft-related crimes as essentially sexist in nature (*The National*, 28th March 2014, cited in Botu, 2014). However, Forsyth (2013) argues that the commonly perceived idea that sorcery and witchcraft-related violence is wholly directed at women is erroneous because there are numerous cases that show that men, women and children are common victims of violence related to sorcery and witchcraft. Such concerns demonstrate the need to conduct a detailed study that will isolate sorcery-related violence from gender-based violence. Such a study should establish empirical facts and supporting evidence that may be useful for policy development and planning.

¹ When parents are killed, orphans face the unstable prospects that attend the removal of proper parental care, economic support, and conventional expectations for food, shelter, social security and education.

Birth of Sorcery National Action Plan

The government of PNG introduced, legislated and implemented a number of intervention strategies as a panacea to alleviate social conditions and reduce the escalating rate of crime and violence related to accusations of sorcery and witchcraft. The thrust of these strategies has three basic focus points: (1) The endorsement of the Family Protection Bill 2013, (2) the introduction of death penalty and (3) the repealing of the Sorcery Act 1971 (Botu, 2014). Prime Minister Peter O'Neill called for more severe penalties following a spate of horrific tortures, killings (related and unrelated to sorcery and witchcraft) and rapes in PNG, a deterrent for which, he considered, was the introduction of the death penalty (*Global Post*, 2013, cited in Botu, 2014). This has met with considerable support from parliamentarians and important sectors of the population, but debates concerning the death penalty are still common. The controversial Sorcery Act 1971 was repealed in April 2013, as it was perceived as a mask that protected perpetrators of violence related to sorcery and witchcraft (Botu, 2014). This step was in direct response to public calls to end the pervasive—and ostensibly chronic—sorcery and witchcraft-related torture and killings. It was argued that, although the Act criminalized the practice of sorcery and witchcraft, it nevertheless served to facilitate and provoke false accusations and extrajudicial violence. Repealing of the Act meant that any cases where those accused of practising sorcery and witchcraft had been assaulted or murdered would be tried under existing criminal laws that punish assault and murder (see Forsyth, 2015).

However, these strategies had their critics, and this three-pronged scheme has been described as a headline-grabbing Western approach to dealing with conflict through the inexpedient use of legislative power and human rights prescriptions (see Botu, 2014). The disadvantages of these “Western” approaches to conflict resolution in non-Western settings are known and have been described (see Sanson & Bretherton, 2001). As anticipated by their detractors, they proved ineffective in PNG, resulting in impunity and an increase in violence. The second mission of SNAP is to deal effectively with the perpetrators of violence; given the figures, this has yet to be achieved. In light of it, Botu (2014) recommends that a more collaborative approach should be embraced in addressing sorcery and witchcraft-related violence.

A conference at the Australian National University, in June 2013, addressed the implications of sorcery, witchcraft and associated violence in Melanesia. It was there that an attending group of key stakeholders decided to form a working committee and consolidate efforts to develop a holistic, comprehensive strategy that would tackle the problem at all levels. Their efforts focused on distinct areas that needed urgent attention. As a result, The Draft National Action Plan (DNAP) was formulated and developed later in 2013. DNAP was further refined to produce a final blueprint, now called the Sorcery National Action Plan (SNAP), in November 2014. After more than two years of work led by the PNG Department of Justice and the Attorney General, the government, through a National Executive Council decision, finally approved SNAP on July 21, 2015 (Gibbs, 2015). This move was welcomed as an important step forward in addressing the problem of sorcery and witchcraft accusation-related violence at its roots.

The approved SNAP is an analytical policy framework developed as an intervention strategy to address sorcery and witchcraft accusation-related violence. The vision of SNAP is to make PNG society free from sorcery and witchcraft-related violence through strengthened partnerships among relevant stakeholders. It is a five-part strategy that is focused on care and counselling, advocacy and communication, law and protection, and health and research. Despite the challenges to its implementation and the aforementioned setbacks, it can be argued that SNAP is an important *long-term* strategic policy document that will help address sorcery and witchcraft-

related violence. The current trend of violence related to sorcery and witchcraft necessitates a policy document that incorporates a clear outline of the legal support framework. Creating a robust and pragmatic policy framework is an essential toolkit for planning and addressing social issues such as sorcery and witchcraft accusation-related violence, issues that adversely affect individuals, communities, institutions and the nation. SNAP as a policy document will help identify potential strategies, characterize the vulnerabilities of such strategies, and evaluate deadlocks to address sorcery and witchcraft-related violence more efficiently.

