

Developing the State-Society Relationship in Timor-Leste: A Quest for Social Accountability with NGOs

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This study discusses social accountability in Timor-Leste by scrutinizing the patterns of state-society interactions and the role of non-governmental organizations (NGOs). Analyzing five case studies in peacebuilding and development, it highlights NGOs' multiple positions—from oversight and advocacy, to their role in facilitating state-society relations in service delivery, suggesting alternative forms of public services, and conveying citizens' views on government performance to the state. It elaborates how NGOs are closely associated with *suco* (village) and community authorities and bridge the gap between the state and society. In a fledging state, these dynamics emerge from the state's attempts to formalize this relationship into law and society's accommodation of its citizens within the local context. The study also addresses international actors who strive to support NGOs.

Keywords social accountability, state, society, NGOs, Timor-Leste, local

Introduction

Participation of citizens and communities is considered vital to reduce corruption, improve public service delivery, and increase transparency in public budgeting, so as to make the public sector more responsive and accountable. In this light, enhancing social accountability has been increasingly sought by international organizations as they demand democratic governance in developing countries (Berthin 2011; World Bank 2020).

The formation of civil society is not uniform. In the context of state-building, or peacebuilding in the broader view, the Western concept of civil society is influential as it is believed to promote good governance, respect of human rights and rule of law, and to be essential to the building of viable democratic states (Paffenholz 2013, 348-349). Considering this, there are several ways civil society interacts with the state. In conflict-affected situations where social capital drasti-

cally changes, civil society is constituted by various groups influenced by global contexts and political elites (Kent, Wallis, and Cronon 2019). As a result, tensions may develop between such groups. Given such conditions, a critical issue raised in civil society in the midst of state-building and, more broadly peacebuilding, concerns the roles of civil society organizations (CSOs) and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and their impact on the relationship between state and society.

Studies of Timor-Leste have articulated how NGOs and CSOs interact with state actors. In Timor-Leste's transitional justice system, local CSOs were supported by international human rights NGOs in their advocacy. However, local CSOs faced criticism from domestic political elites, who accused CSOs of promoting irrelevant foreign agendas and neglecting the lives of local people and victim's voices (Kent 2019). Government elites were keen to establish a transitional justice mechanism, as they believed it would benefit and serve to consolidate the nation. However, in doing so, they disregarded the importance of cultural practices (Grenfell 2019). The Timorese Security Sector Reform (SSR) was characterized by the heavy involvement of external actors, namely international entities such as the United Nations (UN) and donors. During the pre-independence period, top-down reforms were affected by the UN and the elites, and CSOs had limited oversight functions. After the political turmoil of 2006, however, national NGOs became a catalyst to push the state and society towards social change by incorporating communities' initiatives in the state-building process (Tanaka 2018a).

Considering these insights, this study discusses the roles NGOs have adopted in Timor-Leste by analyzing dynamic patterns of the state-society relationship during the state-building process through the lens of an accountability framework. It documents how NGOs have expanded beyond their traditional roles by providing oversight in civil society's attempt to hold the state/government accountable, initiating and implementing public services, promoting alternative means of public services, and conveying citizens' views to the state regarding government performance. Through this analysis, the article clarifies how key elements of Timorese civil society—NGOs closely associated with *suco* (village) chiefs/councils—serve as the bridge between the government and its citizens in the process of state-building. Specifically, local governance embedded in *sucos*, which seek political legitimacy but lack administrative and financial resources, shaped initiatives of both the state and society. The state approached *sucos* directly to distribute goods and services through an enduring context of institution building and formalization; conversely, society configured by *sucos* and NGOs approached the state to address their local concerns prior to the establishment of laws and regulations. Concurrently, international actors have directly supported the state/government and NGOs.

The following section provides a theoretical review of various types of social

accountability, followed by an overview of state structure and civil society in Timor-Leste. To begin, the article highlights the role of the *suco* as a vital focal point in Timor-Leste society. Specifically, the state recognizes the *sucos* as the representatives of the voices of the local society yet struggles to fulfill its political legitimacy. Section two introduces five examples of state-society interactions: public services delivery, community policing, the early warning early response program, social audit initiatives, and policy dialogue. Section three analyzes these five cases to identify the different types of state-society interactions and the role NGOs play. The article argues that NGOs enable state-society interactions in Timor-Leste, but also face challenges in sustaining them. An assessment of the impact of international support follows. The final section concludes the article, highlighting the findings and directions for future research.

Social Accountability, Civil Society, and State-Building in Timor-Leste

Social Accountability and State-Society Relations in the State-Building Process

Social accountability is considered a means for people to hold elected leaders accountable. Elected politicians or government can be held accountable by civil society, NGOs, and the mass media, or by applying various mechanisms such as the ombudsman. A social audit—an alternative to voting—can be conducted (Smulovitz and Peruzzotti 2000). These interactions are built on the relationship between state and society and serve to improve policy outcomes and to modify policy agenda.

Scholars have pointed out that the state-society relationship is expanded in accountable networks (e.g., Klijn and Koppenjan 2014). Electoral/political accountability functions in a hierarchical relationship based on the delegation from principal to agent, a relationship set by law. Examples of this vertical hierarchy exist between voters and politicians, or politicians and bureaucrats. Social accountability often has no lawful obligation and the relationship between stakeholders can also be seen as horizontal (Bovens, Schillemans, and Goodin 2014, 12). The relationships in social accountability can be vague as long as one entity involves others through outsourcing or coordination. This allows several actors to be accountable to different entities. As achieving policy goals or solving policy problems are more concerned with process management, it is reasonable to acknowledge that relationships in social accountability can be pursued with flexibility and be formed with different standards (Klijn and Koppenjan 2014).

