

Introduction

The ongoing peace process that began in 1997 in Bougainville, in the southwest Pacific state of Papua New Guinea (PNG), is little known, perhaps because it lacks the geostrategic gravity of many other peace initiatives. It is of particular note, however, for several significant reasons.

First, so far this has been a remarkably successful process, ending (to date) a violent and deeply divisive separatist conflict that for much of the period from 1988 to 1997 destabilized both PNG and the wider Pacific islands region. After many failed peace initiatives that seemed to contribute to more hostility, with conflict intensifying considerably from early 1996, the situation seemed to have become intractable. The success of the process is all the more remarkable given the part played by significant “spoilers,” as well as ongoing tensions and local armed conflict that threatened to derail the process at various points—even after the main parties involved in the intervention had departed.

Second, the process related to a multiparty conflict where the adversaries were often nothing more than loose coalitions. Not only was the situation in Bougainville deeply factionalized, but throughout the conflict the PNG government was itself divided and its policies and actions uncoordinated. Such characteristics are increasingly common in intra-state conflict, often giving rise to issues and problems not well addressed by conflict resolution theories derived from relatively simple bilateral conflicts.¹ The Bougainville case highlights some of the difficulties and offers some approaches to actors in interventions faced with similar

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circumstances (including the particular dangers if armed conflict resumes after intervention).

Third, the process itself was unusual in that it was both initiated and largely controlled by local actors, with the international community playing mainly a supporting and facilitating role.

Fourth, a multifaceted international intervention—mainly a regional “coalition of the willing” and a small United Nations (UN) observer mission—played significant roles in the Bougainville process for an extended period (1997–2005).

Fifth, perhaps the most remarkable aspects of the intervention was the fact that it was, in many ways, the archetypal “light footprint” intervention, which peacebuilding policymakers, practitioners, and students generally acknowledge should be the model pursued by all intervention—one with the lowest possible local impact. Such an intervention is generally regarded as involving the local control and ownership needed for an intervention to be sustainable, helps manage safety risks for those making the intervention, reduces costs and minimizes local dependency, and makes exit strategies manageable.

Sixth, with the benefit of hindsight, the peace process could have benefited from a bit more flexibility with regard to the “weight” of the intervention. While a light footprint intervention tends to focus on the earliest possible exit, more flexibility is required for interventions in such complex multiparty conflicts. For example, a small intervention force that could return when localized armed conflict threatened the peace process might have reduced the serious risks of undermining the long-term process as occurred in Bougainville from late 2005 to early 2010.

The question of why a light footprint intervention was possible in Bougainville is a central focus of this monograph. Policymakers and representatives of international bodies in Washington, D.C.; London; Canberra, and other national capitals increasingly assume an almost countervailing need for both multiple agendas in, and a consequential high degree of international community control of, international peacebuilding interventions. The assumptions seem to be much the same not just situations following intense conflict or when a state collapses, but also more generally where a state is weak. The agenda of activities of the

international community in such interventions has expanded in recent years, so much so that it sometimes seems to be assumed that there must be a correct or most productive approach to such activities—perhaps even that templates are available. This agenda—so extensive that it can be quite difficult to achieve a light footprint intervention—generally includes

- provision of a robust peacekeeping (or, if necessary, peace-enforcement) role;
- mediation and other support for achieving a political settlement between opposing combatant and political groups;
- disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration of combatants;
- active engagement in state-building—in relation to both the civil service generally and the law and justice sector in particular, including stepping in to provide these “from scratch” as needed, or rebuilding damaged local capacity through injecting experts and providing capacity-building support to local officials;
- provision of aid and investment packages in support of economic reconstruction;
- development of appropriate postconflict constitutional arrangements, which—in situations where there has been ethnic conflict—often include, among other things, executive and/or territorial power sharing, limits on executive powers, a constitutional court, strong protections for human rights, and a transitional justice mechanism such as a truth and reconciliation process; and
- provision of support for—and/or organization of—elections for a new government.

Of course, while a light footprint is widely regarded as desirable, it is also generally recognized that there are some conflict situations where this cannot be achieved. Further, other factors than those outlined in the extensive agenda of activities could influence the weight of the footprint. A case could vary greatly depending on the local context, changing circumstances, and the particular phase of the intervention in question. For example, in relation to the importance of phases, an initial

demonstration of a high level of force might well be justified to encourage particular armed groups to lay down their weapons, but subsequent intervention stages might then be quite limited, or vice versa.

Despite such caveats, the burgeoning scope of the agenda of intervention activities seems to be a major factor leading toward an increasingly heavier footprint. It is in this context that the Bougainville peace process is of particular interest, because while it included most elements of the above agenda, it still managed to achieve a light footprint.

Of course, making comparisons among conflicts, peace processes, and peacebuilding interventions that occur in vastly differing contexts is a task fraught with difficulty. Aspects of the Bougainville situation lent themselves to a far lighter international community involvement than may be necessary in some other cases. Even so, the Bougainville case supports the view that when carrying out peacebuilding interventions, the international community can sometimes achieve more by being less activist than can often seem necessary. Hence, as noted, it serves as a key example when considering both the advantages of, and the conditions that may be necessary for, a light footprint international intervention.

This case study of the Bougainville peace process pays particular attention to the international intervention and its role in the wider peace process. The seven chapters are organized as follows. Chapter 1 presents an overview of facts and issues about the location. Chapter 2 outlines the little-known case of the Bougainville conflict, its origins, main features, and impacts. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the chief facets of the peace process, including some of its main difficulties and the key dynamics that enabled local actors to initiate and largely control it. Chapter 4 turns to the international intervention, focusing on the outside actors involved and their relationships to local actors to explain the significant degree of local control. Chapter 5 deals with the key features of the Bougainville Peace Agreement of August 2001 and the extent of its implementation in the nearly nine years since it was signed. Chapter 6 examines ongoing sources of tension and conflict in Bougainville, with particular attention paid to localized armed conflict in the period since 2005 and, among other things, whether this experience points to shortcomings in the international intervention. Chapter 7 pinpoints some major lessons that the international community might

derive from the experience of the Bougainville intervention. Finally, the monograph concludes with key reasons why the international intervention in Bougainville was able to achieve the much sought-after goal of a light footprint.

A Note on the Sequence of Events in Bougainville

The history of Bougainville, of the conflict (both its origins and the course of events 1988–97), and of the peace process is complex. To date there is not yet a single volume that presents even an overview of those events, especially those during the conflict and the peace process. This book does not seek to fill that gap. Further, the analytical approach used here does not present the events of the period 1988 to 2010 in sequence. To assist the reader to better understand the sequence of events, a “Chronology: Main Events in the Bougainville Conflict and Peace Process” is included toward the end of this monograph.