

Transitional gap of governance: Social change and urban vulnerability in post-1999 East Timor

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The purpose of this paper is to shed light on socio-economic changes in post-1999 East Timor, and to elucidate the way in which human vulnerability emerged under the international state-building. This paper draws attention to the ‘transitional gap of governance,’ or the emerging situation where neither state institutions, nor kin-based community networks, function appropriately to protect the security and welfare of individuals and families. While the legal and institutional framework of the new state has struggled to penetrate the society, rapid socio-demographic changes weakened customary governance, which used to thrive in kin-based communities of East Timor. It is in such a ‘gap of governance’ where people are left in vulnerable circumstance and a new form of human insecurity emerges.

Since the late 2000s, the state-society relationship has become the centre of the debate in literature. It was seen as critical to better understand the ‘success’ or ‘failure’ of international and national efforts to realise sustainable peace in the country. Some commentators have criticised that international statebuilding activities concentrated their focus on the capital city Dili and failed to account for the significance of rural areas where more than 80 per cent of the population resided (Grenfell 2008; Matsuno 2008). Others have also argued that the modernist nature of legal and institutional frameworks ignored the plurality of laws in East Timor and excluded customary governance that thrived at the grass-root level in the country (Grenfell 2006; McWilliam 2008). While drawing upon the body of existing literature, this paper emphasises the significance of the socio-demographic transition triggered by the economic changes under the international statebuilding. Most importantly, this paper points out that weakening of kin-based communities and support networks within the communities have led to a new form of vulnerability among those who reside in urban areas.

State difficulties and customary governance

Statebuilding in East Timor commenced in 1999, when the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor was established by the UN Security Council. Despite the national and international efforts to build autonomous, capable, and legitimate states in the territory, ‘success’ of statebuilding has appeared to be elusive. Most notably, a series of violent incidents erupted in Dili in 2006 raised serious concerns over the state’s ability to contain violence and maintain law and order. Delays in legislative processes, as well as widespread nepotism and corruption, have also raised alarms over the capacity of new state institutions. While the reports and figures indicate the country’s miraculous economic growth, the issues of poverty has been observed in both rural and urban areas (Jakarta Post 2013).¹

The state institutions have also faced difficulties in penetrating into and establishing relationships with the local society. The state judicial system, founded under international auspices, was one such example. The district courts and the court of appeal have continually experienced low levels of activity (World Bank 2006; Low 2007). The majority of citizens placed far more trust in their own local community leaders. These citizens were more likely to trust their village chiefs, rather than institutions of state justice, to deal with problems arising in their lives (The Asia Foundation 2004). The state justice system also failed to deliver appropriate information to the population. The fact that the majority of the rural population had never heard the terms ‘court’ and ‘lawyer’ proved they did not have enough information or exposure to the formal justice system (The Asia Foundation 2004). In general, statebuilding processes lagged behind in implementing regulative frameworks and providing public services, particularly in rural areas.

¹ East Timor has maintained very high economic growth since late 2000s. In 2011, for instance, it recorded a 12 per cent increase in the Gross Domestic Product. (World Bank 2014).

The delay of statebuilding in rural area is often attributed to international and national statebuilding activities, which placed much emphasis upon the reconstruction of the capital city, Dili. Nevertheless, there were other more important background elements that needed to be considered. There was locally-based customary governance, which impeded state institutions from taking root in the society. Living largely subsistence-based agricultural lives, the majority of the population in rural areas reside within kin-based communities. The kin-based communities usually hold unique localised structure of governance; led by hereditary authorities, including the political leader of the landowning lineage – commonly called *liurai* – and the spiritual leader – often called *lia nain* – who provides the legitimacy for customary practice of governance. In these communities, the usage of natural resources is regulated by communal rules or *tara bandu*, and the conflicts arising in day-to-day lives are dealt with in community-based conflict resolution mechanisms called *nahe biti* (Ospina and Hohe 2001; Hohe and Nixon 2003; Babo-Soares 2004; Peace and Democracy Foundation 2004; McWilliam 2008). Given that communities in rural areas retain these structures and practices of local governance, the rural society of East Timor is by no means a ‘power vacuum’, even when the centralised state administrative system was not effectively overseeing it. Moreover, in a sense, the local ‘customary’ governance is complementing the modern state’s administration.