Such mechanisms to build social accountability are distinguishable from traditional social accountability, which is referred to as oversight or a “fire alarm.” This oversight enables citizens and organized societal groups to check policy decisions and processes (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984). Here, citizens are involved in the policy process and can pose questions to state actors or

suggest alternative policies from the viewpoint of citizens. NGOs also perform such activities of advocacy from their own perspective. In addition, citizens can actively participate by questioning the performance of state actors by setting the standards to which the state must adhere (Damgaard and Lewis 2014). In the most extreme cases, citizens may formulate and amend policies by jointly working with state actors. In such situations, citizens have dual roles, serving as oversight while also participating in formulating and implementing policies.

These expanded types of societal accountability mechanisms can occur in cases where state institutions are weak. With specific reference to the Timorese SSR, examples across many countries illustrate that security forces can work with civil society and local residents to jointly design security strategies, as well as to implement, monitor, and evaluate security programs (Schirch and Mancini-Griffoli 2015, 7). Beyond the role of oversight, working jointly in service planning, delivery, and evaluation has become prevalent in countries which are in the state-building phase.

Where the state is weak, multiple tasks are suggested to establish state-society relations. The standard state-society relationship should build upon the solid establishment of state and society, yet while both are in the developmental stage. State-building essentially creates a need for political accountability. At the same time, building civil society is also especially encouraged by donors. Further, it is a theoretical challenge to understand the roles citizens play to engage in public service delivery with state actors, while still maintaining their role in oversight. The observation reveals that NGOs often directly implement services when the state does not function; however, service delivery is not a central function of civil society (Berthin 2011). From here, we can consider the types of interactions between citizens and NGOs. In fact, scholars have questioned whether citizens and communities can accept the multiple roles of NGOs, such as planning and implementing programs in addition to oversight (Paffenholz and Spurk 2006, 33). The provision of services by CSOs and NGOs also blurs the relationship between state and society (van Leeuwen and Verkoren 2012).

This review has demonstrated how citizens' involvement in the public sphere in the state-building phase is an area worth exploring, both theoretically and practically. In this light, case studies allow us to elaborate on the kinds of state-society interactions that have been developed, the players involved, and the variations in types of social accountability. The following section provides an overview of civil society, the state in Timor-Leste, and the role of *sucos*, all of which serve as essential elements that form state-society interactions in Timor-Leste.

Overview of Civil Society in Timor-Leste

In Timor-Leste, a range of CSOs are active, including NGOs, church groups, unions, women's groups, youth groups, etc. Timorese have also created self-

help and support groups, as well as village-level groups. These groups can be religious or cultural, or formed around hobbies or sport activities. Community-based organizations (CBOs) are also active, usually for the management of water, farming, or seeds, at the village level or between villages.

NGOs in Timor-Leste are considered more structured organizations that often engage in development issues and receive donor funding (ADB 2019). This article specifically identifies national NGOs as those based in Dili and operate across districts, while local NGOs are those whose operations are based in specific districts/communities. According to the Forum ONG Timor-Leste (FONGTIL), there were 201 local NGOs and twenty-nine international NGOs (INGOs) at the beginning of 2020. FONGTIL was established in 1998 with fourteen local NGOs. During the pre-independence period between 1999 and 2002, registration of new NGOs increased. Some local NGOs were excluded from major activities, as international actors led state-building efforts under the UN administration. However, these local NGOs took on important roles in many areas of development. The younger generation and students who studied in Indonesia formed youth organizations that played pivotal roles in the liberation of Timor-Leste. They subsequently established local NGOs to conduct projects with international NGOs who arrived during the emergency phase with abundant resources for assistance, but no contact and experience in Timor-Leste (Hunt 2008; Wigglesworth 2013). However, local NGOs were unclear about their relationship with state actors after independence (Hunt 2008). By 2005, when the UN downsized its mission, the number of INGOs decreased to twenty-five according to the registration records of FONGTIL. Following the political turmoil of 2006, FONGTIL disseminated the message of national unity across the country. Subsequently, local NGOs coordinated with INGOs to conduct emergency responses to support internally displaced persons, which by then had increased to 150,000 people. This has led to new challenges for local NGOs such as the need to include customary practices such as *Nahe bitu* (reconciliation process, literally lying on the mat) ceremonies and judgements by *lia-na'in* (traditional leaders) for a solution to the crisis (Wigglesworth 2013).

When NGOs work in communities, building relationships with *sucos* and *aldeias* (sub-village) is key to conducting activities. The usual practice is that services in the communities are launched with the permission of the *chefe de suco* (chief of village) and *chefe da aldeia* (chief of sub-village). According to INGOs, cooperatives formed within *sucos* and *aldeias* function well (Tanaka 2014). As these practices indicate that *sucos* and *aldeias* are likely to represent society at local level, reviewing the position of *suco* and *aldeia* within the state structure is pertinent to complete our understanding of Timorese society.

