

Keeping Safe: How international volunteers manage crime and violence in Papua New Guinea

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Abstract

A breakdown in law and order is seen as one of the key issues hindering economic and social development in Papua New Guinea while avoiding crime and violence is an everyday challenge. Yet international volunteers successfully build individual and organisational capacities in this insecure environment. Volunteers adopt a lifestyle similar to local colleagues, working in local organisations and living in local communities and thus face many of the same challenges. This investigation explores how volunteers from Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) and Australian Volunteers International (AVI) respond to crime and violence in Papua New Guinea.

The paper considers conflicting views on the extent of crime and violence in PNG, and then examines what is considered good practice for managing violence and violent crime. It looks at the variety of security management approaches adopted by development organisations in PNG. It shows organisations and individuals use different methods to assess the level of threat and develop differing perceptions of what is an appropriate response. It concludes there is no consensus on the extent of crime and violence and therefore the level of threat to international volunteers. Individually volunteers manage their security by developing a comprehensive understanding of their locality which enables them to evaluate the risks associated with various behaviours. They acknowledge high risk behaviours for them are sexual relationships with Papua New Guineans, exposing corruption and political involvement.

Keywords: Aid workers, violence and crime; security management, volunteers.

Introduction

Papua New Guinea has a formidable reputation for crime, violence and insecurity. Academics, security advisers and development agencies regularly portray the situation as on the brink of a complete breakdown in law and order. Globally, the toll of violent crime on development workers is increasing with many incidents occurring early in assignments before risks are fully appreciated. Aid agencies are placing greater emphasis on security management and the Voluntary Service Overseas (VSO) organization is among them. Volunteer-sending development agencies have been successfully working in PNG for almost 50 years and have expertise in equipping inexperienced development workers to operate in insecure environments.

A greater understanding of how international volunteers manage crime and violence in Papua New Guinea is a timely and valuable contribution to the current debate.

VSO describes itself as ‘the world’s leading independent, international development organisation that works through volunteers to fight poverty in developing countries’ (<http://www.vsointernational.org>). It works through the recruitment, training and placement of skilled volunteers, who work directly within partner organisations, providing training and on-the-job professional support in 34 of the most disadvantaged countries. Today, the average age of a volunteer is 41 years, compared with 25 years in 1978. Volunteers are paid an allowance equivalent to local salaries and share skills, knowledge and creativity.

The organisation was set up in 1958, and PNG was one of the first countries it started to support. VSO volunteers are recruited from all over the world, through six recruitment bases in the UK, Netherlands, Canada, Kenya, India and The Philippines. The proportion of volunteers recruited in the South is expected to continue to increase. Around 50 VSO international volunteers work in PNG focused on development interventions in education, disability, HIV&AIDS and governance, supported by 12 staff in a Programme Office in Madang. Other agencies, including Australian Volunteers International (AVI), also brings international volunteers to PNG. All these interventions are undertaken in a context of high insecurity.

