

BRIEFING NOTE

February 2010

Volume 4 | Issue 2

Expanding State, Expectant Citizens:
Local Perspectives on Government Responsibility in Timor-Leste

■ David Butterworth*

Introduction

“Timorese were willing to die to gain independence... today, as a fragile State, we need to again embrace this great sense of purpose and determination” (Kay Rala Xanana Gusmao, 17 August 2009).

When the prime minister requests further sacrifice to strengthen the “fragile” state, one might ask how much more determined and tolerant of hardship are the people of Timor-Leste willing to be? Even as the government has been working with international agencies towards a more concerted

effort of “participatory intervention” (Chopra & Hohe 2004), those farmers and families now urgently needing state support are also those for whom the sacrifice would be most acute. With this potentially destabilizing situation in mind, in this briefing note we investigate local engagements between citizens and their state, and sketch out the values, hopes and expectations that underlie these encounters and shape rural communities’ definition of state responsibility.¹

Based on a review of anthropological and political studies literature, as well as original field research on the implementation of two public service delivery programs (Local Development Programme and TIM Works),² we put forward an argument in two parts. First, we outline current trends of state-building in Timor-Leste, showing that while contemporary relationships between citizens and the state are fragmented, an ambitious reform agenda culminating in decentralization aspires to increase local participation in state decision making. Second, with a view to informing the reform agenda with voices from rural households and village halls, we bring into focus historical connections between the peoples of east Timor and the various iterations of the state to which they have been subject.

Independent Timor-Leste represents a radical shift in the construction of citizen-state relations in the region, and we suggest that communities are now invoking local idioms of governance, grounded in social obligation and reciprocal exchange, to define their state. The state is no longer an external or antagonistic

body, as it once was under Indonesian and Portuguese administrations. It is now in partnership with the people, and they—in view of this new affinity—have much greater expectations as to what the state *should* provide for their welfare.

At present, Timor-Leste’s citizens see the state as being “in their debt”, and expect it to repay the suffering endured during their fight for independence. State initiatives proving long-term commitment to settling this debt (though they might involve only small, incremental advances) are regarded positively, as are programs which make use of local resources and labor. Such initiatives fit with customary patterns of exchange, and contribute to strengthening state legitimacy at local levels.

Trajectories of the Emerging State

Timor-Leste’s continuing transformation into an independent and democratic state gives cause for optimism: an increasingly well-defined regulatory system and non-oil economic growth of 12.8% in 2008 and an estimated 7.4% in 2009 (IMF 2009) have contributed to obviating post-conflict state fragility. The growing maturity of the state and mounting indications of prosperity, however, do not mask a constellation of problems surrounding citizen-state relations—all having the potential to fracture hard-won stability.

* I would like to thank Pamela Dale, Rod Nixon, Lene Ostergaard, Geraldo Moniz da Silva and Matt Stephens for their support during research and generous comments on drafts of this note. I thank also AusAID, our local research partners Luta Hamutuk, staff of the Local Development Programme and TIM Works, and the people of Aileu and Lautem for their cooperation and warm hospitality. The author can be contacted at david.butterworth@anu.edu.au.

¹ This Briefing Note complements a series of publications, including *Articulations of Local Governance in Timor-Leste: Lessons for Decentralization* and *(Re)Defining Local Governance through Development Initiatives: Contributions for the Youth Development Program*, from J4P Timor-Leste’s “State Building at the Local Level” project. These reports will be released in March 2010 and will be available at www.worldbank.org/justiceforthepeople.

² Field research was undertaken in 2009 and was carried out in 10 *suco* (villages) in the districts of Aileu and Lautem. In-depth interviews were conducted with over 150 research participants from a cross-section of society involved in the implementation of the LDP and TIM Works programs. For more information on LDP, please visit www.estatal.gov.tl. Information on the TIM Works program can be found at www.ilo.org/jakarta/info/public/fs/lang--en/docName--WCMS_116128/index.htm.