State Structure of Timor-Leste

The current state structure of Timor-Leste is stratified into five levels: national,

municipal (former district), administrative post (former sub-district), suco, and aldeia. This state structure developed during the rule of the Portuguese in the 1900s and has continued up to today (Ospina and Hohe 2001). Within this structure, the political system is characterized as centralized, where the administrators of districts and sub-districts are appointed by national authorities. The Indonesian government followed this structure with some adjustment based on their administrative system. The main change was the election of the village chief, which was often influenced by Indonesian interests (*ibid.*, 53). Since independence, the Ministry of State Administration and Territorial Management (MSATM) has been exploring decentralization. The main objective is to decentralize political power to representatives at the sub-national level, allow for more opportunity for peoples' voice to be heard in local development, and to deliver public services in an effective, efficient, and equal manner (AGLD 2003a; MSATM 2008).

A challenge for the national authorities has been the distribution of public goods and services to the people. Historically, sub-national administrations did not have political, fiscal, and administrative power. Rather, these units have to await the decisions and distribution of resources from above. Indonesia administrated Timor as its twenty-seventh province, and the withdrawal of over 7,000 administrators in post-independence created a gap. This resulted in the need to build the administrative system of the new country from scratch. By 2000, community development officers were assigned to run sub-district administration. However, the annual budget allocated to them was only US\$500 (AGLD 2003b). Their role has been minimized to facilitate the communication between district administration and sucos.

In 2014, under the fifth constitutional government led by Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão, decentralization was accelerated by the introduction of a new law. This repositioned the district administration with thirteen municipalities (former districts and the Special Zone of Oé-Cusse Ambeno) and saw sixty-five administrative posts replacing sub-district administration (RDTL 2014a, 2014b). The law notes that such arrangements aimed to “promote the coordinated action of all deconcentrated State services and technical[ly] support the activities developed by the *traditional community leadership* and by *non-governmental organization*” (RDTL 2014a, article 3, emphasis added by author). The government representative at the municipality level is now the municipality manager (district manager) appointed by the Council of Ministers. At the sub-district level, a head of administrative post would report to the municipality manager. The municipality manager is to be nominated and appointed based on their skills and capacity.

Role of Suco in State-Building

Although sub-national administration was considered dysfunctional, political

decentralization was launched in 2000. This saw the election of *chefe de suco* (chief of suco) based on the suggestion led by the Conselho Nacional de Resistência Timorense (CNRT). The aim was to rebuild the power structure at the local level (AGLD 2003a, 54), but elections were only held in half of all sucos. The next local elections to select *chefe de suco* and members of the suco council held in 2004 were conducted in 442 sucos and 2,225 aldeias nationwide. The Decree Law of Community Authority introduced in 2004 specified the role of *chefe de suco* broadly, from building peace and harmony, ensuring food security, maintaining infrastructure, and to building relationships with relevant authorities to dealing with the range of challenges facing communities (RDTL 2004). More importantly, it recognized the importance of “legitimis[ing] the roles so far played by community leaders and bodies through elections” (ibid.).

Before the second local election since the independence in 2009, the law on Community Leadership and Their Elections revised the electoral process and the role of *chefe de suco* (RDTL 2009a; Tanaka 2014). These included the appointment of *lia nain* (legitimized traditional leaders) to the suco council, and the abolition of requirements for candidates to receive nominations from political parties. Further, the law specified that decisions by community leaders were “not binding upon the State” (article 2, 3), and that the *chefe de suco* is to conduct duties assigned by the government or the municipal administration (article 11. 2 (g)). At the same time, the *chefe de suco* are not part of public administration, and the suco council shall be made accountable for financial resources received from the general state budget through the MSATM (article 12 (h)). These revisions indicated that village-level powers were the receivers and implementers of decisions made by the central authority, and were separated from national politics and public administration (Tanaka 2014). Such arrangements strengthened their legitimacy to handle the challenges in daily life within the realm of the local community. However, it was difficult for community leaders (i.e., *chefe de suco* and *chefe da aldeia*) to initiate new activities unless they were able to generate financial and human resources.

In 2016, a new law on sucos was introduced to reinforce local political decentralization. It identified the legal nature of sucos as a public association (RDTL 2016a, article 4). It also acknowledged that the sucos were created through historical circumstances, family connections, and cultural traditions, but also evolved in cities through the migration of different ethnic groups and deterioration of previously existent links (ibid., article 3). The law has some notable updates. In addition to the roles of *chefe da aldeia* and *lia nain*, the suco council includes both male and female representatives from aldeias and youth groups (ibid., article 10). Other revisions concerned the electoral procedure and the extension of the term of suco council members to seven years. Under the new law, voters in aldeia can elect a female and male delegate to represent their aldeia in the local suco council, in addition to selecting the *chefe da aldeia* and the *chefe de suco*. The

new electoral processes also require the formation of aldeia and suco electoral committees to receive nominations from candidates, count votes, and disclose results. The first election after the law was amended was allegedly completed without major problems in October and November 2016. This was despite concerns over management of the elections, as the announcement of the new law was made shortly before the elections (RDTL 2016b; Asia Foundation 2016).

The 2016 law also expanded other aspects of local decision-making. It reiterated that sucos were to collaborate with public administrative bodies and services while considering public interests within the community (RDTL 2016a, article 5. 1. g.). This was done to preserve cultural identity and traditional symbols such as the *knua* (geographical area of extended family), and the *uma lulik* or *uma lisan* (sacred house/kinship system based on a common ancestry). The suco council may approve community development plans but the state and the municipality authorities are not obligated to follow these resolutions (*ibid.*, article 16). These roles allowed sucos to access public services and meet the demands of people. This relationship was to be formalized by linking them with the local administration.¹

The roles of the suco have been reconfigured by several revisions of the related laws. These revisions highlighted the political legitimacy of chefe de suco and suco councils as elected members of the community. However, the chefe de suco and suco councils do not possess administrative and financial resources to fulfill their functions stipulated in law. This implies that the chefe de suco and suco councils face challenges in being accountable to the people who elected them. In this vein, the next section discusses the roles of NGOs who are actively interacting with both state and citizenry.