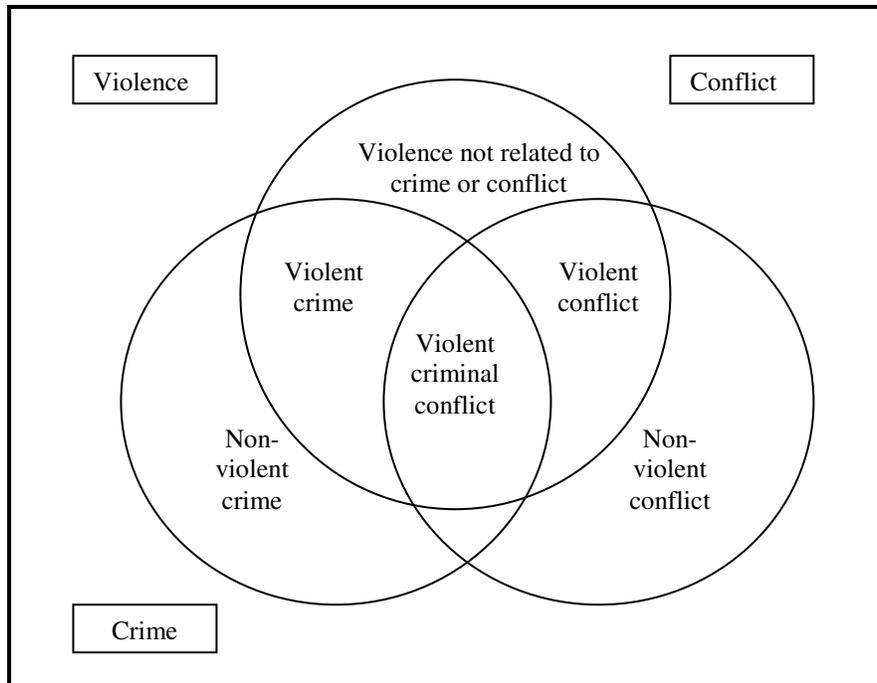
Background

Security analysts usually distinguish security threats, which arise from acts of violence, from threats to safety, which arise from accidents, often driving accidents, or health issues (malaria, HIV, disease), some of which derive from unprotected sex. But the distinction is not universally acknowledged. VSO’s definition of a security incident is ‘Any attack on the physical integrity of the volunteer/staff member, any serious threat of future violence, any life-threatening incident in close proximity, or any incident causing serious emotional distress’ (VSO, 2005, p.18).

In PNG the distinction is blurred. A road traffic accident could be both a safety and security incident with the risk of injury from the crash and the risk of violence and theft from people in the vicinity in the immediate aftermath. Nevertheless, the distinction between security and safety threats is useful and is adopted in this study.

Armed violence can be defined as the use of armed force (usually with weapons) to achieve specific social and/or economic goals and often occurs where violence, crime and conflict intersect (Batchelor and Demetriou, 2005) (Figure 1). Contemporary conflicts and crime often fuel each other and overlap.

Figure 1: Understanding armed violence



(After Batchelor & Demetriou, 2005)

Violent crime includes individual acts such as violent assault, sexual violence, premeditated murder, armed theft, extra-judicial killings, kidnappings and assassinations. Violent conflict refers to collective acts such as gang wars, ethnic conflict rebellions, civil wars and interstate conflict. Violent criminal conflict includes mercenary violence, armed rebellions, terrorism and the illegal use of state force.

What is the extent of violence and violent crime in PNG?

It is almost impossible to determine the extent of violence and violent crime in PNG. Reliable statistics are non-existent, although crime is thought to be increasing dramatically. Nevertheless the perception of threat is widespread and pessimism is pervasive. The Australian Government advises travellers to exercise a high degree of caution because of high levels of serious crime and that crime is random and opportunistic. It warns: 'Violence and use of 'bush knives' (machetes) and firearms often accompany assault and theft attempts. Carjackings, assaults (including sexual assaults), bag snatching and robberies are common' (DFAT, 2007). Other governments offer similar advice. The British Government warns: 'armed carjackings, assaults, robbery, shootings and serious sexual offences, including rape, are common', (FCO, 2007).

Reports on crime and violence dominate PNG newspapers, and media organisations insist they are mirroring society (Media Council of PNG, 2007). Commentators paint a bleak picture of a breakdown in law and order and

soaring crime rates. Windybank and Manning (2003, p.4) warned: 'PNG risks degenerating into a patchwork of local fiefdoms contested by strongmen and criminals.' This dismal picture implies it is unsafe to step outside the door of your house. Maxine Pitts, for instance, concludes crime is beyond manageable proportions and corruption is endemic (Pitts, 2002). A welcome touch of realism is provided by Dinnen who stresses the importance of maintaining perspective (Dinnen, 2000, pp.65-66). He notes most violent crime occurs in towns, yet the majority of Papua New Guineans live in rural areas. He adds: 'For many people, law and order problems are practical challenges to be negotiated daily. These are commonly experienced as threats to personal security and property.' People are reluctant to visit certain areas, or venture out after dark, and town houses and commercial premises invest in elaborate security measures. Criminal gangs, known locally as raskols are blamed for most violent crime and are a source of acute personal insecurity, especially for women.'

What is good practice for managing violence and violent crime?