“Widespread, and in some areas deepening, poverty and the marked failure of independence to improve material life has contributed to a deep sense of frustration” (Brown 2009: 142).

material improvement in rural communities and subsequent migration to urban centers contributes to socio-economic vulnerability, especially among the youth and elderly (Brown 2009).³ And while the state has undergone a positive conceptual reconfiguration from adversary to partner, administrative woes arising from disjunctures between Dili-based elites and poor rural communities are undermining accountability and efficiency in public service delivery. Failure at this crucial nexus between citizen and state is emphasized by anthropologist David Hicks (2007:13), who characterizes the partnership as no less than “dysfunctional.”

The problems are recognized by the government of Timor-Leste, and the current expansion of rural service delivery and, in particular, proposed decentralization⁴ is designed to address the ongoing challenges to rural growth and cohesion between state and populace. A decentralized Timor-Leste would comprise 13 municipalities, each with its own local assembly: a legislative body constituted by elected representatives with powers to approve budgets, adopt by-laws and oversee local public service delivery.⁵ Decentralization is squarely aimed at alleviating the “dysfunction” of community-state relations by promoting “more effective, efficient and equitable public service delivery” (Government of Timor-Leste 2008).

In preparation for such a significant shift in governance, Timor-Leste’s Ministry of State Administration and Territorial Management (MSATM) has implemented the Local Development Programme (LDP).⁶ LDP allocates annual block grants for small-scale infrastructure projects, which are designed and selected through local planning processes in district assemblies⁷ (which serve as the model for future municipal assemblies) formed by elected *suco* (village) members and local public servants. With less explicit governance aims, but equally committed to increasing community participation in state initiatives, the TIM Works⁸ program utilizes labor-based rural road works, enlisting local community members at a wage of 2 USD per day to conduct basic maintenance and reconstruction of rural roads.

These two programs are significant for their emphasis on community driven development: providing one of the only channels by which citizens can choose the direction of development in their communities. Yet program design is still, by nature, a theoretical construct, floating above specificity before thudding into the messy world of political and logistical pragmatics. Lessons are learnt in practice, and so we must consider how these pro-

Contested claims over the “real” champions of independence still linger alongside ethnic tensions between the eastern *loro sa’e* and western *loro monu* affiliations—a mainspring of the 2006/7 violence and population displacements (Kingsbury 2009). The lack of significant

grams, and through them the state, stack up in terms of the expectations of local populations. How do these programs change, repulse or respond to local values and practices, and how can this knowledge be used to improve state stability and legitimacy?

Toward Connection and Obligation

Colonization and occupation by Portugal and Indonesia imposed state values that were largely antithetical to the values held legitimate in east Timor’s diverse societies. The new state reverses this condition: the state, at least in sentiment if not always in practice, is now “owned” by the citizens. But with this change comes responsibility, and as the state and people have partnered, so too has the state incurred an obligation to repay the debt of the people’s suffering for independence.

While the longevity of the Portuguese colony has made lasting impressions in the contours of the Timor-Leste polity, the extension of statehood to rural communities arguably reached its zenith during the short but severe Indonesian administration (1975–1999). But throughout these transformations, the state did not fully penetrate, and could not arrogate, the ethos of governance held legitimate at local levels. States remained peripheral to customary livelihoods, politics and cultural values, and were met with insistent hostility and resistance. Indeed, the failure of such “external” states to peaceably negotiate alliances with local communities strengthened customary systems, which—as densely networked economies and cosmologies—became a key source of stability and welfare (McWilliam 2005; Molnar 2006).

The independent Timor-Leste state, on the other hand, presents a new vision of what a state can be for rural populations in the region, and decentralization could encourage further

³ Findings from the second Timor-Leste Survey of Living Standards (TLSLS) show a large increase in poverty between 2001 (36%) and 2007 (50%) (World Bank and Directorate of National Statistics 2009). The distribution of wealth in Timor-Leste is also highly unequal: With a *gini* coefficient of 39.5, Timor-Leste ranked 162nd out of 182 surveyed nations in equality of income distribution in 2009 (UNDP 2009). The substantial growth in non-oil GDP in 2008 and 2009, however, will likely contribute to stemming further increases in poverty.