Patterns of Relationships between the State and Society in Timor-Leste

In the realm of state-society interactions, we have thus far seen how the suco is in a vital position to represent society. This section discusses five cases that demonstrate the different patterns of state-society relationships that sucos are engaged in to some degree. It also explores the role that NGOs play in Timor-Leste.

Public Services for the Community

Efforts towards community development began taking place as early as 2000 through the disbursement of funds directly to the community. The so-called Community Empower Program (CEP) requested each suco and aldeia to establish committees to exclusively manage the planning and implementation of the CEP (UNTAET 2000). Since 2004, the Local Development Program (LDP) has been introduced as a pilot project at the district assembly level, with

participation of suco council members who would receive the Local Development Fund (LDF) (MSATM 2011a). The LDF was extended into all districts beginning in 2009. The LDF was initially mostly covered by external assistance, but later on the government provided full funding. As of 2011, the total budget of the LDF was US\$3.5 million.

After the 2006 crisis, the government also increased the budget allocated for suco and aldeia. With the aim of accelerating the implementation of the 2011-30 strategic development plan, a special fund was setup. This injected US\$599 million and US\$25 million for infrastructure and human development, respectively. From this special fund, US\$65 million was allocated to the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals) Suco Program which offered housing to 11,140 households and provided solar panels that be built with community participation (RDTL 2011a, 2011b, 2012a). Another relevant program was the Decentralization Development Package (PDD), where the central government implemented infrastructure projects based on requests from districts and aldeias. By 2011, 103 projects at the district level with a total value of US\$28 million and 225 projects at sub-district level valued at US\$15 million were completed (RDTL 2011b). The LDF and PDD were later assimilated into the Integrated District Development Plan (PDID). This was done to simplify the complex procedures imposed on the district administration and the suco (MSATM 2011b).

In 2016, two programs, the Integrated Municipal Development (PDIM) (former PDID) and the National Programme of Village Development (PNDS), were launched (PNDS 2012). They covered four sectors—basic infrastructure, education, health, and agriculture (RDTL 2016c). These programs are differentiated from the Infrastructure Fund, which covers projects valued at over US\$1 million. In the 2019 national budget, US\$7.8 million, US\$9.6 million, and US\$279.4 million were allocated for the PDIM, PNDS, and the Infrastructure Fund, respectively (RDTL 2019). PNDS, created as a government initiative to establish greater connection with the sucos, was designed to ensure community-led decision making on the planning, implementation, and maintenance of infrastructure (RDTL 2013). The program saw the establishment of a management team in the community in cooperation with chefe de suco and suco council (RDTL 2012b). In accordance with the instructions of the PNDS, women participated in building health clinics, constructing community centers, and repairing roads (PNDS 2014).

The management of the PNDS was supported by the Australian Government (Cardno 2020) and the World Bank monitored its overall impact (World Bank 2015). The Asia Foundation, an INGO, received financial support from the Australian Government to support communities, with local NGOs monitoring program implementation (Asia Foundation 2017).

Through these programs, the increasing participation of the community is notable. In the past, communities were concerned that the central authorities

would conduct consultations in communities and leave project planning and implementation to them (Tanaka 2014). Communities were also concerned that construction projects would often be operated by overseas companies which did not hire local workers. In contrast, the PNDS implemented a public consultation process where civil society elements were able to give inputs. As of March 2017, the Aid Management Effectiveness Policy encouraged donors and relevant stakeholders to collaborate with local CSOs and NGOs (ADB 2019).

The above highlights the range of sub-national programs initiated by the government to promote “a peace dividend” within the population and to reduce the chance of conflict (RDTL 2015, 29). Community involvement is increasingly recognized as important. As a result, community members in the suco began to participate and implement projects with support from CSOs and NGOs. However, the effectiveness of this government initiative requires further assessment.

Community Policing

Enhancing local security has been a significant challenge in a fledgling democratic state as it has required both state and society to rebuild their relationship under new systems, laws, and regulations. Historically, Timorese have encountered various forms of security organizations. Before independence, surveillance systems, such as the *babinsa/bimpolda* model, were prevalent under Indonesian military occupation. This model incorporated the customary elites and the suco, and originated from the *koban* system during the Imperial Japan period (Kocak 2019). This system was expected to be converted into client-oriented professional police services by external actors such as the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET). Though there were no consensus on its definition, these external actors were keen to introduce community policing and build partnership with communities in general (Elias 2003). The second Police Organic Law in 2009 defined community policing as a basic standard of policing in Timor, and established the Community Policing Department (CPD) in Dili to oversee community policing (RDTL 2009b, article 16. 1. b.). The law also prescribed that the district police station establishes police posts in every suco. While community policing was officially introduced, Timorese politicians and police officers were not fully convinced of its compatibility to the Timorese context and preferred a more robust model for police functions (Kocak 2019). Such doubts were gradually appeased by the decision of the Polícia Nacional Timor-leste (PNTL) to dispatch suco police officers to all sucos and to develop community policing methods applicable to all members of the PNTL (Wassel 2014).