'The prevailing perception is that violence against aid workers is increasing globally' argues Fast (2007, p.130). More humanitarian workers die as a result of intentional violence, often associated with banditry, than from road accidents and often early in an assignment before risks are fully appreciated (Shiek at al., 2000). Factors contributing to the deterioration in the environment where aid workers operate include the widespread availability of small arms and light weapons and the 'War on Terror'.

Criminal violence is emerging as the biggest threat facing development workers. 'Armed violence is likely to be a persistent feature of humanitarian and development landscape for years to come. This reality needs to be confronted head on' (Buchanan and Muggah, 2005, p.46). Guidance for development and humanitarian organisations was provided in 2000 by Van Brabant, who suggested there were three broad 'ideal-type' security strategies (2000,p.57). His conceptual framework has been adopted by others (Bickley, 2003, p.13).

The strategies are:

- **Acceptance strategy** – attempts to reduce or remove threats by increasing acceptance for the organisation and individuals and their work in a particular environment
- **Protection strategy** – uses protective devices and procedures to reduce the vulnerability of the agency. This is sometimes called 'hardening the target'
- **Deterrence strategy** – uses a counter-threat to deter threat, such as the defensive use of force.

Van Brabant suggested: 'Acceptance is about making more friends, protection about sheltering at a distance, and deterrence about intimidating your enemies'. He acknowledged there are many actors in violent environments and, in practice, a combination of strategies will be needed.

Bickley (2003) stresses the importance of a deep understanding of the context and a continuous re-evaluation of possible risks. This is echoed by Shiek et al. (2000, p.168) who called for an accurate understanding of risks, better briefings, better stress management and alternative ways of handling cash and protecting assets. Internationally, aid workers prefer the acceptance strategy to protection or deterrence (Fast and Wiest, 2007, p.12).

A 2004 humanitarian sector review concluded: 'Current standards of security management require improvement in many humanitarian organisations' (Barnett, 2004, p.4). NGOs have been urged to develop organisational cultures that supports good security management (Buchanan and Muggah, 2005). This includes rigorous and regular internal data collection, demand-driven and responsive security training and trauma counselling and integrating security management into administrative and programme management processes.

Managing security in PNG

Inevitably organisations have responded to the high levels of insecurity in a variety of ways. Staff in developmental and diplomatic organisations, as well as long-term residents, were interviewed to explore their approaches to managing security. Three broad strategies emerged; (1) a combination of acceptance and protection elements, (2) a reliance on protection, and (3) a combination of protection and deterrence elements. These responses reflect differing assessments of the level of threat. A 2007 VSO security review noted: 'Ask 20 people about crime in PNG and you will get 20 different answers' (Clamp, 2007, p.10). Nevertheless some general conclusions can be drawn. The high prevalence of sexual assaults means risks are very different for women and men, and violence and violent crime is more common in the highlands and towns than the coastal areas of PNG.

VSO relies on a combination of acceptance and protection strategies (VSO, 2002). International volunteers are strongly advised to develop friendships with neighbours and local people, develop an understanding of the places where they live and work and to avoid isolating themselves from the community. This is supported by ensuring their houses have sturdy doors and locks, usually metal bars across windows, and occasionally security guards or a two-way radio linked to a security company. Van Brabant's guidance that an acceptance strategy needs to be actively maintained and the importance of individual behaviours is reflected in the guidance and practice.