SNAP so what? And how can SNAP really address sorcery and witchcraft-related violence? Father Philip Gibbs posited a parallel question, asking how SNAP will be able to stop the tortures and killings of those accused of witchcraft (see Gibbs, 2015). In practical terms, implementation of SNAP remains a daunting challenge and its future uncertain because of the lack of seed finance that would help implement some of its critical content. SNAP is not legislation, but a policy document that strategizes how sorcery and witchcraft-related violence can be addressed in practical ways. As such, SNAP itself is *not* important, as it is another master strategy document. It is the intended outcomes envisioned in it that matter most because outcomes are the evidence of the successful results. The only way in which these outcomes will be realized is by effectively implementing the strategies. Otherwise, SNAP will gradually accumulate dust and become a banal remnant of unrealized objectives. Implementation herein refers to the transformation of policy ideas and strategies captured in SNAP into action that is aimed at remedying sorcery and witchcraft-related violence. In order to lessen and gradually eradicate sorcery and witchcraft accusation-related violence in PNG, there needs to be a united response and closer cooperation to implement SNAP effectively at all levels. It is hoped that herein I am able to emphasise and justify the need for participatory research and community advocacy. Participatory research and communication and advocacy are important strategies identified in SNAP.

Need for Coordinated Participatory Research

Research has been identified in SNAP as a critical component to establish an evidence-based framework to address violence related to sorcery and witchcraft. There must be adequate empirical evidence to develop appropriate working strategies so that policy makers can make informed decisions regularly and plan in spite of the great uncertainties. Violence related to sorcery and witchcraft has burgeoned astonishingly in PNG, creating great anxiety and uncertainty across the nation. It is to be expected that adequate research will contribute to the literature and knowledge of sorcery and witchcraft-related violence in PNG, revealing unreported cases, violence and its pervasiveness, and providing useful empirical evidence for decision-making authorities and stakeholders; this will allow for evidence-based planning and policy development and implementation. Surveillance through research and access to surveillance data are essential at all levels in order to understand patterns of emergence and to allow stakeholders to anticipate and respond to emergent and re-emergent sorcery related-violence.

The importance of collaboration and coordination in social research has been detailed (see Katsouyanni, 2008; Lambert, 2013). The need for a coordinated participatory approach to research is evident because violence related to sorcery and witchcraft, in spite of all other avenues of treatment, is seemingly perpetual and is increasing. So it is that, in line with the participatory approach, research institutions, civil society organizations and concerned individuals are conducting independent research on various aspects of sorcery and witchcraft-related violence across the country. This is beneficial because it contributes to the literature on the topic of sorcery and witchcraft; however, some of the studies are repetitive and often overlap.

So a need for coordination is identified. Coordinated participatory research will enable researchers to work effectively with each other and with the public at large. Through coordination, need areas for research can be identified and allocated and, consequently, research objectives will be spread over a wider range of specific areas, will address a broader spectrum of problems and will recommend more ways for addressing the problem of sorcery and witchcraft-related violence. In addition, resources allocated for SNAP [intended for research] can be budgeted and managed more effectively. Various aspects of sorcery and witchcraft in PNG have been studied, including its anthropological aspects (Gibbs, 2009; Franklin, 2010; Kuman, 2011), its legal aspects (Forsyth, 2015; Auka, Gore & Koralyo, 2015), and the destructive nature of sorcery-related violence and the collateral abuse of human rights (Sohkin, 2012; Sohkin et al., 2013; Botu, 2013; Urame, 2013). Botu's work (2013, 2014) explains the conflict dynamics attending research and further asserts the need for detailed study in this area. The research shows that researchers have fundamentally different backgrounds and outlook. This can lead to a result where differing outcomes compete for acceptance. Therefore, a coordinated approach will unify research menus and enable focused collaboration aimed at achieving specific projected research outcomes.

The focus of the research should begin by developing strategies on how the impact of sorcery and witchcraft-related violence can be communicated and addressed. For example, Oxfam International used a community-based participatory research (CBPR) approach in the Gumine district of Simbu province, and engaged members of the community to reflect on issues surrounding sorcery and witchcraft (see Oxfam International, 2010). This study showed that members of the community reflected on how problems surrounding sorcery and witchcraft are affecting them and discussed how they can address these problems themselves. Key areas of impact identified in the Oxfam study include conflict transformation and peace building, household food security, education, poverty, providing social support systems, community policing, health education and improving legal support to victims (Oxfam International, 2010).