Building a relationship between the public and police officers in communities was accomplished through the establishment of the Community Policing Council (CPC), also known as the Konsellu Polisiamentu Komunitária (KPK) in Timor-Leste. The CPC generally functioned to identify factors that destabilized security,

to seek solutions to security risks/problems, and to gather information about the security situation through regular meetings and collective activities (Belo and Rajalingam 2014, 13–14; Wassel 2014). The CPC is typically composed of the suco police officer, chefe de suco, village elders, and community representatives. The security issues discussed at CPC meetings have been diverse, such as youth violence, land ownership disputes, domestic violence, economic or social problems, and political interference (Tanaka 2018b). As local leaders explain, the CPC has the potential to promote collaboration between police and local authorities to prevent conflict and crime (*ibid.*). While community policing is operational in all 452 sucos, only 123 CPCs were operational as of 2018 (New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2017). According to the Chief of CPC in PNTL, almost 80 percent of Sucos operates CPC as of April 2021 (phone interview by Cross). This implies the expansion of CPC nationwide may achieve its larger impact.

The launch of community policing was a result of various efforts, from law development to establishing the CPC on the ground. While the UN missions and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) were assisting overall PNTL development, Australia helped to support the Timor-Leste Police Development Program (TLPDP) and third country trainings were implemented by the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA). These programs reflected the long involvement of internationals in capacity building related to community policing since the UNTAET period (Tanaka and Honda 2018; JICA 2019). In particular, these programs brought opportunities for PNTL officers to assess community policing principles and its suitability in the Timorese context.

In 2011, to establish the CPC, New Zealand launched the Timor-Leste Community Policing Programme (TLCPP) through the New Zealand police, with a program called HAKOHAK (Hametin Koperasaun Hamutuk Polisia ho Komunidade) operated by the Asia Foundation (Gordon, Wilson, and Fernandes 2014). The program was also jointly funded by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) with much engagement from Timorese staff. These community policing programs supported suco police officers on the frontlines, and served as a bridge to newly established CPCs. Since 2009, the Asia Foundation has worked with the PNTL to conduct pilot projects to explore the Timorese model of community policing (Asia Foundation 2017). The majority of community residents increasingly recognized the CPC as an effective means for preventing crime and disputes (Asia Foundation 2019, 11). However, surveys reveal that the majority of the public reported incidents to the community leader and not to the PNTL (Chinn and Everett, 2008; Asia Foundation 2019, 10). This highlights that the assessment/coordination roles of chiefs or traditional leaders are becoming common in communities for minor crimes. Further, the settlement of disputes are facilitated by community leaders with the PNTL providing security and active mediation (Asia Foundation 2019, 12-13). In such ways, CPCs

were able to resolve disputes locally (Wassel 2014, 20).

To establish CPCs in the sucos, HAKOHAK collaborated with Asosiasaun HAK, a local human rights NGO. This has been a key contribution to increasing the number of CPCs in sucos (Gordon, Wilson, and Fernandes 2014, 24). As the structure of CPCs is determined by the suco council, the success of the CPC and its operations depend on the active involvement of council members. The key challenge NGOs face is that their engagement would not automatically lead to success without the support of the police (*ibid.*, 22-23). It is also notable that HAKOHAK employed mostly Timorese staff who formerly worked for international organizations. Their ground networks allowed the program to smoothen access to the community for officials, police, and local NGOs (*ibid.*, 24).

NGOs played a significant role in setting up CPCs. This was especially necessary as PNTL was evolving towards community policing as its central principle, and dispatching suco police officers to the community. NGOs supported the incorporation of customary practices as they recognize their importance. At the same time, such arrangements required the strengthening of the capacity of communities to implement community policing practices. This has brought further expectations of the involvement of CSOs. However, the success of setting-up CPCs is principally dependent on the abilities of community leaders to solve issues on the ground and to build credible relationship with suco police officers. NGOs thus play a facilitating role between the relevant interlocutors.

Early Warning and Early Response Systems

Local NGOs were concerned that potential local disputes would arise from confusion over land ownership, youth unemployment, and arrangements of veterans' pension payments (Tanaka 2018b; Tanaka and Honda 2018). Following the 2006 crisis, such concerns grew and revealed the need for local security in communities.

In this vein, the national NGO Belun, together with the Columbia University Center for International Conflict Resolution, launched the early warning system in 2008, now developed into the Early Warning and Early Response (EWER) program. The EWER program aims to identify incidents in municipalities through a monitoring network in the suco comprising volunteer monitors and coordinators. Through the Conflict Prevention and Response Network (CPRN) at the administrative post level, information is accumulated and analyzed by Belun (Belun 2019).

With the aim of conflict prevention, the EWER program also supports community dialogue and the reconciliation process (*ibid.*). A traditional conflict mediation mechanism, *Tara Bandu*, is a choice for conflicting parties to reconcile disputes in the community. This mechanism, based upon customary law and respective cultural identities, is conducted in various ways in Timor-Leste currently. This is due to the variety of ethno-linguistic communities

especially in urban areas, and the involvement of actors such as the PNTL and the churches in designing and implementing Tara Bandu (Belun and Asia Foundation 2013). In addition, *biti boot* (a traditional method of discussion and resolution), socialization, seminars, and workshops could also be used as conflict resolution methods (Belun 2017). These various methods form the early response system aim to deescalate tension and its spread. For instance, concern about increasing violent conflicts in one of the aldeias, a community dialogue was held involving *lia nain*, local leaders, police officers, and youth. This resulted in youth involvement in conflict prevention activities, and created space for different parties to respect each other (Belun 2019). Through the EWER program, national NGOs assisted communities in identifying potential conflicts and facilitated the implementation of the reconciliation process. Beyond local security, the EWER program is likely to be expanded to the areas of disaster preparedness, climate-related hazards, and food management. In these areas, communities can receive training from INGOs and international organizations (IOM 2018; Bureau of Meteorology and World Vision Australia 2018).