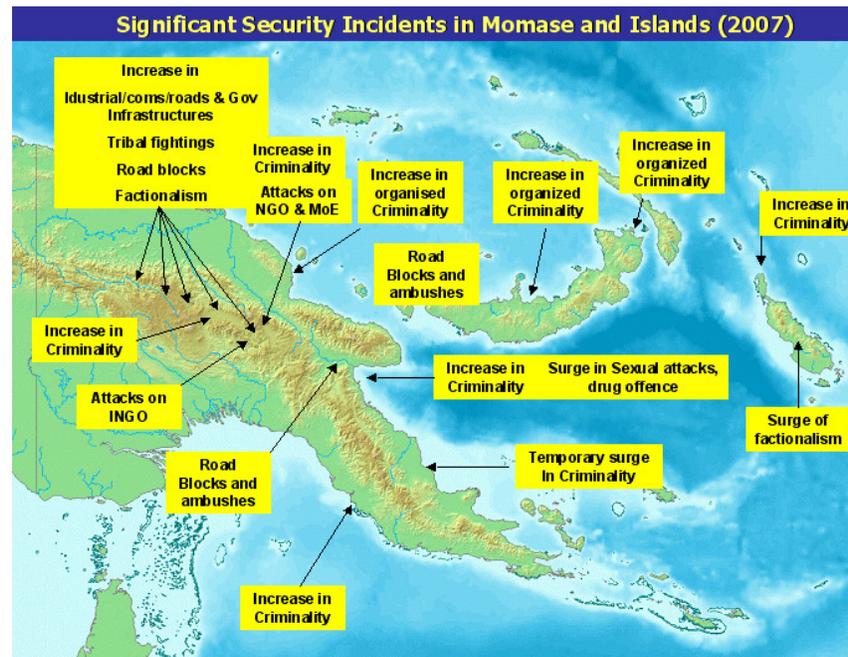
Volunteers' descriptions of the impact of the security situation on their daily lives range from: clothes stolen from a washing line, theft from a house by someone reaching through a window, to not being able to walk alone after dark. Upon arrival volunteers are introduced to the VSOPNG security policy, which includes travel restrictions and no-go areas in some highlands provinces, and parts of Bougainville. The policy acknowledges different levels of risk in the coastal region and the highlands and the main urban centres. The policy stresses the protection strategy is relied upon in Port Moresby.

The VSO approach acknowledges: 'There is an element of unpredictable risk which means that, irrespective of measures taken, there is no ultimate guarantee of safety if criminals are determined enough' (VSO, 2008, p3). Highway hold-ups are the most common example of being in the wrong place at the wrong time, with some roads, particularly the Highlands Highway, having a reputation for regular incidents. Yet, even these incidents need to be interpreted with care as villagers filling potholes or clearing a landslide will frequently stop vehicles and charge an unofficial levy. The level of risk is minimal; a smile, a joke and K2 is all that is needed – but some volunteers report these incidents as robberies and find them stressful and frightening.

Increasingly, the behaviour of individual volunteers is seen as one of the key factors contributing to higher risk situations (Clamp, 2007, p.27). An understanding of cultural norms reduces the risk of inadvertently causing offence while developing an understanding of the locale helps identify higher risk places, such as night clubs and places frequented by sex workers. The briefing pack states three behaviours increase risks. 'These are sexual relationships with Papua New Guineans, uncovering and exposing corruption and becoming involved in political activities.' Since 2002, VSO has redefined itself as a development agency rather than a volunteer-sending agency and placed greater emphasis on organisational capacity building and advocacy rather than 'gap filling' and individual capacity building. These changes have put volunteers in more 'political' positions and in roles where they have oversight of funds and resources.

VSO has long been aware of the difficulties that sexual relationships can create and has provided guidance on this aspect for many years. VSO staff identified several occasions when sexual behaviour led to incidents, including the hurried departure of a male volunteer in 2007 after he was threatened with violence by the relatives of a woman who had given birth to his child. Exposure of corruption caused problems in 2007 with a female volunteer being moved from Lae and a male volunteer being attacked in his home. Staff said volunteers who failed to repay money borrowed from local people had been threatened with violence.

Both Save the Children and CARE International have their main offices in the highlands town of Goroka and place greater reliance on protection strategies. Both have steel fences around their buildings, with gates manned by security guards. Henry Braun, Country Director, CARE International, said: 'I'm told safety and security has priority over programmes. I have to report more often on safety and security than I do on programmes.' Staff at Save the Children in PNG felt there was a high level of risk and reported two armed attacks on their offices. They felt they were targeted during the 2007 general election as some candidates were critical of the NGO and they removed logos from their vehicles to reduce visibility. One expatriate female said: 'There is a general feeling that things are getting worse.' Another staff member, an expatriate male, felt less threatened but said: 'PNG is characterised by occasional appalling incidents'.

Figure 2: Papua New Guinea risk assessment

Staff of international organisations are required to comply with a combination of protection and deterrence elements. Some travel with armed escorts in parts of the country, and security management has a high priority and involves detailed analysis of the situation (Figure 2). One security advisor said: ‘All the indicators for a pre-civil war situation are here, including attacks on infrastructure - bridges and pylons and food gardens, attacks on governmental buildings, medical supplies, and the traffic of weapons between the Highlands and Bougainville.’