⁴ The Timor-Leste National Parliament approved a Law on Administrative and Territorial Divisions for decentralization in June of 2009. Municipal elections are planned for mid-2010, pending approval of additional laws on Local Government and Municipal Elections.

⁵ Government of Timor-Leste, Ministry of State Administration and Territorial Management, *Draft Law on Local Government*.

⁶ Started in 2005 and initially supported by the United Nations Capital Development Fund (UNCDF). The program Block grants are allocated based on population size, with a current allotment of US\$3.50 per village resident, and average project cost was approximately US\$5500 in 2007–8 (LGSP-Timor-Leste 2008).

⁷ Early pilots of LDP, including those studied by J4P, made use of sub-district and district-level planning processes. However, in keeping with the current decentralization model, new LDP districts concentrate on district-level planning, in consultation with *suco* and *aldeia*.

⁸ In full, TIM Works is the “Investment Budget Execution Support for Rural Infrastructure Development and Employment Generation”, and implemented by the Secretary of State for Vocational Training and Employment (SEFOPE).

⁹ Autochthonous political systems pre-dating and coexisting with colonial rule did not possess the same institutions as Western-based states, though some large and powerful kingdoms, like Sonba’i and Wehali, did effect some state-like powers, such as holding authority to form militias and exact tribute (Boxer 1960; Therik 2004).

engagement of citizens in state activities.¹⁰ This redefinition, however, carries a particular set of values and responsibilities to be negotiated which, we suggest, are informed by customary political systems. In Timor-Leste, transformative events such as births change the fabric of political, as well as social, life in a hierarchical system scholars call “precedence” (Vischer 2009). Transformations create asymmetric pairs, whereby each component is assigned different responsibilities and a complementary relationship is mediated by exchanges of goods and services. For example, births differentiate elder and younger siblings such that the “elder” is customarily attributed sacred authority and “younger” is given political power. In the birth of Timor-Leste, the state is younger than the people, it is a newcomer who might wield power in the political sphere, but is in many ways inferior, and obligated, to the elder, autochthonous, citizenry who facilitated its arrival.

The specific dynamics of the relationship between citizen and state pivot on sacrifices made by the people to deliver independence. With reference to the Mambai people from Aileu district, Traube (2007:10) shows that the experiences of the resistance movement “evokes a cultural code of reciprocity in which those who suffer to bring something forth must be repaid; whoever benefited from or caused their suffering owes them ‘payment for their fatigue’ or ‘wages’ (seul kolen).” Fox (2009: 125) extends this principle to argue that the rural population as a whole “regard themselves as having purchased East Timor’s nationhood with their blood.” The new familial partnership between the state and its citizens emergent in the independence of Timor-Leste is given shape by the suffering necessary to attain that very goal. From this local perspective, the debt of independence owed to the people by their new “younger sibling” must be repaid with stability, welfare and, eventually, prosperity.

For example, much dissatisfaction among rural communities with the performance of the new state revolves around infrastructure. Degrading roads, overcrowded classrooms, and irregular access to clean water were some of the major complaints heard by the J4P researchers. In some cases, citizens drew unfavorable comparisons with the advances in infrastructure made during the Indonesian occupation. In this respect, a positive transformation in community welfare has not mirrored the transformation to independence. Indeed, dissatisfaction is heightened because there is now a closer sentimental connection with the state, forged through violence and suffering, that entails higher expectations. In our interviews with public servants, village elders, and project beneficiaries, the majority charged the state with the responsibility to make restitution for the peoples’ sacrifice.

Implications for Public Service Delivery

In juxtaposition, these statements from community leaders capture a tension immanent in the new partnership between citizens and state: while people expect more assistance from the state,

they are not willing to become passive or dependent recipients. Demand is high among local communities for the extension of the state footprint through service delivery,¹¹ but in doing so the preservation of long-term reciprocity is also sought.