The evidence-based data and relevant information compiled through the EWER program is published in periodical reports, its website, and shared with society through dialogues among police officers, the Ministry of Interior, and the National Directorate Community Conflict Prevention (NDPCC) (Belun 2019, 2020). It also supports the creation of policy recommendations (see below). In short, through these activities, NGOs support the local communities' efforts towards security, and also connect issues in the communities to the public and the state.

Social Audit Initiative

Under the current democratic system, the government faces calls to manage public resources in a transparent and accountable manner. The Social Audit Initiative (SAI) is one way to respond to such requests by citizens and NGOs/CSOs to review, monitor, and evaluate public resources management, expenditures, and implementation of public policies (Berthin 2011, 26). Social audits can be understood as a social oversight mechanism to track government performance (*ibid.*, 31).

The willingness of government authorities to accept collaboration with citizens and the available legal climate are key conditions for effective implementation of SAI. Often civil society elements would also launch SAI activities in advance (*ibid.*, 39-41). In this respect, the Timor-Leste case is unique in that the Prime Minister Rui Maria de Araújo officially introduced SAI in 2015. Then he acknowledged the significance of civil society in contributing to improve accountability (Tanaka 2018a). The SAI was established under the Cabinet Office, and the government entered into an agreement with FONGTIL, which formalized collaboration between the state and civil society (Government of Timor-Leste

2016). The SAI initially focused on four sectors: agriculture, education, health, and infrastructure. It aimed to collect opinions on governmental project planning and implementation, to share such information with relevant governmental departments, and to monitor issues until their resolution (Tanaka 2018a). The government subsequently launched a Sector Working Group (SWG) for the security sector that mostly had similar functions with the SAI. The SWG worked as an avenue for the state to exchange security information and assess security risks with NGOs, security organizations, and related governmental institutions (ibid.).

Following the establishment of SAI, NGOs responded in several ways. As a result of the construction of infrastructure to support rural water supply under the PNDS, maintenance of infrastructure has become an issue. Community management groups were supported by the INGO WaterAid to employ a community scorecard process, which has been used in other countries. In this process, community management groups made self-assessments of the quality, quantity, and accessibility of their water supply, and contacted the government for the improvement of services (WaterAid, HFTL, and PN-BESITL 2016). WaterAid conducted trainings for Platforma Nasional Be'e Saneamentu no Ijieni Timor-Leste (PN-BENSITL), a network of fourteen local NGOs so that each NGO could support community groups. The process also engaged administrators and water supply departments at the municipality level to assess local government support. The findings in this process indicate that investment in operations and maintenance by communities is required to achieve high standards of clean water supply.

Engaging NGOs in social audits was also promoted through the creation of a handbook which provided step-by-step guidance to implement social audits. The book was created by FONGTIL and the Asia Foundation, and financially supported by the European Union (Failor and Leahy 2017).

Policy Dialogue

At the national level, NGOs have been involved in policy dialogue with governmental institutions based on their knowledge in respective policy areas. This included Fundasaun Mahein in the Superior Council on Defence and Security in the president's office, Hametin Agrikultura Sustentavel Timor Lorosa'e (HASATIL) in the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries' Consultative Council on food security and nutrition, and two CSOs had representation in the Petroleum Fund Consultative Council. Parliamentary committees would often seek CSOs' views on budget proposals (EU 2016). Further, CSOs' policy analyses offered alternative voices in policy making. This ranges from local security issues, economic policy and natural resources management, security sector, justice policy and court operations, land policy and mediation, legal aid for land conflict disputants, and quality of education (ibid.).

Such policy analyses are available due to NGOs' monitoring networks in

communities. For instance, an NGO Luta Hamutuk has a budget transparency division in its organization, with a network of 294 focal points to monitor and collect information nationwide (ADB 2019). This is similar to the monitoring structure that Belun has developed through the EWER program discussed above.

Discussion

This section analyzes the variety of state-society relations previously introduced and the role of NGOs. This allows us to consider the type of social accountability that Timorese have formed and to assess the impact of international support. Figure 1 illustrates the current state structure (as of 2020), the origin and direction of the initiative taken in each case study, and the level of society in which NGOs are mainly operative. The state structure shows the vertical nature of the relationship between the state and society. The directions of arrows in each case study describes whether the activities were implemented from top to bottom or vice versa. The top-down direction shows initiatives implemented by national authorities onto the village/community, while the bottom-up direction shows the converse. These interactions between the relevant stakeholders confirmed that an extended variation of social accountability has formed in Timor-Leste.