Sexual assault is identified as a particular problem. One advisor said: ‘As a place for women, PNG is far worse than Afghanistan.’ The Australian High Commission and the US Embassy have high levels of protection, with full-time security advisors. One security advisor said: ‘Before I came I was told it was a chaotic opportunistic crime environment but I think it’s more helpful to think about PNG men retaining dual roles as farmers and warriors and a lot of criminal activity can be seen as traditional ‘raiding parties’.’

Research methodology

Security approaches adopted by organisations in PNG were examined through a series of interviews with 23 development agency staff, security advisors and

long-term residents. Additionally four VSO and one AVI staff were interviewed. These interviews explored perceptions of the extent of crime and violence and the level of threat. Interviewees were asked how they managed security. A simple interview structure was developed, which allowed scope for wide-ranging follow-up questions.

A literature survey and initial interviews suggested individual behaviour was a critical element in security management. Research hypotheses were developed to test the importance of behaviour in managing insecurity.

Two additional research instruments were developed; a questionnaire consisting of 57 questions and an interview guide for semi-structured interviews with international volunteers. The questionnaire was trialled in early January and amended. Questionnaires were photocopied and mailed in January 2008, with a covering letter, to 32 VSO volunteers and 27 AVI volunteers. Follow-up letters encouraged volunteers to complete the questionnaires. Completed questionnaires were returned by 28 VSO volunteers and 20 AVI volunteers, giving a total response rate of 81%. A semi-structured interview guide was developed, trialled and modified for focus group discussions in which 29 VSO and AVI volunteers participated.

Nevertheless, the data provides a snapshot of perceptions and opinions in early 2008. The volunteer population in PNG is constantly changing as volunteers undertake placements varying in length from a few weeks to more than two years.

Analysis and findings

VSO recorded security incidents since 1994 show a considerable variation in the number of incidents, with the lowest number in 2003 (1) and the highest in 2007 (29), with an average of about eight a year. The number of volunteers in the country varies from month to month and is usually between 35-45. However, reporting systems have not been consistent, and a wider range of incidents were recorded in 2007.

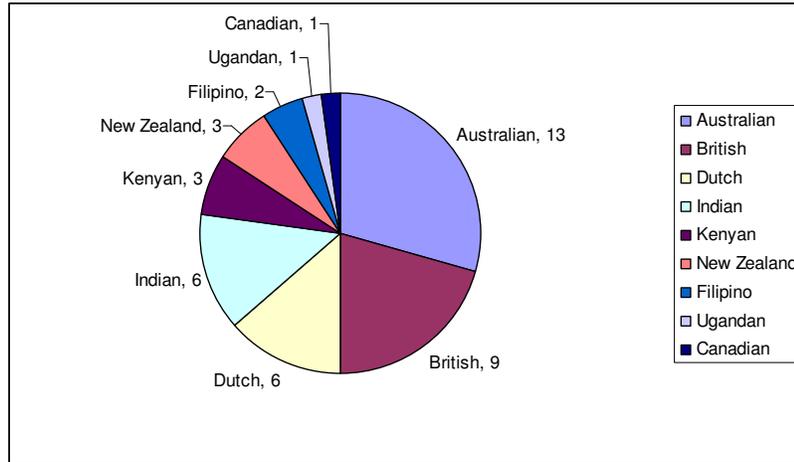
The number of incidents involving serious physical assault or injury is low: five since 1994. These are:

- rape and assault of a volunteer couple in 1995
- shooting, in the leg, of a volunteer and the rape of his girlfriend in 2000
- violent assault on four volunteers in 2000
- threats to a volunteer seriously injured in a road traffic accident, where another passenger died, in 2007
- rape of a niece of a staff member in 2007.

The numerous difficulties in collecting accurate information on security incidents have been noted by many researchers (Fast, 2007, p.136), and these latest interviews with volunteers showed several incidents had not been reported or recorded.

International volunteers surveyed had an average age of 42 years, with the youngest at 23 and the oldest 69. Females were 54% and males 46%. VSO volunteers were 58% and AVI 42%. Nine nationalities were represented (See Figure 3).