The local construction of citizen-state relations stresses on-going and balanced partnerships with state initiatives. This view is informed by customary exchange practices which, in Timor-Leste, can be contracted over individual life-times and beyond. For example, in the lead up to marriage, and then continuing throughout the life of the couple and often their children, bride-wealth goods and services are customarily exchanged between the clans of the couple. While the “wife-taker” group carries the heaviest burden, and must offer expensive gifts such as buffalo, the “wife-giver” group also expresses its commitment to the relationship through counter-prestations, such as their offer of cloth, betel nut and hospitality on ritual occasions.

“There are no poor people here, we are just not given the means” (chefe aldeia, male, 44).

“According to our Timor traditions...we work problems out ourselves, and do not complain to the government” (chefe suco, male, 56).

LDP and TIM Works are core instruments in the citizen-state partnership, and analysis of their achievements uncovers aspects of program design that correspond or conflict with citizen expectations. Undesirable outcomes, such as unbalanced power relationships between community and public servants or community dissatisfaction with the process and quality of sub-project implementation, can in part be explained by conflicting ideas of what public service delivery should, in fact, be doing.

For example, an initiative carried out hurriedly and on *ad hoc* bases will likely be construed locally as unreliable, probably corrupt and insufficient to fulfill state obligation. Establishing long-term, on-going exchanges between community and state, in which a reliable commitment is proven through time, can reap greater dividends. Even if benefits might at first accrue only slowly, incremental advances build trust and confidence that “one-off” programs do not (see Box 1).

The long-term reciprocity hoped for by local communities in their partnership with the state presents further possibilities for refining state initiatives. While the state is undoubtedly viewed as a “debtor”, the cultural system underpinning the citizen-state partnership does not preclude—and in fact encourages—recip-

¹⁰ The idea that decentralization impacts positively upon citizen-state relations and improves state accountability towards the citizenry is, of course, not without contention (see World Bank 2005). Decentralization can arguably also increase the risk of inefficiencies in spending, corruption, and clientelism.

¹¹ For example, recent surveys show a clear preference for community leaders, rather than the judiciary, to retain responsibility for dispute resolution (2007 Timor-Leste Survey of Living Standards, extended).

rocal contributions from the “creditor”. Rural communities certainly expect the state to repay their sacrifice in full, but this does not render citizens passive bystanders to state development, and experiences from LDP and TIM Works highlight this point. Indeed, some key challenges faced by the programs are overcoming obstacles hindering the involvement of motivated citizens. Public service delivery programs can draw upon local resources during sub-project implementation, and this commitment can substantially increase community satisfaction (see Box 2).

Conclusion

Understanding the values and hopes citizens have for their state is a fundamental, but often overlooked, aspect of measuring progress in state-building and seeking new paths for change. In this note we have highlighted how customary values of reciprocity are shaping definitions of state responsibility in independent Timor-Leste. The new state is a “sibling that came into being” through the sacrifice of resistance, and to the people it has thus incurred a debt to provide for their welfare.

State initiatives to encourage democratic governance and improve infrastructure in rural communities, such as LDP, TIM Works and decentralization, are aimed at building stability and wealth through strengthening the state’s engagement with the citizenry. To do this, the state must acknowledge its role as an indebted exchange partner, and then continue to enact long-term cyclical projects while also increasing opportunities for the community to participate actively in the distribution of state wealth. We hope that making this proposition a

Box 2: Cooperation between community and state

In a small peri-urban *aldeia* in Lautem district, community action played a crucial role in shaping the implementation of an LDP project. In 2007 a project to upgrade the small access road linking it with neighboring communities was conceived through consensus decision making by local leaders, in which citizens were consulted and an executive decision made by the hamlet chief (*chefe aldeia*) and ritual elders (*lia na'in*). The leaders also created a design for the project which they believed most suited to local conditions and which would make most use of local resources. However, subsequent changes in project design at district level were questioned by the local community, and they deemed project implementation by a contractor ineffectual. For example, community members were frustrated that the type of clay used to surface the road was spread too thinly and that the road did not extend to the houses located at the furthest end of the hamlet. To remedy this situation, a cooperative work day was held by the hamlet, in which together the community completed the road to the full length.

part of future public service delivery programs will help create the prosperity deserved by the people of Timor-Leste.

