

Humanitarian impacts of recurrent intercommunal violence in Enga province

OVERVIEW

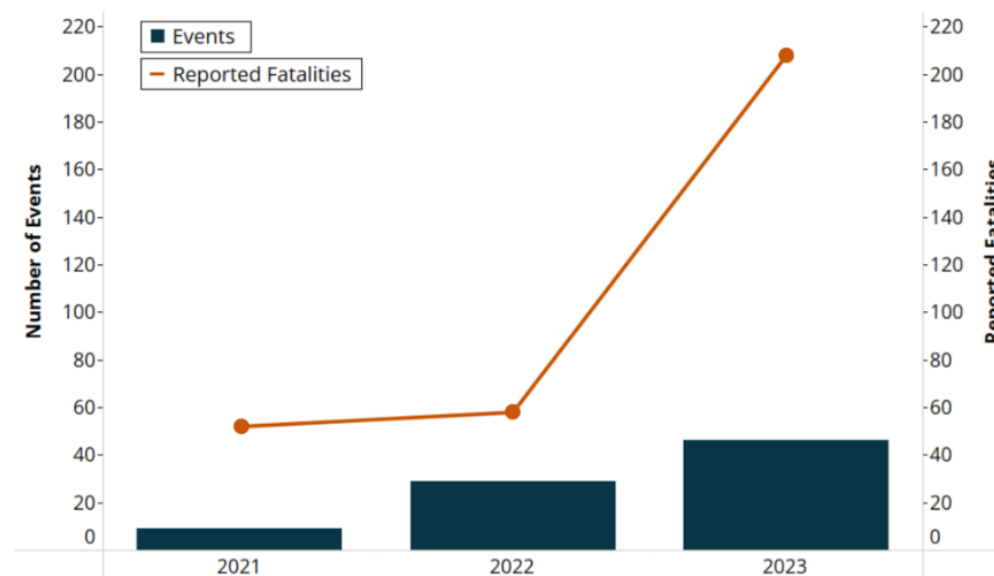
From 15–17 September, violence broke out in the Lagaip-Porgera district of Papua New Guinea’s Enga province, after the Sakar clan settled on the land of their Piande rivals to conduct unauthorised gold mining (Development Policy Centre 25/09/2024; BBC 16/09/2024; AJ 16/09/2024). By 27 September, information on casualties and humanitarian impacts remained limited and varied as a result of significant access constraints. It has been estimated that the violence killed between 20–50 people, displaced ‘hundreds’, destroyed ‘many’ homes, and disrupted access to healthcare and other basic services (UNCT PNG 17/09/2024; Reuters 16/09/2024; AJ 16/09/2024).

These incidents reflect increasingly frequent and lethal intercommunal violence in Enga province. Violent incidents in Enga recorded by the Armed Conflict Locations and Events Dataset Project (ACLED) increased from fewer than ten in 2021 to around 50 in 2023, with casualties rising from around 50 in 2021 to 220 in 2023 (ACLED 27/02/2024). On 18 February 2024, the deadliest incident of violence in Papua New Guinea’s (PNG) history occurred in Enga, when fighting between up to 17 tribes and affiliated groups – including the Kaekin, Palinau, and Sikin tribes on one side and the Ambulin and Sau Walep tribes on the other – killed around 50 people (ACLED 27/02/2024; Development Policy Centre 25/09/2024; ABC News 19/02/2024).

While many incidents of intercommunal fighting in Enga (and across PNG) are reported as ‘tribal’, those involved and their motivations extend beyond tribal identities, and include national politics, crime, and conflict over natural resources (USIP 02/07/2024; ICRC 15/03/2022; UNDP 24/06/2024). The decreasing influence of traditional, tribal social structures, along with a growing youth population and new technologies, including communications technology and firearms, have also changed the dynamics of intercommunal conflict, leading to the abandonment of past norms and methods of waging war (ICRC 15/03/2022 and 05/06/2018; Lowy Institute 09/02/2021; USIP 02/07/2024).

Intercommunal violence increases the humanitarian needs of Enga’s marginalised, remote communities, who already have minimal access to basic services, including healthcare, education, transport, and WASH infrastructure. Perpetrators often burn and destroy homes and cropland, leaving communities displaced and without access to traditional livelihoods for months or even years. Gender-based violence (GBV) against women during fighting and at IDP sites increases protection needs (IFRC 15/03/2022; USIP 02/07/2024; IOM 27/03/2024 a).

