



VOICES OF BOUGAINVILLE

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(Our Land, Our Future)

Executive Summary

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The Panguna copper and gold mine has played a central role in Bougainville's recent economic and political history. During the course of its operation—from 1972 until 1989—the mine formed the foundation of an economic development model centred on large-scale mining, providing a major revenue source for government, investors and other businesses linked to the mine's operation. Subsequently, the eruption of intense social conflict over the mine's operation played a central role in triggering the region's decade long civil war. The mine now lies at the heart of debates over the region's political and economic future, as discussion surrounding the mine's proposed reopening gains momentum. These debates are closely intertwined with discussions over the island's prospective independence from Papua New Guinea. As these debates unfold in tandem, the next 12 months will be a critical time for the people of Bougainville.

Official public discussion surrounding the mine's future has often projected sentiments of both inevitability and united public purpose in support of the mine's reopening. Yet despite optimistic declarations over the potential to overcome past conflict and achieve broad-based support amongst affected people for the mine's reopening, there have been numerous warning signs that significant social tensions surrounding the mine persist.

REPORT AIMS

Drawing on interviews with a range of everyday Bougainvilleans living in villages around the Panguna mine area, this report explores some of the ways in which complex legacies related to the conflict, and

mining, are intersecting with equally complex debates over Bougainville's economic and political future. The report endeavors to relay voices from mine-affected communities in Bougainville, voices that have been distant from recent public discussions surrounding the mine—raising some difficult and troubling questions about the mine's past, and its soon to be determined future.

RESEARCH METHOD

The interviews were carried out by two researchers in ten different sites in the Panguna region during November and December 2013. The researchers spoke to people from most of the key villages in or around the mine site, including a majority of the main villages located in the Special Mining Lease Area and in the Upper and Middle Tailings Areas. A snowball sampling method was used in order to identify participants, who were broadly divided across a range of ages and genders. In all, 65 individual interviews were carried out as well as one focus group discussion with 17 participants.

RESEARCH FINDINGS: HISTORY OF THE MINE AND THE CONFLICT

The individuals consulted in this study overwhelmingly felt that from the very start, the decision to have a mine at Panguna was imposed upon them by outsiders; they felt that the legal regime and economic enticements which convinced some to agree to the operation had been part of a deliberate strategy to undermine their way of life and to steal their resources. They felt that the mine, both during its construction and operation, had produced a range of disastrous impacts, citing

most prominently the pollution and environmental destruction it had caused to their land and ecosystems; in addition they felt that it had made them dependent on outsiders, prompted an influx of foreigners, eroded their sovereignty, and generated insecurity. Relations with the mine operator were also flagged as an issue of concern.

The conflict years (1988-1997) were remembered as a time of trauma, both by those who lived through the period directly as well as by those who were too young to have personal memories of the events. The most common causes of this trauma were the loss of property and livelihood, the shortages of food, medicine and services, and the killing or maiming of family members. The respondents overwhelmingly identified the mine, and the environmental destruction associated with it, as the cause of the conflict, although discontent with benefit-sharing arrangements and the enrichment of elites and landowner associations were also mentioned as significant factors. The Bougainville Revolutionary Army was still widely held to have waged a just war, although some acknowledged that it had committed violations. In contrast, the atrocities committed by the Papua New Guinea Defence Force (PNGDF), were felt to have been worse and less forgivable. The role of the Governments of Papua New Guinea and Australia, in addition to the mine operator Bougainville Copper Limited (BCL), in supporting the conflict was well understood and the cause of ongoing resentment and mistrust towards all three actors.

RESEARCH FINDINGS: PLANS TO REOPEN THE MINE

Opposition to the opening of the mine was near universal; individuals not only expressed their personal opposition but reported that this was the feeling of the majority in the area. The three main reasons for this opposition were: the negative environmental and social consequences associated with the first period of mining, the role the mine played in sparking the conflict, and the lack of meaningful reconciliation and justice, associated with which is ongoing trauma from the conflict period. Around one fifth of the respondents would be prepared to consider discussing the prospect of reopening the mine after the independence vote has been taken; other additional conditions for reopening were local ownership/control of the mine or a proper reconciliation ceremony.

Respondents were deeply critical of recent consultations surrounding the proposed reopening of the mine. Some felt that the consultations had not been sufficiently inclusive of communities that would be directly affected by the reopening, and that youth, women and elders had been excluded and/or their opinions disregarded. Others felt that they had been poorly represented by the landowner associations or their elected representatives; others felt that there had been misleading statements in the media about the enthusiasm of Panguna residents for the mine reopening, and about what the reopening would mean. Others still appear to have deliberately chosen not to engage because of ongoing trauma associated with the conflict, and mistrust of the actors pushing for reopening.

RESEARCH FINDINGS: RECONCILIATION AND ASPIRATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Although not all respondents expressed their opinion on the peace process to date, those who did reported unanimous dissatisfaction. Nearly three quarters felt that although there was now an end to the violence, the problems facing families have not yet been addressed. Related to this, a sizeable majority felt that lasting peace had not been restored and that more reconciliation was necessary. Smaller numbers reported variously that there had been peace but no justice; that the peace process has not been properly consultative; or that the process itself was an initiative to serve the needs of Australia/Papua New Guinea. All respondents felt that the ongoing fact of trauma present in their communities was a serious problem and that there needed to be more support services to address it.

When asked about the future of Bougainville, respondents identified a number of principles which they would like to be adhered to secure a healthy and prosperous life for their communities and their island. The most important among these were respect for the natural environment, a commitment to a 'people-centred' development, and a development process designed and controlled by Bougainvilleans. A significant number rejected the attempt to link the issue of Bougainvillean independence with the reopening of the Panguna mine.

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