

Community building as state building in a Port Moresby suburb

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23 June 2023



Women and children are now safer in Gerehu

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Where do you start to build a state? We often imagine top-down processes of constitution writing and elaborate institutional frameworks of national governance. But what if we move beyond narrow institutionalist understandings to a much broader view of state building – if we see it as the creation of a normative order and shared political community, a locale for identity formation, and the provision of public goods to enable citizens to flourish? Then we need to understand the process of community building as well.

Community building is a bottom-up process that is focused on relationships. There is a mutual dependence between community building and state building, as effective states need effective communities, and vice versa.

So to understand state building, we need to start much lower down.

We might even start where John Pato (not his real name) started almost 20 years ago, as a new resident in a rundown section of Gerehu, a sprawling suburb with about 50,000 residents, on the northern side of Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea's national capital. A postal worker by profession, when John first moved into Gerehu Stage 4 (the suburb is divided into seven stages, for administrative purposes) in 2004, it was a lawless place, characterised by car-jackings, burglaries, drugs and violence.

He knew no one in the area, and initially attended Sunday mass in his old neighbourhood in another part of the city. Some time after he had moved into Gerehu, he was persuaded to go to a service at the local Catholic church located in Stage 4 – a light blue, wooden-panelled structure, surrounded by bushes in which criminals hid and drugs were sold. As fate would have it, the day he attended, the local priest announced his imminent departure and asked the parishioners to elect a new council and executive members. In the absence of any other volunteers, John was surprised to find himself elected to the position of chairman of the parish

council.

As soon as he was appointed, he realised the extent of problems facing the parish. “I thought, ‘How on earth will I do all this work?’”, he said. “The place was full of criminals.” One strategy he devised to deal with the break-ins and other criminal activities was group mobilisation. “I would gather all the congregation together and we would march into the houses where the criminals lived and talk to them”, he told us. “We tried to confront people face to face, not to fight them, but to talk with them and tell them it is not right.”

The turning point for the area came when the criminals broke into the residential quarters of the nuns adjacent to the church. John was in a meeting when a distraught nun came running to tell him what had happened. The young men had forced their way in at gun point. One sister was almost raped. “All our things are gone. We can’t stay here anymore, we want to leave the place”, they told him.

Stage 4 was widely regarded as a no-go area at the time. Outsiders, including the police, were reluctant to visit. John reported the incident to the police station located in another part of the suburb but this elicited no response. So John mobilised his parishioners, moving from place to place in the neighbourhood, seeking names of those responsible and spreading the message: “We want everything returned.” He reflected, “I went in a positive way, trying to understand their needs as well.” By the next day, most stolen items had been returned to the sisters.

Rather than closing down the small convent, under John’s leadership members of the congregation and wider community came up with the radical plan of trying to keep and protect it by directly addressing Stage 4’s chronic crime problems and making it a safer place to live. Over the following two decades, this vision has been gradually acted upon.

Today, the little wooden church is surrounded by a new clinic, and the nuns’ residence has a primary school attached to it. With assistance from the local member of parliament, most roads have been sealed, and the bush areas where criminals used to hide have been cleared, with some turned into food gardens. Small roadside stalls have sprung up selling betel nut, cigarettes and other household items, and women and children appear to wander freely, at least during the day. From a crime-prone, no-go zone to a neighbourhood where people can go about their daily lives without constant fear of criminal violence and intimidation, the transformation has been quite remarkable.

Of course neither we, nor John himself, are suggesting that his is the only story in the apparent turn-around that has taken place in this corner of Gerehu. But he has

undoubtedly played a significant role. Moreover, his role, and the roles played by many like him, are often left out in accounts of state building that are focused on institutional forms and processes. These can overlook the agency of individuals who drive local transformations – including, in this case, bringing safety, healthcare and education to a neighbourhood formerly ridden with fear, distrust and desperation. In John’s own words, “Changes don’t just come about – people make changes. Good people make a better community for others to live around.”

We visited various stages of Gerehu with John, as part of an Australian Research Council-funded Discovery Project investigating the ways that communities across the Pacific are seeking to govern and order themselves, often in the absence of much formal state presence or engagement.

One strong feature emerging from our research, and very clear in the Gerehu example, is the existence of a phenomenon that [psychologist Albert Bandura calls “collective efficacy”](#). Bandura found that effective collective action is associated with a group’s confidence in its own abilities. Applying this insight to the study of crime, [researchers such as Robert Sampson have found](#) that, in communities where neighbours believe that they can act together to overcome crime, there is likely to be significantly less violence.

Understanding the conditions in which collective efficacy can develop in the Pacific Islands is critical. It is especially critical in PNG now, where growing social grievance is linked to feelings of marginalisation from formal governance structures and decision-making processes that afford few openings for grassroots participation. As recognised in much earlier analyses of PNG’s changing social order (the [Morgan and Clifford reports](#)), community leaders want to be active agents, not passive bystanders, in their own governance and transformation.

Our research to date points to a range of factors, the most significant of which are committed leadership by motivated individuals with belief in themselves and their mission, and nodes around which relationships, networks and micro-level governance initiatives can be built. These nodes can be customary forms, including clan structures, churches, or even a vibrant NGO or resident women’s group. The underlying source of legitimacy of an individual leader or particular node appears to matter less than its ability to inspire collective efficacy and help open up fertile spaces in which other initiatives can grow.

While our research remains at an early stage, we suggest that the kind of “building” we are observing at the micro-level has implications across scales. State building involves a complex interplay between micro, meso and macro institutions, leadership and communities. We need to better understand how what happens in a

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place like Gerehu can contribute to the shaping of PNG's evolving nation-state, just as we need to know how the latter shapes what happens in Gerehu.

Disclosures:

This research is supported by the Australian Research Council through a Discovery Project.

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