In practice, scant research evidence is used in PNG with regards to developing policies. Many policies are drawn up by policy makers who base their findings on shallow observation, faulty research and personal assumptions. In some instances, and to some extent, policies are schematised in order to protect political interests. Needless to say, the development of SNAP has experienced the same problems. In the real world, policies are developed in fluid environments and, of necessity, tend to compete with vested political interests; they can also react to social pressure by striving to solve headline-grabbing problems quickly, albeit superficially. SNAP must be made impervious to this trend because, as stated above, the issue is real and very serious in PNG. There is a need for policy makers to be guided and informed by evidence at each stage of policy development, from when an issue is first identified, to the development of the most appropriate response and subsequent evaluation of its effectiveness. SNAP has to be standardized through transparent processes and be continuously supported with evidence-based participatory research. The research must also engage the challenges and limitations of implementing SNAP using a holistic bottom-up approach. Bureaucratic lenses and experiences do not often capture the views and experiences of ordinary people, and research shows this to be the case in sorcery and witchcraft accusation-related violence in PNG.

Let us now draw attention to the relevance of the type of policy design that is driven by empirical, research-acquired evidence, and not by theorizing ideologies. The relationship between research and policy development is at times tenuous and fraught with uncertainty because research is not always designed to be relevant to policy, or policy-makers do not understand research findings as central to decision making. Under such circumstances, there is a

danger of overlooking or misunderstanding the true nature of the situation on the ground. The aim of strengthening research capacity on sorcery and witchcraft accusation-related violence is to generate and convey knowledge into policy decisions, as is clearly called for in the SNAP blueprint. Moreover, policy-makers need to have access to the right information at the right time to inform decisions that draw on the evidence of what works. Research data must therefore be rapidly paraphrased into effective tools for policy-makers. Sorcery and witchcraft accusation-related violence has reached perplexing and complex levels, therefore, continuous participatory research is needed to improve and facilitate pragmatic policy development while implementing the existing SNAP policies.

SNAP shows promise in this regard, as a more rationalistic approach was engaged in its development. This approach is crucial because it holds great appeal and lays out a logical and deliberative framework for addressing sorcery and witchcraft accusation-related violence. The document is rooted in the collection and examination of evidence, evaluation of alternative courses of action and the creation of systems for implementation with projected long-term outcomes. However, it cannot predict abruptly changing environments or new expectations that may arise between the moment of decision-making and the moment of implementation. Only a short-term future can be predicted with confidence. This is the real dilemma with sorcery and witchcraft accusation-related violence in PNG. Perhaps, no matter how rational SNAP may be or hope to be, it is not possible to gather all the facts and take into account every consideration. This brings to the fore the issue of sustainability in implementing plans and strategies, and questions the attainability of projected long term outcomes. That is why an incremental approach through research is necessary for the plan's sustainability. Such an approach will support the long-term vision of SNAP while encouraging the feasible development of problem-solving strategies on a daily basis.

Need for Developing Effective Communication Strategies

Intervention strategies should not focus excessively on *resolution* or *management* of sorcery and witchcraft-related violence. These two approaches neutralize the technical and practical side of peacemaking, while ignoring cultural and relational issues (*see* Burgess, Burgess, Glaser & Yevsyukova, 1997). This often results in the continuation of injustice, as is clearly evident in the steadfast perpetuity of sorcery and witchcraft-related violence in PNG. The long-term solution to sorcery and witchcraft-related violence rests in conflict transformation: conflict transformation is a dialectic approach to conflict that is caused by and causes changes in relationships, with particular focus on the mindset. Ladarach (2003) defined conflict transformation as the process to envision and respond to the ebb and flow of social conflict, giving, in this fluid environment, the opportunities to create constructive change processes that reduce violence and increase justice. In short, it allows us to respond to real-life problems in human relationships. In order to build peace, negative or destructive interaction patterns need to be transformed into positive or constructive relationships and interactions.

Effective communication is an essential tool for conflict transformation (*see* Adejimola, 2009). Effective communication in conflict transformation activities contributes to re-establishing relationships and creating a shared understanding of the conflict, while also building the vision of an interconnected future among opposing groups (Baú, 2015). Advocacy and communication has also been identified in SNAP as an important strategy to address sorcery and witchcraft-related violence. This strategy must be accorded due priority because there is pressing need for community advocacy and awareness. Members of the community [rural and urban] have been identified as key stakeholders (Botu, 2014), yet they lack updated information on intervention

strategies² intended to address sorcery and witchcraft accusation-related violence. How do we connect to these people, particularly those in rural communities who are responsible for most of the violence related to sorcery and witchcraft, and communicate with them in such a way they can easily comprehend? A suitable communication approach will serve as a vital link.

