



# Legacies of Conflict in the Pacific: Why the Past Matters Now

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In July 2025, Conciliation Resources published a report titled *Legacies of Conflict in the Pacific: Dealing with the Past*, co-authored by Mercy Masta and Kate Higgins, with contributions from peacebuilding practitioners across Fiji, Papua New Guinea (PNG), Solomon Islands, Bougainville, and other Pacific contexts. Launched at ANU in September 2025, the report emphasises that conflict in the Pacific is not merely historical — its legacies continue to shape the political, social, psychological, and cultural life of communities.

This In Brief examines the lasting impact of past conflict and emphasises the importance of history, memory, and local agency in peacebuilding. Drawing on the compendium, it advocates for inclusive, culturally grounded, and locally led approaches that combine oral and documented histories, support indigenous practices, and prioritise marginalised groups. It also offers practical recommendations for policymakers and peacebuilders to advance long-term reconciliation, justice, and sustainable peace in the Pacific.

Pacific societies are grounded in rich oral traditions that play a central role in peacebuilding and conflict resolution: storytelling, poetry, song, community dialogues such as *tok stori* (storytelling) and *talanoa* (dialogical conversation), and ceremonial practices. They foster cultural resonance, local ownership, and the intergenerational transmission of knowledge, values, and identity. However, oral traditions carry risks: memory can be selective, narratives may lead to conflict, and the passing of elders can result in lost histories. Dominant groups may shape narratives to suppress alternative viewpoints or justify aggression (Bilali and Mahmoud 2017). Without documentation, critical histories can be distorted or erased.

The report reinforces that history is not confined to the past — it shapes the present. As the saying goes, ‘the past lives on’. There are three reasons why past legacies remain pertinent today, making reflection on history both critical and urgent.

First, trauma is ‘intangible’ yet pervasive; it lingers long after the visible signs of conflict have faded, manifesting in deep social divisions, intergenerational memories of suffering, broken relationships between communities and individuals, and the enduring pain of unresolved trauma and loss. Unaddressed traumatic memories of conflict can persist across generations, shaping young men’s identities and loyalties in ways that hinder adjustment to peace, as

evident in Bougainville (Kent and Barnett 2012). When left unspoken, these experiences quietly influence how individuals relate, trust, and engage in society, perpetuating unresolved trauma across generations.

Second, conflict narratives or stories about who did what, who remembers what, and who has suffered play a powerful role in shaping collective identity and memory. These narratives influence how people perceive one another across cultural, ethnic, or political lines; how young people come to understand their history and place in society; and how leaders mobilise public sentiment either towards reconciliation or further division. When conflict narratives remain unchallenged or reflect only one perspective, they can perpetuate hostility and hinder reconciliation. Some Pacific nations have established truth and reconciliation commissions (TRCs) as a top-down mechanism to transform conflict narratives, but significant gaps remain. In Fiji, for example, a contributor to the report noted that the TRC lacked inclusivity and sufficient safeguards against retraumatisation. More broadly, little is known globally about effective approaches or the long-term impacts of transforming conflict narratives (Bilali and Mahmoud 2017).

Third, unresolved legacies of conflict, such as unacknowledged disappearances (missing persons), unresolved land disputes, and limited or unequal access to justice — as seen in the contributions to the report from PNG, Solomon Islands, and Fiji — act as ‘building blocks’ for new conflict. These issues continue to fuel resentment, mistrust, and feelings of injustice, especially when communities feel their suffering has been forgotten or ignored. Addressing the past involves breaking cycles of conflict to create lasting peace.

This highlights the critical role of documentation, which should be viewed as an essential complement to oral culture. While oral traditions such as storytelling, poetry, and community dialogue remain central to Pacific societies, documentation — through interviews, written reflections, digital archives, poetry, and memorials — serves several important purposes that oral transmission alone may not fully achieve. The act of documenting the past, therefore, is a necessary and urgent step toward justice, social cohesion, and the long-term peace and resilience of Pacific societies.

In light of the findings of the report, policymakers and peacebuilders should reassess approaches to peacebuilding and post-conflict engagement by placing greater emphasis on history, memory, and local

agency. Effective and sustainable interventions must be rooted in the lived experiences, cultural practices, and historical narratives of local communities. The following recommendations outline how policy and programming can be more inclusive, context-sensitive, and impactful.

First, all peace and security initiatives should embed documentation and historical analysis as core components. Understanding local histories, collective memory, identity, and past grievances is essential for building trust and legitimacy. Policymakers and peacebuilders should support oral history projects, archival efforts, interviews with survivors of conflict, and artistic expression such as poetry, dance, and visual art. These are not peripheral but central tools for making sense of conflict and supporting healing. Furthermore, documentation efforts must be inclusive, ensuring that women, youth, minority groups, and victims' families are actively involved, to reflect diverse perspectives.

Second, policymakers and peacebuilders should support, resource, and legitimise indigenous and local peacebuilding practices. Many Pacific communities already depend on customary justice systems, traditional ceremonies, and grassroots dialogues that hold deep cultural legitimacy. Collaborating with local actors can ensure interventions align with community values and needs. Financial and technical assistance should strengthen civil society, community leaders, and customary authorities addressing conflict legacies. In Bougainville, for example, initiatives combining state and customary policing demonstrate the potential for lasting peace through shared responsibility (Dinnen et al. 2024).

Third, policymakers and peacebuilders must prioritise inclusive approaches that centre historically marginalised groups — such as survivors of conflict, women, youth — in transitional justice and reconciliation efforts. Report contributors from Solomon Islands and Fiji suggest that the inclusion of young people holds significant creative potential. Young people are more willing to challenge existing structures and systems of power that continue to marginalise groups and exclude them from shaping and sustaining peaceful societies. Creating safe spaces for intergenerational, intersectional, and gender-sensitive dialogue can help bridge divides, while addressing power imbalances — between elites and grassroots actors, or urban and rural communities — is essential for sustainable peace. In addition, relationships in the Pacific are central; viewing inclusion through this relational lens reveals opportunities for excluded groups to address past injustices and contribute to solutions.

Finally, policymakers and peacebuilders should prioritise long-term commitment over short-term results. Healing from conflict requires sustained engagement, trust-building, and patience. Programs should be designed with longevity in mind, supporting recurring dialogues, memorialisation, and intergenerational transmission of memory. This includes supporting curricula that reflect local histories, advancing indigenous peacebuilding practices, building memorials, developing digital archives, and encouraging creative expression through arts and literature as forms of remembrance.

The report is a call to recognise that the Pacific's histories — colonialism, internal conflict, trauma — are still alive and materially shape politics, social relations, identities, and vulnerabilities. These historical experiences are not confined to the past; instead, they manifest today through unaddressed trauma, unresolved grievances, and ongoing social divisions that contribute to instability and distrust. For a region with strong oral cultural traditions, the act of documentation — of writing, recording, memorialising — is not merely archival, but part of healing, justice, and sustaining peace.

For policymakers and peacebuilders, this means policies and programs must pay attention to the past as well as the present; they must support local actors, include all voices, and safeguard memory for the future. Only then can peace be truly sustainable — for today's generation and those to come.

## Author notes

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