References

- Brown, M. Anne. 2009. “Security, development and the nation-building agenda – East Timor”. *Conflict, Security and Development*. 9(2): 141–164.
- Chopra, Jarat & Tanje Hohe 2004. “Participatory Intervention”. *Global Governance*. 10: 289–305.
- Fox, James J. 2009. “Repaying the debt to Mau Kiak: Reflections on Timor’s Cultural Traditions and the obligations of citizenship in an independent East Timor”. In David Mearns (ed.) *Democratic Governance in Timor-Leste: Reconciling the local and the national*. Darwin: CDU Press.
- Government of Timor-Leste 2008. *Policy Orientation Guidelines for Decentralization and Local Government in Timor-Leste*. Ministry of State Administration and Territorial Management (March 2008).
- Gusmao, Kay Rala Xanana 2009, August 17. *Opening Remarks*. Speech presented at The Second Consultative Conference on Principles for Good International Engagement in Fragile States and Situations, Health Sciences Institute, Dili. Accessed: <http://easttimorlegal.blogspot.com/2009/09/xanana-gusmao-speech-at-2nd.html>
- Hicks, David 2007. “Community and the Nation State in East Timor: A View from the Periphery”. *Anthropology Today*. 23(1): 13–16.
- International Monetary Fund. 2009. *Public Information Notice No. 09/88*, 24 July 2009.
- Kingsbury, Damien 2009. “Lessons Learned in Timor-Leste”. *World Politics Review*. December 8, 2009.
- Local Government Support Program Timor-Leste (LGSP-TL) (2008). *Annual Report: Local Governance Support Program Timor Leste / Jan-Dec 2007*.
- McWilliam, Andrew. 2005. “Houses of Resistance: Structuring Sociality in the New Nation”. *Anthropological Forum* 15(1): 27–44.
- Molnar, Andrea. 2006. “‘Died in the Service of Portugal’: Legitimacy of Authority and Dynamics of Group Identity among the Atsabe Kemak in East Timor”. *Journal of Southeast Asian Studies*. 37(2): 335–355.
- Traube, Elizabeth. 2007. “Unpaid Wages: Local Narrative and the Imagination of the Nation”. *The Asia Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 8(1): 9–25.
- UNDP. 2009. *Human Development Report 2009, Overcoming Barriers: Human Mobility and Development*. New York.
- Vischer, Michael. (ed.) 2009. *Precedence: Social differentiation in the Austronesian World*. Canberra: Australian National University E-Press.
- World Bank. 2005. *East Asia Decentralizes: Making Local Government Work*, Washington, DC.
- World Bank and Directorate of National Statistics. 2009. *Timor-Leste: Poverty in a Young Nation*. Dili.

Box 1: Recurring versus one-off program design

The ethos of long-term reciprocal exchanges permeates life in Timor-Leste, and its value to state initiatives can be illustrated through a brief look at a road maintenance project. The project, which was located in the heartland of Mambai traditional culture, encountered problems when the initial plan to work in five hamlets (*aldeia*) was changed due to budget constraints. Originally the project would employ 100 workers—20 from each hamlet—and was communicated to local authorities by program officials at district meetings. The new design, however, could only reach two hamlets, but this was not effectively communicated to local actors. Hamlets that would now miss out mistakenly understood that, while the change was necessary, the project would eventually continue into their communities.

As time passed, and the project did not continue as locals expected, discontent intensified. According to one community leader, “the work must be continued in the other *aldeia*! In our *aldeia* we have already started building a new road ourselves...we hope that the people [from the program] fix whatever problems they have and return” (*chefe aldeia*, male, 47). The Local Development Programme has mitigated this type of problem through a multi-year design that ensures that communities who miss out in one year will have the opportunity to benefit in the next. The promise of return encourages cooperation between villages and positive acknowledgement of the state. As the *chefe suco* of a neighboring village remarked, “we understand the limitations of the budget, and we have to give the chance to other *suco*, because they also have needs”.