Suitable research approaches such as Community-based Participatory Research (CBPR) methods integrated with visual design technologies (such as use of participatory videos) can be used to develop communication strategies to inform about issues of sorcery and witchcraft effectively. Interventions through the use of media can play a pivotal role in this (*see* Macionis, 1997). In this regard, the work of Vlad Sohkin has been overwhelmingly acknowledged. He documented images and stories of the victims of sorcery and witchcraft or gender-based violence in a project titled *Crying Meri* [meri is a *Tok Pisin*³ word for women] (*see* Sohkin, 2012). This study demonstrates the need for the use of visual literacy and digital technology as an effective alternate approach to addressing sorcery and witchcraft accusation-related violence as it is more intelligible and beneficial to the illiterate communities. On one side, the work of Sohkin (2012) lacked engagement with communities, effective communication and acknowledgement of social change processes. Many people in the rural communities of PNG are illiterate, thus, visual technology can be an effective medium of communication and advocacy. Furthermore, beliefs about sorcery and witchcraft are spiritually and culturally embodied and, as a result, more susceptible to visual stimuli; technology can help to adjust people's understanding of their non-secular world (*see* Thomas & Kauli, 2015) and of the violence associated with it. Advocacy and awareness programs can be done concurrently to educate people on the negative effects of accusing someone of sorcery or witchcraft, and of the violence such accusations can produce.

Community activities such as sports programs, youth initiatives and special skills training can be used as appropriate avenues to bring awareness and discuss issues relating to sorcery and witchcraft within the community (*see* Baú 2015, Witne 2015; Kuman 2016). The work of Baú (2015) highlighted how developing appropriate communication strategies was linked to conflict transformation: these help build peace through community activities such as sports and participatory media that promote social change, as happened in the Rift Valley of Kenya after the post-election conflict in 2007-2008. Social change refers to any significant alteration over time in behavioural patterns and cultural values and norms, yielding profound social consequences (Greenwood & Guner, 2008). As societies are characterized by the common attitudes and behaviour of their members (Greenwood & Guner, 2008), violent attitudes (such as sorcery and witchcraft-related violence) that are perceived as a norm in a society can actually be changed. In the modern world, societies and cultural patterns are never static; thus social, political, economic and cultural changes occur constantly. Such behaviour reflects purposive decision making by individuals acting vigorously in their environment. Such change in cultural values can shift and enable developmental pathways (Greenfield, 2009). The nature of sorcery and witchcraft-related conflict is deep-rooted because its emergence is founded on cultural values and belief systems. Such conflicts can only be de-escalated and transformed by transforming the people's mindset.

The work of Witne (2015) and Kuman (2016) are good examples of community-based participatory approaches that focus on social change. Their work demonstrates how community members of the Yuri tribe in the Simbu province of PNG initiated community peace-building. This was achieved through building awareness of underlying issues and in consultation with like-minded individuals who formed a community association⁴ to advocate for peace and to arbitrate,

² Such as new legislative changes.

³ Lingua franca commonly spoken in PNG and other Melanesian countries.

⁴ The group is named YAKA, abbreviation of *Yuri Alaiiku Kuikane Association*.

reunite, rebuild and reconcile the tribal community with other communities (Witne, 2015; Kuman, 2016). Importantly, the community partnered with key stakeholders such as community policing officers, non-government organizations and churches to drive the message of peace and safety and to say no to violence, including sorcery and witchcraft accusation-related torture and killings. Such community initiatives should be strengthened by providing support through skills training or by introducing other community development initiatives that can motivate and enhance the development of positive attitudes.

Conclusion

The aim of implementing SNAP should be to transform and de-escalate the conflicts and violence that are associated with the beliefs and practices of sorcery and witchcraft. Community advocacy strategies should harness sound programs and effective communication strategies that will promote and bring about social change. Apposite research must be actively engaged and strengthened to support SNAP and propel it into the future. This will enable policy makers and implementing agents to strategize approaches based on evidence. Importantly, community-based participatory research approaches must be used, and the planning aspects of advocacy should also focus on how local communities will be engaged and empowered to take ownership of the issue. SNAP will remain the cornerstone in addressing sorcery and witchcraft-related violence while it is successfully implemented. Otherwise, sorcery and witchcraft-related violence will become idiosyncratic in PNG culture.

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