It is important to note that these local governance practices are significantly influenced by social and economic structures of the locality. Local communities continued to revolve around subsistent agriculture and farming, such as raising pigs, goats, and buffalos and cultivating corn, rice, root crops, and vegetables. The small-scale agriculture and farming are usually labour-intensive and require communal support, which often increases the need for co-working in the neighbourhood. Agricultural life is also heavily influenced by the natural environment, such as the annual rainfall cycle and the fertility of the soil. Thus, the members of a community share the risks as well as benefits of the economic activities through co-working. In such a circumstance, the role of kin-based communities is not only to provide a set of local regulatory frameworks, but moreover to provide social security against physical, social, and economic risks in their daily lives (Mubyarto *et al.* 1991).

Social change

This local social arrangement in East Timor, however, has experienced a gradual, but irreversible, change in the face of market-based economic reforms and socio-demographic shifts. In particular, the government’s decision to leave agriculture to the private sector has inflicted serious damage to the local small-scale food production and has changed social arrangements in local society. The end of government subsidies to local agriculture, and the influx of cheap agricultural products from other countries, severely damaged the marketability of local agricultural products and caused a decline in agriculture and farming (Engel and Vieira 2011, 10). The decline of local agriculture can be seen, for instance, in the fall of rice production. While East Timor produced over 55,000 metric tons of rice per year in early 1990s, the number fell to an average of 41,000 metric tons by the mid-2000s (Kammen and Hayati 2007). Combined with other factors, such as the failure to maintain irrigation systems and the high cost of inputs for the agriculture, many people have started feeling that agriculture and farming is ‘not a good way to make money’ (Berlie 2010, 204).

Critically, the decline of local agriculture triggered a large-scale human movement; a number of people, predominantly young men and women, started flooding into the capital city Dili in search of jobs. Together with other factors – including returning refugees choosing to remain in the capital rather than going back to their land of origin, and the world’s highest birth rate, backed by the post-conflict baby boom – migration from rural areas contributed to the sharp increase in population of the capital city (Moxham 2008, 13; Belun 2009a). The population of Dili was estimated 123,474 in 2001, but rose to 175,730 in 2004. By the time of national census in 2010, it reached 234,331 (Muggah 2010, 17-18; RDTL 2010). It is estimated that 40 percent of the current population of Dili consists of migrants, most of whom migrated in the late 2000s.

One of the consequences of these socio-demographic changes was the weakening of kin-based collectives and atomisation of human lives in Dili. Even though migrants from rural areas tend to dwell

closely with those who belong to the same ethno-linguistic groups, the cohesiveness of kin-based community is gradually fading in the capital city. In Dili, people have smaller families and have little economic relationships with their neighbours. The inhabitants' communication with community leaders has also declined. In many cases, the members of the population do not know of their own village chief or the members of the village council. Comparing village communities in rural areas, human relationship in communities in Dili has become loosened and more atomised in its nature.²

Importantly, the changing nature of local community is reflected in the practices of community governance. The practice of *tara bandu*, for instance, is becoming less popular in urban Dili. When I conducted interviews with village chiefs in 2010, all five village chiefs in urban Dili affirmed that they no longer practiced *tara bandu*. This is a stark contrast with the rural areas where all village chiefs with whom I conducted interviews answered that they maintain *tara bandu* practice.³ The unpopularity of *tara bandu* in urban Dili is not so surprising given that it is largely a communal regulation over the usage of natural resources in the community, such as trees, water, and soil. People in urban areas tend not to practice *tara bandu* because their lives are more dependent on products from commercial market. Moreover, in the areas where many of the residents are immigrants from other parts of East Timor, they often cannot make *tara bandu* even if they want to. One village chief in Dili told me that they could not create a new *tara bandu* because they were not *rai nain*, or original to the land and do not have proper knowledge about the tradition of the land or *lisan*.

Similarly, changing nature of local communities also affected the practices of community conflict resolution. While most disputes continue to be over human relationships and resources such as land, fewer cases are now being referred to customary justice systems. Some people have begun to question adjudications provided by their community leaders, such as *lia nain*. The outcomes of customary dispute resolutions are being increasingly contested particularly in the urban areas (EWER 2009a; EWER 2009b; EWER 2011). Consequently, an increasing number of community disputes are now attended to by the national police. EWER's study in 2012, for instance, revealed that during the two-month survey period, 60 per cent of incidents that occurred in the territory had police response (EWER 2012). At the same time, given that 36 per cent of incidents in the same survey time were still attended by traditional and local leaders (EWER 2012), it would be appropriate to say that local disputes are dealt with by the state authority in cooperation with local authorities.