Figure 3: Nationality of international volunteers



Hypothesis: Volunteers manage their security by developing a comprehensive understanding of their locality which enables them to evaluate the risks associated with various behaviours.

Most international volunteers are confident they know enough about the area where they live and work to be able to identify security risks. Overall 83% felt confident (male and female both 42%). However, 75% of those who were unsure or not confident were female, and this sub-group seemed to have less confidence in the acceptance strategy – only 38% of them felt safer because people knew they were a volunteer and felt less likely to be a victim of crime or violence because people knew they were a volunteer.

Volunteers in the highlands described a higher level of threat. One female said: ‘I think I understand some of the risks, but I’m still learning everyday. I do it through a bit of observation, but mainly lots of chatting to people to find out things.’ A male volunteer said: ‘Whenever I go to Mt. Hagen, I hide my phone in my underwear.’

Some volunteers were nervous. One female said: ‘I used to work in a prison and I used to have a bloody sight more freedom in a prison than I have now. I don’t think the area we live in is safe.’ Another said: ‘I’m not scared but I do realise that we have to take precautions. I think you can’t let your guard down.’ A male volunteer said: ‘I wouldn’t go outside the gate at night without one or two national friends simply because the drunks in the road are crazy.’ A female

volunteer said: 'It's very important that people are aware of all possible dangers here before they set foot in PNG. It is a scary place. If you are the type of person who is going to lie awake at night worrying about possible dangers, you shouldn't be here.'

Hypothesis: Volunteers who adopt acceptance strategy behaviours and integrate into the community feel safe.

84% of volunteers felt well or moderately integrated into the community, but 17% felt not integrated or only slightly integrated and these were mostly volunteers who were not confident they knew enough about the area where they lived and worked to identify security risks. 58% described themselves as socialising with Papua New Guineans daily; while 10% rarely socialised with Papua New Guineans. Local language skills clearly helped. 'Tok Pisin' was spoken every day by 82% of volunteers and 65% spoke it several times a day. Most volunteers who rarely felt safe during routine chores, such as shopping, did not regard themselves as well integrated.

One said: 'I feel comfortable where I live. I know the people surrounding me. I also know that they are looking out for me, mainly because they are always telling me they are looking out for me.'

Nevertheless not all volunteers were confident that the acceptance strategy was effective, especially those living in the highlands. Additional protection measures would make 28% of volunteers feel safer at home. One female said: 'We should have all the VSO's in one compound and give us a vehicle so that we can go out after 5pm.' Another added: 'We haven't been out once at night in four months.' A male volunteer said: 'Despite being incredibly careful, things have happened. Here I'm aware of being suspicious all the time. It's not if something will happen, it's when!'

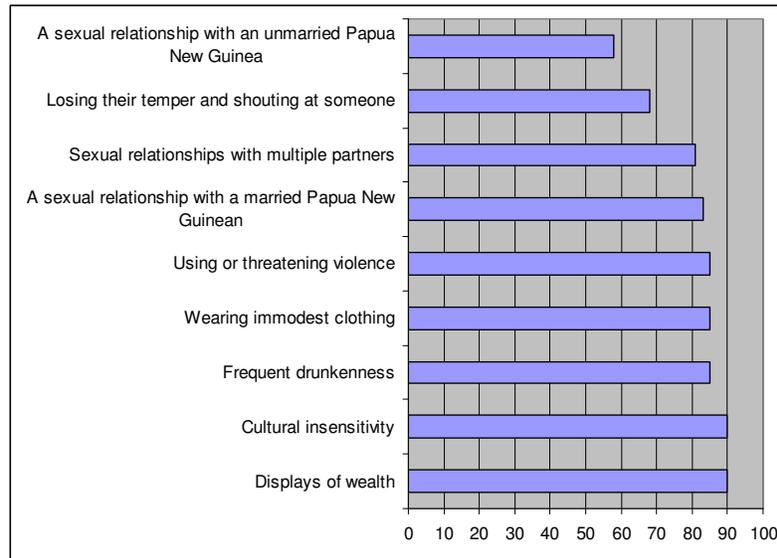
Volunteer's perceptions	%
'People I work with know I am a volunteer'	100
'People treat me with respect because they value the work I do'	79
'I feel safer because people know I am a volunteer'	67
'I am less likely to be a victim of crime or violence because people know I am a volunteer'	44

Hypothesis: Volunteers appreciate their behaviours contribute to the level of respect accorded to them by the community where they live and work and volunteers can identify behaviours which could damage their standing in the community.

