



## **Experts: New Highways Will Drive Environmental and Social Calamities in New Guinea**

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An Indonesian plan to crisscross the western half of New Guinea with new highways has “red flags all over it,” according to an international research team that has evaluated the costs and benefits of the project.

The authors studied the “Trans-Papuan Highway”, a network of paved roads that, if completed as planned, would span over 4,000 kilometres across Papua and West Papua provinces. Their findings have been published in the journal *Environmental Science and Policy*.

“We’ve assessed big development projects around the world, and this is one of the most worrying in terms of its overall social, economic and environmental costs,” said team-leader William Laurance, a Professor at James Cook University in Australia and director of ALERT—the Alliance of Leading Environmental Researchers & Thinkers.

“The new highways will slice through some of the largest intact tropical rainforests in the world and open up major areas of forest destruction in central, eastern and south-eastern Papua,” said co-author Dr Mohammed from the University of Chittagong in Bangladesh, another ALERT member.

“And there would be enormous costs—to biodiversity, forests, the global climate and the island’s many indigenous peoples whose traditional lands will be overrun,” said Alamgir. “Indigenous groups have been very poorly integrated into the development process.”

“From an environmental perspective, one of the most worrying impacts is new roads and huge mining leases in the world-famous Lorenz World Heritage Site,” said Laurance. “Lorenz was ranked by the United Nations as one of the most unique and important protected areas on the planet.”

The Trans-Papuan Highway was initiated by the Indonesian federal government, which has promoted earlier development schemes in the Papuan region that have spanned tens of millions of hectares of land. Most are regarded as development failures.

“In addition to all the environmental damage, the Trans-Papuan Highway doesn't make economic sense to us,” said Laurance. “The roads would be extremely expensive to build and maintain because they'd have to traverse some of the steepest and most difficult terrain imaginable.”

“And by cutting through the traditional lands of so many different indigenous groups, the roads will almost certainly provoke anger and anti-government sentiment—and that's the last thing Indonesia needs,” said Alamgir.

“These top-down initiatives by central governments tend to do poorly because they don't take into account local cultural sensitivities and ecological dynamics,” said Alamgir.

“You don't need expensive projects with huge environmental and social risks to promote smart, sustainable development,” said Laurance.

“If you're filling your car with petrol you don't light a cigarette,” said Laurance. “Why risk a big explosion?”

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Sean Sloan, Mason Campbell, Mohammed Alamgir, Jayden Engert, Yoko Ishida, Nicole Senn, Jaime Huther, and William F. Laurance. “Hidden challenges for conservation and development along the Trans-Papuan economic corridor”. *Environmental Science and Policy*, volume 92, pages 98-106 (2018).

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