Figure 1. Increasing political violence* in Enga province, 2021–2023



Source: ACLED (27/02/2024)

*Events classified as ‘political violence’ in ACLED’s data on Enga province for this period include: armed clashes, defined as “short-lived and/or small-scale territorial exchanges that do not last for more than one day”; attacks, defined as occurring “when civilians are targeted with violence by an organized armed actor”; mob violence, defined as occurring “when rioters violently interact with other rioters, civilians or their property, or armed groups outside of demonstration contexts”; and sexual violence, defined as “an action that inflicts harm of a sexual nature.” Militias connected to specific tribes are reported to have been involved in nearly all incidents in the ACLED database for this period (ACLED accessed 01/10/2024; ACLED 02/06/2023).

ABOUT THIS REPORT

Aim:

This report analyses the drivers and humanitarian impacts of and responses to recurrent intercommunal violence in Enga province.

Geographic and temporal scope: this report focuses on two major instances of violence in Enga in 2024: events in Lagaip-Porgera district between 15–17 September and those in Wabag and Wapenamanda districts on 18 February. This report also draws on information relating to nationwide trends and impacts of intercommunal violence, primarily from the last five years.

Methodology and limitations:

This analysis is based on a secondary review of publicly available data. Significant access constraints limit information on the impact of specific incidents, particularly the most recent, September violence.

Information on national intercommunal violence rates is also limited, as government institutions do not collect comprehensive statistics on the murder rate, displacement resulting from violence, and other key indicators of intercommunal violence. When examining national trends, this analysis draws on a United States Institute for Peace (USIP) study that estimates the frequency of intergroup violence across PNG between 2018–2022 based on public reporting in the country’s two national daily newspapers (the Post-Courier and The National). Given its reliance on public reporting, however, the USIP study likely underestimates the frequency of violent incidents (USIP 02/07/2024). This analysis also cites ACLED data on violence against civilians in PNG, which is also primarily based on public reporting and, as such, likely underestimates actual rates of violence (ACLED accessed 27/09/2024).

The State’s lack of information-gathering capacity and constrained humanitarian access mean there is minimal baseline information on population characteristics, livelihoods, and access to services in Enga province. There has also been no credible census since 2000 in PNG, and a 2022 voter roll used for population estimates does not include children under 18, leaving information gaps on birth rates and child mortality (France 24 28/05/2024).

Terminology:

Secondary sources cited throughout this report often use the terms ‘tribe’ and ‘clan’ to describe the groups associated with violence. In PNG, the term ‘clan’ generally describes extended family networks, while ‘tribe’ refers to a group of affiliated or related clans (ICRC 15/03/2022; Reilly 01/04/2008). It is not always clear if a given source consistently uses these terms according to the above definitions.

This report uses the term ‘intercommunal violence’ – in place of the more commonly used ‘tribal violence’ – to reflect the combination of groups and motivations involved in violent incidents. These linkages extend beyond tribal affiliations to include hired mercenaries acting for profit; people involved in illicit economies; and community members engaging in or responding to petty crime.

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TRENDS AND DRIVERS OF INTERCOMMUNAL VIOLENCE

In PNG, intercommunal violence between different clans and tribes has historically occurred over land, other material resources, and sociopolitical power (ICRC 15/03/2022; Reilly 01/04/2008). According to the USIP's analysis, around 55% of reported incidents of intercommunal violence (156 of 281) between 2018–2022 involved violence between tribes or clans and around 8% involved interethnic conflict. The difference between the USIP's 'tribal fight' and 'interethnic conflict' categories is unclear (USIP 02/07/2024). While these incidents are often manifestations of long-running intercommunal disputes, some are triggered by a targeted, interpersonal incident, such as theft, physical assault, or murder, which draws the affected person or people's relatives, tribe or clan members, and other parties into a wider conflagration (USIP 02/07/2024; ICRC 15/03/2022; ACLED 27/02/2024). The USIP also identifies around 21% of reported violence that resulted from "lawlessness not related to ethnicity or tribe" (USIP 02/07/2024).

These classifications, however, do not provide insight into the following drivers of more recent violence, which exceeds the historical frequency and deadliness of fighting between tribes and clans.

