

Policing innovations in Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste and the autonomous region of Bougainville

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In Solomon Islands, Timor-Leste and the autonomous region of Bougainville, the bulk of the population live in rural localities with variable, often extremely limited, access to government services including justice and policing. In these countries, uniformed state police constitute only one of multiple sources of regulatory or dispute resolving power.

Despite the realities of plural policing, international engagement remains heavily focussed on building up state policing agencies. Over the last fifteen years in Timor-Leste, and even longer in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands, proffered solutions have remained focussed squarely on working with taken-for-granted institutional forms, and echo the same types of efforts tried time and again. Few of these solutions —often predicated on the assumption that what ‘works’ in Australia and other metropolitan contexts can be transplanted directly — have flourished.

Despite the calls from leading development organisations for innovation and initiatives with catalytic potential, examples of attempts to engage ‘beneath’ or ‘above’ the state, or experiment beyond the conventional policing frame are few and far between. Police reform seems much less of a testing ground for innovative approaches than in other parts of the law and justice sector.

This paper discusses three examples of creativity and innovation in donor-funded police development programming, framed broadly around the concept of ‘community policing’. In Bougainville, a ‘Community Auxiliary Police’ scheme engages with hybrid local justice and security practices and would appear to be generating some positive outcomes. A short-lived ‘Community Officer’ pilot scheme in Solomon Islands was popular because it worked with the grain of existing configurations of authority and regulation in rural localities. It has now been adopted (and adapted) by two provinces as part of the strengthening of their systems of local-level government. In Timor-Leste, an Asia Foundation program to set up community-police forums throughout the country taps into and aligns with traditional means of dispute resolution.

The paper argues that, at the very least, there is a strong case for donors investing in police development to look in more detail at such cases of innovation rather than simply repeating what has gone before.