Public services for communities that are financed by the national authorities and backed by international support during the independence period can be categorized as top-down. Focusing on state-building in Timor-Leste and recognizing the limits of sub-national government, the national authorities sought assistance to address the needs at the village level. Such efforts saw the implementation of early programs, which focused on allocating funds to communities. However, the ministries mostly led project implementation. Concerned about national unity, the government was keen to interact directly

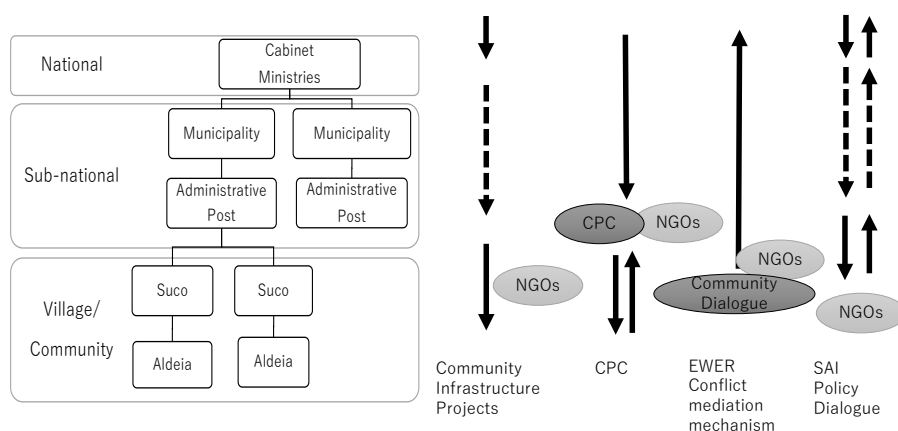


Figure 1. State Structure, State-Society Interactions, and Role of NGOs

with *sucos* and encourage public participation, especially after the 2006 crisis. This led to recently developed programs such as the PNDS, which were carefully designed to incorporate community-led decision making in the planning, implementation, and maintenance of small-scale infrastructure projects. INGOs and local NGOs backed by donors supported the development of capacity in the community to sustain their projects. In other words, citizens supported by NGOs are collaborating with the government. This implies that NGOs adopt roles of oversight but also provide public services.

In comparison, the success of community policing originated in the need to build public trust in the police. While international support was initially key, the introduction of new laws, systems, and the involvement of communities were also essential elements. While the sub-national level police structure was under-developed, the establishment of the CPC was expedited with the earlier establishment of village-level governance with the *suco* and *aldeia*. Particularly, the 2006 crisis saw increasing concerns about local security. National NGOs and INGOs were able to obtain international donor support to launch and implement the CPC within local governance structures. These CPC activities were also reinforced by the shifting the PNTL strategy to center on community policing as the basic principle. Thus, the development of community policing in Timor-Leste can be described as product of dual efforts of institution-building of the police at the national level and the continuous engagement of civil society and international actors. In essence, the Timorese CPC, where community representatives are involved in local security efforts, is effectively an example of collaboration between the government and its citizens. Similar to the case of the PNDS, NGOs take on the role of providing oversight as well as provider of public services.

The EWER program has grown from its roots as a grassroots level enterprise. It was first launched as a mechanism to collect local concerns and information on incidents using monitors on the ground. The data collected were used by national NGOs as a database for local security. This accumulation of local knowledge has allowed NGOs to generate analytical reports that are shared with the state. This is crucial as the state has yet to fulfill the role of providing security at the sub-national level. In addition, national NGOs supported the reconciliation/mediation process among conflicting parties led by community leaders. The reconciliation/mediation takes a process-oriented approach where NGOs adapted to traditional and cultural practices in each community and created customized ways of reconciliation in different communities. As the EWER program is not officially incorporated into the state structure or functions, the role of NGOs promoted an alternative means of sustaining local security.

The SAI in Timor-Leste was developed by the government as a unique procedure, highlighting official commitment with NGOs. The SAI is essentially a bottom-up approach that conveyed the voices of citizens to the government and

holds the state accountable. In Timor-Leste, the implementation of the SAI by the government has allowed state and society to interact in equal partnership. In principle, the SAI is an oversight mechanism for citizens, with NGOs assisting citizens and communities to functionalize it. Policy dialogue is an extension of the constant efforts of NGOs to provide evidence-based data produced with their ground networks. This allows for the building of a mutual state-society relationship. Among different perspectives of social accountability, NGOs also fulfill an advocacy role in the provision of alternative voices to the state.

Each case study demonstrates initiatives actively taken by NGOs to bridge the gap between state and society. On the one hand, such phenomena were partly a response to the limitation of the state and government in providing public services. From the point of view of accountability, citizens are often assisted by NGOs to monitor the government, and to plan and implement local projects. The role of NGOs is not only to implement public services as often discussed in the development/peacebuilding context. Rather, they also function as a facilitator to ensure participation of citizens in planning, implementing, and monitoring programs. During the early phase of state-building, the top-down approach was used by the government to accelerate the construction of community infrastructure. Later on, the government redirected its efforts so as to incorporate the voice of its citizens with the support of INGOs and local NGOs. In community policing, NGOs took on the facilitator role to develop the CPC. This was in parallel with the gradual reconfiguration of community policing as the formal standard at the national level. Through the EWER program, NGOs also facilitated community efforts to maintain local security. With the SAI, NGOs compiled and analyzed data which was unavailable to the state. The SAI serves as a bottom-up process reinforced by the government's will to form partnerships with NGOs that represented their citizens (Government of Timor-Leste 2016). These NGOs connected citizens to the government, and provided alternative voices directly to the government. These multiple functions of NGOs served to construct state-society interactions in Timor-Leste.

