

Listening, Connecting, Acting – The Lobby- and Advocacy-Work of the Westpapua-Network as a two-way street

West Papua remains largely underrepresented in international political debates. While geopolitical interests, economic resource extraction, and security considerations dominate policy agendas, the perspectives of people in the region receive little attention. For decades, large parts of the indigenous population have been exposed to racism, structural discrimination, cultural marginalization, and violence. The work of the Westpapua-Network (WPN) responds to this imbalance by strengthening access to information, amplifying local perspectives, and promoting equal partnerships.

Advocacy grounded in listening

Founded in the 1990s by the United Evangelical Mission (UEM) together with other organizations and individual actors, the WPN constitutes a brought alliance of church-based and secular organizations. Its shared objective is to increase political and public awareness of West Papua without speaking on behalf of those affected. A central challenge is the region's systematic isolation: access for journalists is severely restricted, information flows are controlled, and critical voices are repressed.

The Network's advocacy and public outreach activities address this gap by providing verified information on West Papua to audiences in Germany through publications, policy briefings, events, and digital formats. At the same time, it facilitates direct engagement by creating platforms where indigenous Papuan can present their own perspectives—through speaking tours, conferences, film festivals, and exchanges with political and civil society actors. In Germany, the WPN is the only organization that places West Papua and the situation of Indigenous Papuans at the core of its work, thereby filling a gap that would otherwise remain unaddressed. The guiding principle has a clear approach: engagement *with* people from West Papua, rather than speaking *about* them. This work is based on a long-standing cooperation with partners in West Papua. Advocacy is understood as a two-way street, involving mutual exchange, joint initiatives, and regular visits in both directions. This strengthens not only international awareness, but also raises the agency of those whose voices are systematically marginalized. Advocacy thus functions as a tool for solidarity, accountability, and political responsibility.

The role of the church in society

In West Papua, churches play a significant role in society. In a context shaped by repression, militarization, and limited civic space, churches are often among the few institutions able to articulate concerns publicly. They provide social stability, spaces of protection, and international connections that are essential for many communities and activists.

Decades-long church partnerships between West Papua and Germany have created a durable transnational network. For local communities, these partnerships signal international recognition and sustained attention. For the WPN, church-based solidarity constitutes a central pillar of its work. It adds continuity, credibility, and ethical legitimacy to advocacy efforts, and positions churches as actors that support human rights not only normatively, but also through concrete structures and long-term engagement.

Historical context and current policy challenges

The present situation in West Papua cannot be separated from its historical background. Following the end of Dutch colonial rule, the region initially pursued independence. However, geopolitical and economic interests led to its integration into the Indonesian state in the 1960s.

Since then, conflict has persisted, often framed primarily in terms of separatism. This framing is insufficient. Many Papuans articulate demands centred on dignity, equal rights, recognition, and freedom from violence. Structural and everyday racism within Indonesia remains a key driver of tension. Dehumanization and the systematic undermining of cultural identity continue to shape lived realities of the indigenous population.

At the international level, the situation is frequently presented by the Indonesian government as a security issue, thereby justifying military measures. This narrative obscures root causes. Violence cannot sufficiently explained by focusing only on separatism, but of long-standing exclusion and human rights violations. Introducing this differentiation into policy debates is a core objective of the Westpapua-Network's advocacy work.

Advocacy as empowerment, not prescription

The Westpapua-Network does not seek to prescribe political outcomes or take positions on the political status of West Papua. Its advocacy focuses on human rights, dignity, and peace. The aim is to improve the quality of political decision-making by providing context, evidence, and affected perspectives.

A key principle is partnership on equal terms. People in West Papua are not framed as passive victims, but as political actors. They document human rights violations, engage with international mechanisms, use digital communication tools, and articulate their own priorities. The Network acts as a facilitating platform, not as a substitute voice.

Participatory formats, open dialogue, and sustained engagement with partners on the grassroots level are central to this approach. While resource-intensive, they enhance credibility and long-term impact. Empowerment, in this context, is understood as the sharing of access, visibility, and influence.

Responsibilities of church and political actors in Germany

For church institutions and political actors in Germany, this work highlights a clear responsibility. Human rights obligations are universal, and international solidarity must extend beyond strategic and economic interests. The Westpapua-Network demonstrates how civil society and church-based actors can contribute to informed policy engagement without instrumentalizing affected communities.

Advocacy and lobbying in this sense are means, not ends. They serve to ensure that the voices of people in West Papua are considered in political processes and public debates in Indonesia, Germany and even beyond. Sustainable change begins where those who listen take their role seriously and translate it into social and political responsibility.

With the founding of the WPN, UEM responded at an early stage to alarming reports about the human rights situation in one of its member churches and assumed responsibility for the well-being of the people in West Papua.

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