Almost all volunteers (94%) acknowledged behaviours could damage their standing in the community and could identify damaging behaviours. Displays of wealth and cultural insensitivity were identified as risky by 90% of volunteers. A sexual relationship with a married Papua New Guinean was seen as risky by 83%, while 58% felt a sexual relationship with an unmarried Papua New Guinean was risky (see Figure 4).

One male volunteer said: ‘Only too often the volunteer does not understand the ramifications of Australian behaviours and attitudes when they are transposed into PNG. These include unmet expectations and anticipations, jealousy and public discussion of any relationship.’

Figure 4: Behaviours volunteers identified as increasing risks of as security incident occurring



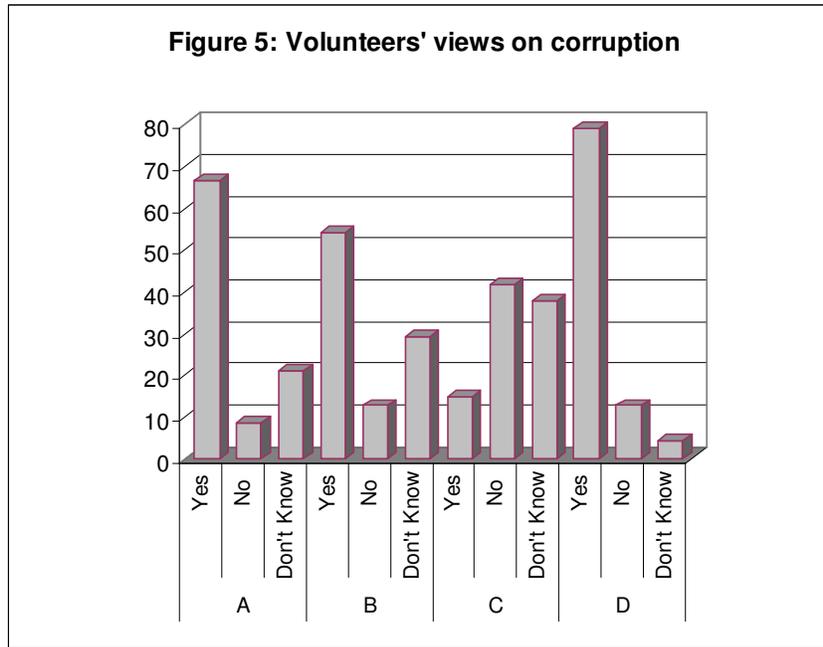
Hypothesis: Volunteers appreciate casual sexual relationships with Papua New Guineans may lead to violence from relatives, and male volunteers are more likely to accept the levels of risk associated with these behaviours.

81% of volunteers identified sexual relationships with multiple partners as increasing the risk of a security incident, although 44% felt the risks of a sexual relationship would be acceptable in some circumstances. Interestingly, 23% of females, compared with 21% of males felt the risks would be acceptable in some circumstances. VSO staff said in their experience male volunteers are more likely to form sexual relationships. The complexities of cross-cultural relationships were acknowledged by volunteers. One said: ‘A volunteer embarking on a relationship enters into a web of complex relationships with other people, as well as cultural obligations, they neither understand, are prepared for, or are able to meet.’

Nevertheless it has proved difficult to investigate the hypothesis that volunteers appreciate casual sexual relationships with Papua New Guineans may lead to violence from relatives, and male volunteers are more likely to accept the levels of risk associated with these behaviours. Inevitably any investigation of people’s sexual behaviours is fraught with difficulties. The data shows

volunteers appreciate the risks, but determining how they behave is much harder and needs further research.

