

Transnational Crime in the Pacific — A Conversation Starter



Australian
National
University

GORDON PEAKE & SINCLAIR DINNEN

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This *In Brief* draws out some of the key themes raised during a recent policy workshop on transnational crime, hosted by the School of International, Political and Strategic Studies and facilitated by the State, Society and Governance in Melanesia Program, the Australian National University. Convened by Senator Brett Mason, Parliamentary Secretary for Foreign Affairs, the workshop on 12 May 2014 brought together government officials, practitioners and academics to discuss a longstanding area of policy concern in Australia and the region.

The workshop was intended as a ‘conversation starter’ and was an innovative first step towards building a consensus for more effective collaboration between different agencies.

Australia is already deeply involved in combating transnational crime in the region. This includes assistance to the Pacific Transnational Crime Network, a multi-agency law enforcement network with 18 Transnational Crime Units based in 13 Pacific Island countries. Australia also supports multilateral efforts to develop uniform frameworks through the United Nations. In Papua New Guinea, the Australian Federal Police works with the PNG Anti-Corruption Taskforce to tackle cross-border crime, including the sharing of intelligence.

While there have been a number of well-publicised seizures of illicit goods over the years, the scale of the problem remains hard to quantify. Senator Mason noted the salutary observation of one leading researcher that ‘inward flows of development aid are often more than matched by outward flows of illicit money to be stashed or spent abroad, often in the very same countries providing development assistance’ (Sharman 2012:1). Recent attention has been directed at suspicious transfers of funds to Australia from Papua New Guinea (Koim 2012).

The challenges of measurement are complicated further by lack of consensus on definitions of transnational crime, competing priorities and different institutional imperatives. Attempts at universal definitions, such as in the United Nations Convention Against Transnational Organized Crime, are not well suited to the nuances of particular local and regional contexts, including ambiguities between the lawful and the legitimate in different cultural settings.

A number of key themes and areas for future policy development emerged from the wideranging discussion at the workshop.

1. Information Gap

Discussion around the issue of transnational crime in the Pacific suffers from a seriously deficient evidence base. There is a yawning information gap (McCusker 2006), which Australia is helping to partially fill by supporting much-needed basic research and data collection. For example, Australia recently co-funded the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime 2013 report on transnational crime in East Asia and the Pacific (UNODC 2013). A proposed follow-up dedicated report on the region will help place the Pacific in global perspective, as well as standardising a more adequate evidence base of the scale and nature of the issues, and informing effective policy engagement. In addition to the role of governments in addressing transnational crime, there is an important role for the research and think-tank communities in undertaking assessment and analytical work.

2. Different Countries Have Different Priorities

While the discussion in Australia has understandably focused on the domestic impacts of transnational crime (e.g. drug importation), views from the region are also framed in terms of national priorities, which vary widely from country to country. Australia’s focus has been on Pacific islands countries as transit points for activities that threaten to end up on Australian soil, while the view of sovereign Pacific nations has been on potential local impacts. There is a divergence between Australia’s concerns with border security and those of Pacific governments concerned with the economic impact of transnational crime. Among these domestic priorities is the profound damage caused to the viability of Pacific economies by illegal fishing, which robs countries of vital revenue and livelihoods.

3. Corruption

Workshop participants noted that transnational crime is often inextricably bound up in larger issues of corruption among local political and business elites. Understanding the way institutions of these states actually work, as opposed to how they should work, is not helped by

Australian views of them as flawed versions of our own institutions. There is a clear need to better understand the 'rules of the game' that shape the exercise of power and distribution of resources in different countries.

Corruption has become a growing concern for civil society in the region, indicating another possible divergence in priorities. This raises a dilemma for external policymakers reliant on the cooperation of domestic elites who are viewed by many of their own citizenry as tainted. Increasing sensitivity among a small but growing middle class in the region could be a potentially important entry point for promoting more effective accountability and governance.

4. Agility and Innovation in Responses

Participants noted that limited bureaucratic nimbleness was a constraining factor on external engagements in this area. Familiar problems that affect all long-term development endeavours also pertain in this area of work; namely constrained budgets, time frames, and slavish adherence to logframes. A related and equally familiar issue revolves around the fragmentation of Australian Government efforts — relatively little effective coordination across different areas of responsibility serves to dissipate the overall impact. 'Whole-of-government' approaches remain a work-in-progress.

Australia's interventions continue to be framed around 'capacity building' with familiar institutional forms rather than more innovative thinking about how to address problems in contexts that are different from our own. Developing more sophisticated understandings of local contexts and power dynamics will help refine interventions capable of addressing these complex and multifaceted problems. In that vein, there is a need to be more aware of examples of successful problem-solving interventions that make creative use of overseas development assistance. While the Pacific has its own distinct characteristics, many of the underlying challenges are global. Accordingly, learning can potentially be gleaned from other parts of the world.

5. Hybrid Responses

While governments naturally gravitate towards other governments, it is important to move past 'seeing like a state' in addressing issues whose impacts extend beyond capital cities and government offices. Civil society and

the emergence of an embryonic middle class in the region have been mentioned already, but there is also a significant role for the private sector in contributing to the effort to address transnational crime. Transnational corporations, such as those operating in the extractive sectors of Papua New Guinea, are subject to international regulatory regimes and accountability systems based in their countries of incorporation. In many of the countries where they conduct their extractive activities, they wield as much, if not more, influence on domestic governments than do donors. This provides another potential and largely unexplored entry point for addressing these problems.

This workshop was envisioned as the beginning of a conversation. Subsequent dialogue will need to include regional stakeholders such as governments, agencies, civil society and the private sector. The research community can play an important convening role in advancing these discussions. Rigorous analytical work is also needed to better understand local contexts. Achieving greater consensus on definitions and improving coordination are prerequisites for effective preventive and suppressive action.

Author Notes

Gordon Peake is a fellow and Sinclair Dinnen a senior fellow with SSGM. Both were facilitators at the Transnational Crime in the Pacific workshop.

References

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