On the other hand, the increased state-society interactions in Timor-Leste could also be attributed to the existence of local governance. These structures were inherited from past administrations and backed by the extended kinship system. The *suco* and *aldeia* governance structures have endured different administrations in Timor-Leste history. As forms of local governance, they were key to supporting the involvement of various stakeholders, such as the state, citizens, NGOs, and donors. This administrative structure is likely in contrast with the case of the Solomon Islands, where patron-client relationships at the personal level are a key factor in determining interactions in rural communities, for instance (Cox 2009). In Timor-Leste, local authorities delegated by community members have become more prominent after independence. Such emerging recognition in local governance is likely to enable NGOs to take on

multiple roles and minimize tensions between them and the citizens, which is one of the concerns raised by scholars.

Impact assessments of international society in reinventing Timorese state-society relationship are complicated. This is because international actors are involved in the state-building process from both top and bottom. The case studies on the building of public infrastructure in communities and establishment of CPCs were a result of the emphasis on institution-building by international organizations and donors. Subsequently, direct support for NGOs was possible when the state focused on interacting with the *sucos* and local communities. Simultaneously, NGOs rooted in Timorese society have expressed their own views, opinions, and actions by closely interacting with local communities. Their roles grew when communities began to interact with the state.

There are challenges for NGOs to continue to sustain their activities directed across multiple levels of society. Access to financial resources is an eminent problem faced by NGOs. National NGOs have access to a variety of resources through interaction with local NGOs, governments, and INGOs which are based in the capital. However, representatives of CSOs formally announced challenges to sustain their activities and called for continuous support during a development meeting in 2012 (FONGTIL 2012). The national NGO Belun, which implemented the EWER program, highlighted in July 2019 that it was operational in only three municipalities due to the reduction of funding which limited their ability to support situation monitoring and data collection (Belun 2019). Activities of NGOs are also sustained by technical support of INGOs and donors. This indicates that capacity development of NGOs is imperative if the nationwide extension of NGOs activities is expected.

Official donor support has also declined rapidly after independence, and the sustainability of well-established NGOs was openly questioned (Hunt 2008). The European Union (2016) assessment is that CSOs/NGOs reliance on external funding, which is often short-term and project-based, makes it difficult to achieve long-term objectives. It suggests donors to consider multi-year support, including technical support, to boost the capacity of NGOs, while the priority of CSOs/NGOs should be to build constructive relationships with relevant stakeholders.

Conclusion

In the context of peacebuilding, the engagement of civil society through supporting NGOs is expected to build viable state-society interactions, thereby making the public sector more accountable. In this sense, promoting social accountability is encouraged by international actors. In reality, however, when the state is weak, its attempts toward institutional building manifest into multiple interactions between the state and society that may not be explained in a

conventional framework of democratic governance. As the dynamism of such relationships likely requires NGOs to operate beyond their traditional roles (such as providing oversight), this study explored these theoretical and practical gaps to elaborate upon the extended functions that NGOs can adopt.

The state-building process in Timor-Leste has included various actors, such as the state/government, citizens, *sucos*, and internationals, all of which sought a new state-society relationship. As these actors recognized local governance at the village level as a catalyst of their interactions, the case studies revealed that NGOs have served as a bridge between the state and society in close association with *sucos* and community authorities. This enables *suco* authorities, who attempt to hold political legitimacy but lack administrative and financial resources, to receive support. In this vein, NGOs extend their roles beyond oversight, by facilitating fumbling state-society relations in service provision cycles, suggesting alternative forms of public services, and conveying citizens' views on government performance to the state, in addition to advocating for alternative voices to the state that differ from its own viewpoint.

The analysis demonstrates the dynamic interactions initiated by both the state/government and society in the fledging state. At a glance, the state-society relationship has generally developed in a concerted nature over time. The early stage of state-building is characterized by a top-down style of service delivery. This included small-scale infrastructure construction in local communities. The local security arrangement (i.e., CPC) and the monitoring of public services (i.e., SAI) at village/community level must be understood in the context of state-building efforts that sought to formalize the relationship through laws and standards. In contrast, the EWER program and conflict mediation mechanism were developed through grass-roots initiatives and sought to be adaptable to local contexts. These two mechanisms were implemented in a flexible manner as laws and regulations were not configured *ex-ante*. Such mixed forms of state-society interactions should be understood within a situation where both state and society were in the midst of revitalizing their relationship.

This article discussed cases of peacebuilding and development projects in which internationals engaged with both the state and society. It demonstrated that state-society interactions are constructed through multiple layers of NGOs/CSOs in conjunction with international actors and donors. For those who support NGOs, one of the key challenges ahead is their sustainability.

Acknowledging such unknown future factors, the findings imply that long-term impact on state-society relations must be examined carefully. The accomplishments of the diverse work performed by NGOs may contribute to community leaders' legitimacy over time. It is also crucial to recognize and examine the roles the media, church groups, and CBOs play in civil society and should be explored by future research. Among a variety of civil society actors, NGOs will likely continue to experience challenges in trying to create multiple

impacts that buttress the role of citizens in consideration of local context and culture. That is, to support citizens in monitoring government performance and to collaborate with the government, while still maintaining advocacy. As state-society interactions are dynamic in nature, it is key for all relevant actors, including internationals, to recognize their respective roles in setting policy as they consider their impact on state-building in Timor-Leste.

Notes

1. Additional roles are added to the *sucos* and authorized under the 2016 law. It allowed the *suco* council to collect revenue (RDTL 2016a, article 8). Furthermore, the new law laid out the structure of the Administrative Post, which is yet to be operative as of March 2020. It would be composed of the administrator, the *chefe de suco* and *lia nain*, veterans, women, and youth groups, with the aim of ensuring consultations in local development in the respective areas (RDTL 2014a, article 30 and 31).

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