Changing social structures and population demographics

Historically in PNG, traditional communal leaders have held significant influence over a clan or tribe's decision to engage in fighting. Leaders generally imposed norms for the conduct of violence, limiting the impact of fighting on 'neutral' clans and community members (ICRC 15/03/2022 and 05/06/2018; Lowy Institute 09/02/2021). Traditional leaders and systems are seeing declining influence, however, within communities that are increasingly youth-dominated – nearly 65% of the population in the Highlands region, which includes Enga province, was under the age of 18 in June 2024. Social norms and practices among youth are often shaped by extra-communal influences, including modern communications technology, weaponry, and industry (UNDP 24/06/2024; ICRC 15/03/2022). These changing norms and structures have contributed to conflicts that do not adhere to traditional understandings of permissible methods and targets of violence. Youth sometimes initiate such conflicts without the support of community leaders and elders (ICRC 15/03/2022 and 05/06/2018).

Community leaders, security forces, authorities, and civil society across PNG often rely on traditional peace-making methods, which include compensation payments for death and damage incurred from fighting, temporary ceasefires, and peace and reconciliation ceremonies (USIP 02/07/2024). Traditional peace-making approaches are, however, not always equal to the increasing scale of violence, which (in some cases) demands greater compensation than clans or tribes are able to provide (The Guardian 02/12/2017). Following

intercommunal violence in Enga in February 2024, a peace agreement between the Palinau and Yopo tribal alliances was signed in Port Moresby after "several attempts to hold peace talks the traditional way back in Enga did not work" (Post Courier 22/07/2024). It was not mentioned whether these efforts included compensation payments.

Changing technology

In PNG, the rising death toll from intercommunal violence is often attributed to the increased use of firearms over traditional weapons, such as spears. Over 40% of reported intercommunal violence cases from 2018–2022 involved firearms, compared to only 10% involving spears, arrows, or bush knives. The rate of firearm use could even be higher, as around half of reported cases made no mention of the weapons used (USIP 02/07/2024; ANU 01/03/2024). By September 2024, around 50,000 illegal firearms were circulating in PNG, many of which were stolen from government repositories or trafficked over the border from Indonesia as part of a profitable trade allegedly involving political elites and security personnel (Development Policy Centre 25/09/2024; The Guardian 02/12/2017; RNZ 30/10/2023; Post Courier 17/10/2023). Arms are sometimes brought in and used by people outside the relevant tribes or clans. For example, the February 2024 violence in Wabag and Wapenamanda districts included gunmen allegedly hired by wealthy members of participating tribes (ACLED 27/02/2024).

Mobile phones have also enabled the rapid mobilisation and spread of fighting, leaving communities with little time to flee impending attacks (The Guardian 26/02/2021; ICRC 22/06/2017).

Politics and elections

Conflict related to national politics increasingly triggers spikes in long-running local conflicts over land and other pre-existing social issues. In some cases, clans and tribes capitalise on political tensions as a pretext to renew fighting over long-standing issues, such as land disputes. In May 2022, for example, violence around the national election heightened intercommunal conflict, particularly in Hela and Enga provinces, displacing an estimated 30,000 people (IOM 27/03/2024 b).

Legal and illegal mining

The December 2023 reopening of the Porgera Gold Mine in Enga province increased local tensions related to the mine's socioeconomic impact. Such tensions include disputes over the fair distribution of royalties, inclusion of community groups (particularly women's groups) in consultations on the reopening, and plans for the resettlement of communities living on land used by the mine (Development Policy Centre 19/02/2024 and 25/09/2024).

Originally opened in 1990, the mine prompted local service development and employment opportunities, leading the population of Porgera Valley to increase from around 4,000–73,000 between 1990–2023. This influx of people from other communities led to rising social tensions, however, as did the mine’s impact on cropland productivity, leading to resource scarcity in a primarily agricultural community (Development Policy Centre 21/06/2023; ABC News 28/12/2023; INA 12/2020).

The mine closed in 2020 after the Government, in an effort to negotiate an increased stake, declined to renew its lease. In December 2023, the mine reopened after a new lease, which gives local entities from PNG a 51% equity stake (10% to unspecified 'local landowners', 5% to Enga’s provincial authorities, and 36% to the PNG Government), was agreed (Development Policy Centre 24/01/2024; ABC News 28/12/2023; Benar News 04/04/2024).

