

Using Mobile Phones to Track Anti-Witchcraft Violence in Papua New Guinea



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Recent research has highlighted the ongoing issue of anti-witchcraft violence in Papua New Guinea (Eves 2013; Forsyth 2013, 2014). One of the most intractable problems in addressing the issue is stopping the cycle of violence following accusations of witchcraft. Accusations are often sparked by sickness and death, making funerals important seeding sites of accusations: the cycle of rumour, accusation and violence is often swift (Eves 2013; Eves and Kelly-Hanku 2014). However, very little evidence or data about these cycles exists. Indeed, a draft national action plan formulated in June 2014 to address the problem lists an evidence-based research framework as one of the key platforms of a holistic, community-driven response (Forsyth 2014).

This *In Brief* outlines the role new mobile phone-based research techniques can play in addressing this information deficit. It details a pilot project using mobile phones to record and report data about accusations of witchcraft at funerals. The pilot is part of a growing body of work that uses mobile phones to collect and record data in environments that are otherwise difficult to reach, and for a wide range of purposes, including health, education, agriculture and development (see Demombynes et al. 2013; Dillon 2012; Schuster and Brito 2011). The project also shares important features with conflict-mapping programs which use mobile phones to track and map outbreaks of violence (see Meier 2012). However, this pilot is the first to apply these new research techniques to the problem of anti-witchcraft violence.

A Pilot in Enga

Enga Province has a recent history of witchcraft accusations and associated violence (see Gibbs 2015). The pilot takes advantage of significant increases in mobile phone penetration in Papua New Guinea, which now stands at approximately 40 per cent, up from less than 5 per cent in 2007 (Suwamaru 2014). Despite the fact that problems of cost, infrastructure and power remain (there is no electricity in the area covered by the study, nor are there landline services), mobile phones are common and coverage considerable, if not ubiquitous. Indeed, mobile phones

are often the primary source of information about witchcraft-related attacks (Forsyth 2013).

The pilot is funded by Caritas Australia and involves seven volunteers who are provided with a solar charger and credit for their mobile phones. The volunteers are members of a church-supported men's group and report on discussions around recent deaths in the valley by using a simple code in a series of two text messages to a central phone held by one of the men who acts as a coordinator. The first text records the clan of the dead person, their sex, their approximate age, when the death occurred and where it occurred (for example, at home or at a hospital outside the province). The second text records the name of the person who died and how they died (with set responses ranging from an accident, to old age, to illness, to violence). The second text also records community responses. It records whether there is talk about witchcraft in the community in the context of the recent death. If such talk exists, it records whether it is 'serious' talk or not, and whether accusations have been made and violence has resulted (Gibbs 2015).

The pilot commenced in mid-2014 and after six months had covered 75 deaths in the lower Ambum Valley of Enga Province. There was talk of sorcery associated with three of those deaths, but no violence. In many ways this result is expected given the church has run several awareness workshops in the region following a brutal accusation, torture and killing two years ago. However, the pilot will soon expand to the neighbouring Sangarup and Sari parishes, where the result is likely to be quite different given recent outbreaks of anti-witchcraft violence.

As with other SMS-based data collection programs, problems encountered include phone loss and network access. There is also the potential risk in the consistency of manually transcribing data. Perhaps more difficult to address is the issue of verification. This means ensuring that respondents are reporting events accurately. This is an issue in many other pilots, especially those which track outbreaks of violence, but in this pilot the problem holds special resonance because of the fact that respondents are members of the small, close-knit communities

on which they report on this controversial issue. How can respondents be truly objective given their enmeshment in these communities, and the sensitivity of the topic? For example, respondents might think twice about reporting some details if it would give the community a bad name or attract a forceful response by the police.

Expanding and Refining the Pilot

The pilot will soon expand, and there are several ways it might be adapted to address some of the weaknesses of this new research technique. Most importantly, the project might benefit from the introduction of independent observers — preferably women, to add a gender lens to the process, although this is not without serious security implications. An additional measure could include in-depth interviews by independent observers with existing respondents about their reasoning processes concerning reporting. Third, the pilot might serve a useful early-warning function for rapid response in cases of violence and this possibility should be built into the expansion. Finally, consideration should be given to the possibilities of using new software such as FrontlineSMS or Ushahidi that has been designed to facilitate mobile phone-assisted research. Such software provides for online mapping and allows for multiple users to enter data on the same event easily and quickly (FrontlineSMS 2011; Meier 2012). Having multiple perspectives on the same event would help overcome some of the verification problems highlighted above. However, the immediate use of such technologies is likely to be constrained by the current absence of access to stable internet.

Author Notes

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