Transitional gap of governance and urban vulnerability

The wilting of community ties could mean the weakening of autonomy and the weakening of the ability to effectively support the community members. In rural areas, community members are closely tied and community leaders, such as village chiefs, tend to maintain customary ties with the village population. Not only are communities in rural areas capable of gathering necessary goods within the community itself, they are also capable of conducting necessary activities and holding events at the expense of the community. On the contrary, the communities in the urban areas are not active enough to spontaneously organise events within the community. Instead, many events are planned and organised by the community leaders. They tend to face difficulties without financial support from higher authority.⁴

While community ties are gradually loosening, the state institutions are still fledging, and thus lagging behind in filling the gap created in such a situation. Financial support for village councils has not been sufficient. While village leaders receive small amounts of money to support their living, the village

² Observations from my fieldworks in East Timor, from May to October 2010, and in July and August in 2013.

³ During my four-month fieldwork in 2010 I conducted interviews with village chiefs in Dili, as well as rural areas. In Dili, I interviewed six village chiefs in Dili, each of which is a representative of a subdistrict. This included village chiefs of Colmera (Subdistrict Vera Cruz), Culfun (Subdistrict Cristo Rei), Bidau Lecidere (Subdistrict Nain Feto), Kampun Alor (Subdistrict Don-Aleixo), Comoro (Subdistrict Don-Aleixo), and Beloi (Subdistrict Atauro). It was only the village chief of Beloi that said that *tara bandu* continued to be active. Nevertheless, subdistrict Atauro is located on Atauro Island, which stands opposite to Dili city. Therefore subdistrict Atauro is not counted in the 'five urban sub-districts' in Dili.

⁴ From interviews and observations in 2010 and 2013.

council is still waiting for the state subsidy to be delivered. Moreover, assistance for individuals and families has not been fully realised. It was not until 2008 that the social security payment was distributed to former veterans who had participated in the resistance movement. Although pensions for the elderly and the disabled were finally set up in 2011, there was no unemployment, sickness, or other social benefits until now (World Bank 2013).

Importantly, the lack of governmental support is especially hard for those who reside in urban areas. While rural inhabitants continue to produce much of agricultural and farming products for their own consumption, those who reside in urban areas do not. Therefore, the cost of basic needs is higher in urban areas by 7 to 28 per cent (World Bank and Directorate of National Statistics, 2008). This is indicative of a further rise in the general cost for food, daily commodities and transportation, all of which often badly affect households in Dili. Furthermore, in rural areas, family and kin-based networks continue to provide the most common form of social security against physical, social, and economic risks in daily lives. However, those who reside in Dili are often deprived of such kin-based communities, and thus have less of the social safety-net. As such, people are left in vulnerable situations.

Those exposed to vulnerable situations include young men and women who migrated from rural areas to Dili. Surveys conducted in 2009 and 2010 revealed that about one third of Dili's labour force aged between 25 and 29 were 'unemployed'. Moreover, 60 per cent of male teenagers and around 50 per cent of those between 20 and 24 were also unemployed (TLAVA 2009; Muggah 2010, 55). Post-1999 economic development also created a new gap between those who did well and others who struggled in the last decade. In Dili, some have achieved a living standard at or near the level of developed Western countries – enjoying car rides, satellite television, and once-a-year overseas vacations – while others remain as deprived as before.

Conclusion

This paper has looked into the way in which human insecurity emerged in post-1999 East Timor. It demonstrated that the decline of agriculture and human migration resulted in the weakening of kin-based community and thus, its capacity to provide assistance to the community members. Importantly, however, state institutions are still under construction processes and have not been providing efficient support to those who are in need. This paper argued that it was in such a circumstance or 'gap of governance' where people were left in vulnerable situations.

This paper demonstrated the significance of socio-economic factors in elucidating the emergence of human vulnerability in East Timor. Although the existing literature tends to concentrate on institutional designs and legal frameworks in analysing the successes and failures of statebuilding, it is important to pay more attention to the local society and social changes in understanding the course of international statebuilding. This paper also revealed that, as socio-demographic changes occurred, the nature of local community transformed, and thus the role and the capacity of community-based governance altered. This also allows us to better understand the versatile nature of local society. It is neither static nor homogenous, as is often depicted in the image of 'tradition'.

The economic indicators such as the economic growth rate and the gross domestic production (GDP) are often used to evaluate the welfare situation of the country. This paper, however, demonstrated that even at times of rapid economic growth, individuals and families may fall into vulnerable situations. There are certain groups of people left behind during economic growth, creating disparity among the population. Moreover, these people tend to fall into such a situation that they do not have appropriate support from state authorities or the community. In this light, this paper demonstrated that 'poverty and vulnerability to risk are not the same phenomenon' (RDTL 2006, 19).

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