Illegal gold mining in the Porgera Valley, which increased during the mine’s closure between 2020–2023, is also a common cause of conflict in Enga province, leading to violence between people who migrate to the area in order to mine, landowners, police, and the mine’s security guards. There are reports of a renewed influx of unauthorised miners in Porgera since the mine reopened, raising further tensions with landowners, although the reasons for this influx are unclear (ABC News 28/12/2023; Benar News 04/04/2024).

Security force capacity and behaviour

A low state security presence, including police, facilitates the rapid spread of violence and subsequent impunity for perpetrators, contributing to recurrence. In September 2024, the police-citizen ratio across PNG was 1:1,845, well below the UN-recommended ratio of 1:450 (Development Policy Centre 25/09/2024). This ratio is often even lower in remote communities, as most police are stationed in major towns (ACLEDD 27/02/2024). To compensate for this shortage, the Government frequently deploys additional police and members of the PNG Defence Forces following an incident of intercommunal violence. Police are often authorised to use lethal force after such an incident (AJ 16/09/2024; USIP 02/07/2024). Disproportionately violent and/or under-resourced policing operations contribute to tension and violence, however, and there have been incidents over the past five years of police engaging directly in violence, including allegedly killing uninvolved civilians (USIP 02/07/2024).

That said, police are also often involved in conflict prevention and peace-making efforts, facilitating peacebuilding initiatives in nearly 45% of violent incidents (120 of 281) reported between 2018–2022 (USIP 02/07/2024). It is unclear whether police have traditionally played this role or this is a newer practice.

AGGRAVATING FACTORS

Climate and natural hazards

PNG is vulnerable to natural hazards, including earthquakes, flooding, volcanic activity, cyclones, and drought (IOM 27/03/2024 b). PNG’s INFORM Climate Change Risk Score is 5.5/10 (high), with a score of 7.4/10 for lack of coping capacity, indicating significant constraints to the State’s response to climate hazards (EC accessed 29/05/2024).

Frequent natural hazards decrease communities’ capacity to cope with the impacts of intercommunal violence. In May 2024, a landslide in Lagaip-Porgera district directly affected nearly 10,000 people, with 1,680 still displaced by the end of July. Following the landslide, affected communities chose to remain in areas vulnerable to further landslides rather than relocate to areas at risk of intercommunal violence (UNCT PNG 28/05/2024; IOM 28/05/2024 and 29/07/2024; CARE Australia 07/06/2024). For more information on the May 2024 landslide in Lagaip-Porgera, see ACAPS’s report on the landslide’s humanitarian impacts (ACAPS 31/05/2024).

Rural poverty and social protection

Around 85% of PNG’s population live in rural areas with minimal access to formal employment, infrastructure, and basic services. Around 40% of the population lives below the poverty line, decreasing their capacity to cope with livelihood losses and other economic impacts of intercommunal conflict (IFRC 02/05/2024; CFE-DM 22/06/2022). There is no disaggregated data on poverty rates in Enga province.

Wantok, which is an informal, kinship-based social support system, is the traditional form of social protection in PNG. Formal social protection is limited, with no national social security, unemployment insurance, or pension system. While the Government did propose the implementation of a national policy on social protection from 2015–2020, there is no publicly available information on implementation progress by October 2024 (Govt. of PNG 01/03/2015; The National 07/07/2023). It is unclear how wantok functions in the case of intercommunal violence, although the destruction of entire villages, including homes and cropland, likely limits the resources shareable among family and clan members, impeding their ability to collectively respond to economic shocks.

HUMANITARIAN IMPACTS OF INTERCOMMUNAL VIOLENCE

Shelter and displacement

In March 2024, authorities estimated that intercommunal conflict had left at least 20,000 protracted IDPs across Enga province, not including the nearly 5,500 new IDPs displaced by February fighting in Wapenamanda and Wabag districts. An IOM assessment of recent IDPs found that most were living with host families, who housed up to ten IDPs each, leading to significant overcrowding. Others built makeshift shelters vulnerable to extreme weather and natural hazards along riverbanks (IOM 27/03/2024 a; *The Guardian* 26/05/2024). Such conditions are similar to those of IDPs from previous conflicts and natural hazards in Enga, who generally shelter with host communities in villages or in ad hoc IDP sites established in local government stations and other public buildings. Overcrowding, lack of privacy, and lack of access to basic services are common across all sites (ABC News 11/09/2023; IOM 27/03/2024 a and 29/07/2024).