Figure 5: Volunteers' views on corruption



A	'Corruption' is unacceptable because it is clearly wrong
B	As a volunteer I am seen as a 'role model' and therefore must take a firm stand against corruption
C	The risks to my personal security of uncovering or exposing corruption mean that I have to tolerate it
D	The causes of corruption are complex and deep-seated and I accept there are no easy solutions. This may mean I have to live with corruption in the short-term while working for longer-term change.

Hypothesis: Volunteers appreciate that exposing corruption is a high risk behaviour but find that 'tolerating' corruption challenges their core values.

71% of volunteers agreed 'uncovering or exposing corruption in PNG is a high risk activity', while 79% accepted they may have to live with corruption while working for longer-term change (Figure 5).

The toll of the security situation on volunteers was unexpected, with 44% identifying some effect. Travel restrictions were identified by 20%, but others commented on a loss of confidence, loss of concentration and loss of enjoyment. One volunteer said: 'I can't enjoy the landscape; can't enjoy just 'being' here. I love my work but I'm coming to dislike this country and its leaders'. Others felt productivity suffered because of being distracted by

security issues, demotivated and had feelings of tension. One added: 'Personally, it causes anxiety as I'm having always to be on guard.' Interestingly the UN assessment identified increased stress as an issue, and felt this was caused by fear, security measures and the constant level of awareness required. Stress management has been identified as an aspect of security management (Van Brabant, 2000, and Bickley, 2003).

Conclusions

There is no consensus on the extent of crime and violence and therefore the level of threat to international volunteers, but in such a diverse country, this is not surprising. Residents develop a sophisticated and multi-faceted perception of the threats and develop strategies to manage and reduce risks. There is no 'one size fits all' solution to security management in PNG.

Volunteers manage their security by developing a comprehensive understanding of their locality which enables them to evaluate the risks associated with various behaviours. It is important that VSO and AVI provides training which equips volunteers to understand this and to actively build an understanding of their locality.

Volunteers who adopt acceptance strategy behaviours and integrate into the community feel safe. Of course, it's important to recognize that this does not, necessarily, mean that they *are* safe. VSO and AVI need to the acceptance strategy is explained to volunteers and provide them with practical guidance on integration.

Many volunteers believe they are less likely to become a target for crime and violence as people in their locality know they are international volunteers, value their work and accord them respect and status. There is anecdotal evidence of robbers ceasing their demands for valuables once they have been told their victims are volunteers and clearly many believe the respect given to volunteers offers some degree of protection. Nevertheless it is unrealistic to expect this status will offer impunity to crime and violence.

The majority of volunteers appreciate their behaviours contribute to the level of respect accorded to them by the community where they live and work and they can identify behaviours which could damage their standing in the community. And volunteers appreciate casual sexual relationships with Papua New Guineans may lead to violence from relatives. Volunteers clearly understand that behaviour that may be acceptable in a Western context can increase risks to their personal security in PNG and they modify their behaviour most of the time. These limitations to individual's freedoms, and the possible consequences of these behaviours, need to be explained before volunteers accept a placement in PNG. All that can realistically be expected of organisations such as VSO and AVI is to ensure volunteers develop this understanding. Individuals choose their own sexual behaviours and, as work on HIV&AIDS has demonstrated, changing behaviour requires more than simple understanding.

Volunteers do appreciate that exposing corruption is a high risk behaviour. Nevertheless, VSO has identified an increase in the number of security incidents that occur as a response to allegations of corruption. Why people choose to expose corruption, despite the risk, needs to be explored more systematically. VSO staff believe volunteers feel their core values about right and wrong are compromised, but this needs to be explored in more detail.

The extent and effects of the stress on volunteers from managing the security situation needs further research. VSO and AVI need to acknowledge the levels of stress volunteers experience and develop appropriate responses. The possibility of providing access to professional counsellors, either by telephone or face-to-face, could be explored.

Finally, organisations such as VSO and AVI need a nuanced approach to security management, which can respond to changing circumstances. The acceptance strategy continues to be an appropriate response in PNG at present for male volunteers and for females in the coastal areas. Risks are higher for female volunteers in the highlands and in most towns and a greater reliance on protection measures is necessary here. Young females in the highlands and in towns face the greatest risks and will have less personal freedom. Clearly this creates some challenges for organisations, such as VSO and AVI, whose values include gender equity and non-discrimination on the grounds of age.

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