While no statistics are available for Enga province, around 35% of violent incidents (99 of 281) across PNG between 2018–2022 involved the destruction of homes, with entire villages sometimes burnt to the ground (USIP 02/07/2024; ABC News 11/09/2023). This situation likely leaves few materials for rebuilding and increases the duration of displacement and shelter needs.

Protection

February and September 2024 incidents of intercommunal fighting in Enga province each left up to 50 people dead (ABC News 19/02/2024; UNCT PNG 17/09/2024). Across PNG, a minimum of 1,900 people were killed in the 281 reported violent incidents between 2018–2022 (USIP 02/07/2024). Aside from death, intercommunal violence also frequently involves maiming, the mistreatment of dead bodies, and GBV, including rape, primarily of women (BBC 25/07/2024; UNCT PNG/UNICEF 24/07/2024).

After fighting in February, authorities in Wabag district reported several GBV cases, including instances of rape. By March, however, many complainants had dropped their complaints for fear of reprisal, including fearing for their lives. Fear of retaliation and social stigma systematically prevent GBV reporting across PNG, despite increasing accounts of GBV occurring during intercommunal violence (IOM 27/03/2024 a). In contravention to previous norms against the targeting of women and children, there are reports of rape being used as a weapon of war, with perpetrators targeting of women from opposing tribes to undermine

their male relatives and community members (USIP 02/07/2024; ANU 01/03/2024; ICRC 05/06/2018). One source reports that women are killed to prevent them from giving birth to sons who may become involved in reprisal violence (USIP 02/07/2024).

The overcrowding, lack of privacy, and limited lighting common to formal and ad hoc IDP sites across PNG, including in Enga, increase the risk of GBV, including intimate partner violence (IPV) (IOM 27/03/2024 a and 29/07/2024). IPV rates in PNG are already high, with nearly 60% of ever-partnered women aged 15–49 reporting experiences of physical or sexual IPV at least once in their lifetime according to the 2016–2018 Demographic and Health Survey, which included a nationally representative sample of over 16,000 households (UN Women accessed 27/09/2024; Govt. of PNG/DHS Program 11/2019). This is likely a significant underrepresentation of the true rates given the stigma and other barriers to reporting IPV.

Health

Malaria, gastrointestinal diseases, and respiratory illnesses are common communicable diseases in Enga province and across PNG, especially among IDPs (IOM 29/07/2024 and 27/03/2024 a; IFRC 02/05/2024). In communities affected by intercommunal fighting, which frequently prompts the suspension of government services, those who contract these illnesses are often unable to access healthcare (USIP 02/07/2024). In areas experiencing recurrent violence, such suspension of services has become permanent. For example, until July 2024, the Mulitaka Health Centre in Lagaip-Porgera district – the main referral facility for surrounding wards – had been closed for ‘several years’ as a result of intercommunal conflict. The health centre was reopened and rehabilitated to treat survivors of the nearby landslide in May 2024 (IOM 29/07/2024).

Health facilities are also destroyed during fighting, leading to long-term gaps in care. For example, during the February violence in Wabag and Wapenamanda districts, three health facilities (Lakopenda Health Centre in Wabag district and Sapos and Pina community health posts in Wapenamanda) were destroyed. By March, Wapenamanda’s two remaining health facilities were operating with only two staff, as the others had been killed (IOM 27/03/2024 a).

Without access to nearby health centres, people are required to travel further to access care. Such travelling can involve crossing the territory of rival tribes or clans, posing protection risks (ICRC 22/06/2017). Injured people, older people, people with disabilities, and pregnant and lactating women likely have greater difficulty travelling long distances for health services, leaving them particularly vulnerable to health risks.

Alternative medicine is practiced by herbalists in some communities in PNG, although its popularity has declined among younger generations. The frequency of alternative medicine usage in Enga province, including in conflict-affected communities without access to other healthcare facilities, is unknown (*The National* 18/08/2023).

Limited access to healthcare has increased the number of ‘zero-dose’ children in PNG, with six provinces, including Enga, showing particularly low rates of routine immunisation among children in 2024 (UN 16/07/2024). This likely increases the number of vaccine-preventable deaths, particularly among children, in conflict-affected communities.

Livelihoods

Displacement and the destruction of gardens, cropland, and other livelihood sources during incidents of intercommunal violence deprive affected communities of access to livelihoods for extended periods (IOM 27/03/2024 a).

While there is no disaggregated data for Enga, around 35% of violent incidents (94 of 281) across PNG from 2018–2022 involved the destruction of cropland (USIP 02/07/2024). Such destruction is significant for over 85% of people in PNG, who live in rural areas and mainly rely on subsistence agriculture, primarily producing crops for consumption and selling anything left over to supplement their income (UNDP 18/12/2022; CFE-DM 22/06/2022; Govt. of Enga accessed 30/05/2024). In Enga province, for example, a 2022 survey of over 450 households found that 100% of people relied on their own production to meet food needs (UNDP 18/12/2022). The destruction of cropland from intercommunal violence has a significant impact on food security, leaving affected communities entirely dependent on assistance from host communities and humanitarian responders (ABC News 11/09/2023; IOM 27/03/2024 a).

Intercommunal violence also disrupts natural resource extraction in Enga. For instance, the September violence in Lagaip-Porgera district forced the closure of the Porgera Gold Mine for at least five days, from 15–19 September. The mine primarily employs community residents and contributes significantly to Enga’s economy (Mining Weekly 19/09/2024; ABC News 16/09/2024; Govt. of Enga accessed 27/09/2024). Such disruptions also have economic impacts nationwide, as natural resources (including gold, gas, and copper) have been the largest contributor to GDP in 2024 (IFRC 02/05/2024; Nikkei Asia 12/01/2021).

Education

Recurrent conflict in Enga has consistently disrupted children’s access to education, as caregivers are reluctant to send children to school and teachers are hesitant to accept jobs for fear of violence (UNICEF 09/08/2024). For example, by 27 July 2024, Mulitaka High School in Lagaip-Porgera district had been closed for an unspecified period because of prior tribal conflict. School closures are common, leading children from affected wards to drop out, attend schools in other districts and provinces, or only attend intermittently (IOM 29/07/2024). There is no recent, reliable information available on school attendance rates in Enga province.

Schools have also been destroyed during fighting. Between the beginning of 2023 and February 2024, a total of ten schools were burnt down during instances of intercommunal violence in Wabag and Wapendamanda districts (IOM 27/03/2024 a). Until September 2024, there was still no information on whether these schools had been rebuilt.

HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE AND CONSTRAINTS

Following an incident of intercommunal violence, the PNG Defence Forces are often deployed in an attempt to re-establish security (UNCT PNG 17/09/2024; USIP 02/07/2024). Insufficient resources, legitimacy, and capacity, however, frequently limit the effectiveness of such responses (Development Policy Centre 25/09/2024; ACLED 27/02/2024; ABC News 11/09/2023).

PNG’s Disaster Management Team coordinates international humanitarian responders in PNG. The team is co-chaired by the UN Resident Coordinator and PNG’s National Disaster Centre, and includes UN agencies, INGOs, the PNG Red Cross, private sector stakeholders, and civil society organisations (IOM 27/03/2024 b). UN agencies, INGOs, the International Committee of the Red Cross, and civil society organisations also pursue independent programming to prevent and respond to intercommunal violence across PNG (UNDP 24/07/2024; ICRC 15/03/2022; IOM 27/03/2024 b). There is limited information on the specific activities undertaken by these organisations, however, including their geographic scope, type of programming, and outcomes.

Logistical and physical access constraints are significant in Enga, as villages do not typically have roads (UNDP 24/07/2024). The Lagaip-Porgera district is still recovering from the May 2024 landslide, posing continued logistical barriers to aid delivery in the area (UNCT PNG 17/09/2024). By 20 September, roads connecting landslide-affected areas were still impassable, complicating support for families affected by recent violence (Global Newswire 20/09/2024).

Intercommunal fighting also poses access constraints for humanitarian response. Some tribes and clans impose roadblocks, requiring humanitarian responders to negotiate passage to reach affected communities (ICRC 15/03/2022). Following the May 2024 landslide, the PNG Defence Forces provided humanitarian responders with security escorts, as an unrelated clan conflict in Tambitanis had created security risks along the only road to landslide-affected communities (ECHO 26/05/2024). It is not known whether the use of security escorts for humanitarian response is habitual in Enga or whether this affects responders’ capacity to build trust with affected communities or negotiate with tribes, clans, and other stakeholders involved in incidents of intercommunal violence.