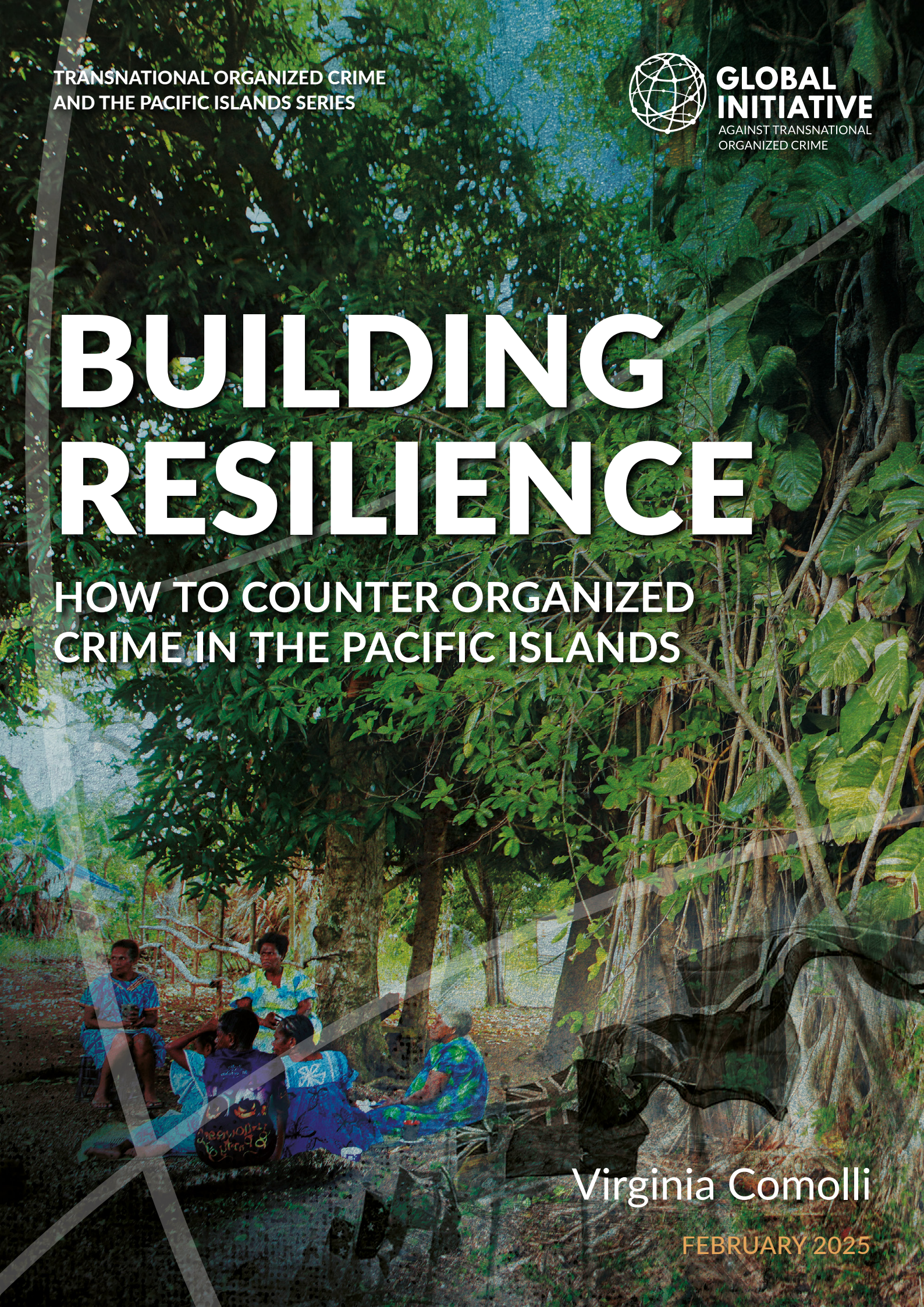
TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME AND THE PACIFIC ISLANDS SERIES

GLOBAL INITIATIVE AGAINST TRANSNATIONAL ORGANIZED CRIME

BUILDING RESILIENCE

HOW TO COUNTER ORGANIZED CRIME IN THE PACIFIC ISLANDS



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INTRODUCTION

This policy brief concludes a series of papers on transnational organized crime in the Pacific islands. The papers have mapped the foreign actors driving a surge in organized criminal activities at a time of intensifying geopolitical competition to secure influence over a region of growing strategic importance.

This competition sees traditional partners such as Australia, New Zealand, the United States, Japan and France and newer ones such as China competing for influence in the most aid-dependent region of the world, and engaging in what has been described as cheque-book diplomacy.[1] This has produced a flurry of high-level visits, security and economic deals, infrastructure building and embassy openings. Notwithstanding pre-existing close relationships (especially between Australia and Melanesia, New Zealand and Polynesia and the US and Micronesia), China's more recent activity in the region – and the resulting allegiance switching from Taiwan to China by some island countries – is arguably the driver of traditional partners' renewed and much expanded interest. This has also led to increased law enforcement assistance and cooperation efforts by traditional and new partners, who have provided training, equipment, police infrastructure and embedded advisers to their Pacific counterparts.

From a transnational crime perspective, this has coincided with the deepening and diversification of markets and the resulting harmful impacts on Pacific populations and their environment, as well as on victims of crime further afield. Drug trafficking, environmental crime, human trafficking and financial crimes are among the most prominent crime types. They are driven by the involvement of foreign criminal networks, the private sector and actors with connections to the region's elites and political leaders. The latter category poses the greatest challenge in terms of responses due to the blurring of identities and agendas, the political support they may enjoy at home and in the Pacific, and the protection afforded by diplomatic relations between their countries of origin and the islands where they operate. This is particularly the case when there is a significant imbalance of power, notably when Chinese actors are involved.

This policy brief explains how geopolitical competition affects organized crime and the implementation of crime fighting measures in the Pacific islands. It also acknowledges the sensitivities involved in combating crime and corruption, especially from the point of view of traditional partners engaging with their Pacific counterparts and eager to preserve and foster good diplomatic relations. Mindful of this, the brief argues for approaching discussions about organized crime through the lens of resilience, and recommends areas ripe for resilience building as identified through consultations with Pacific experts.

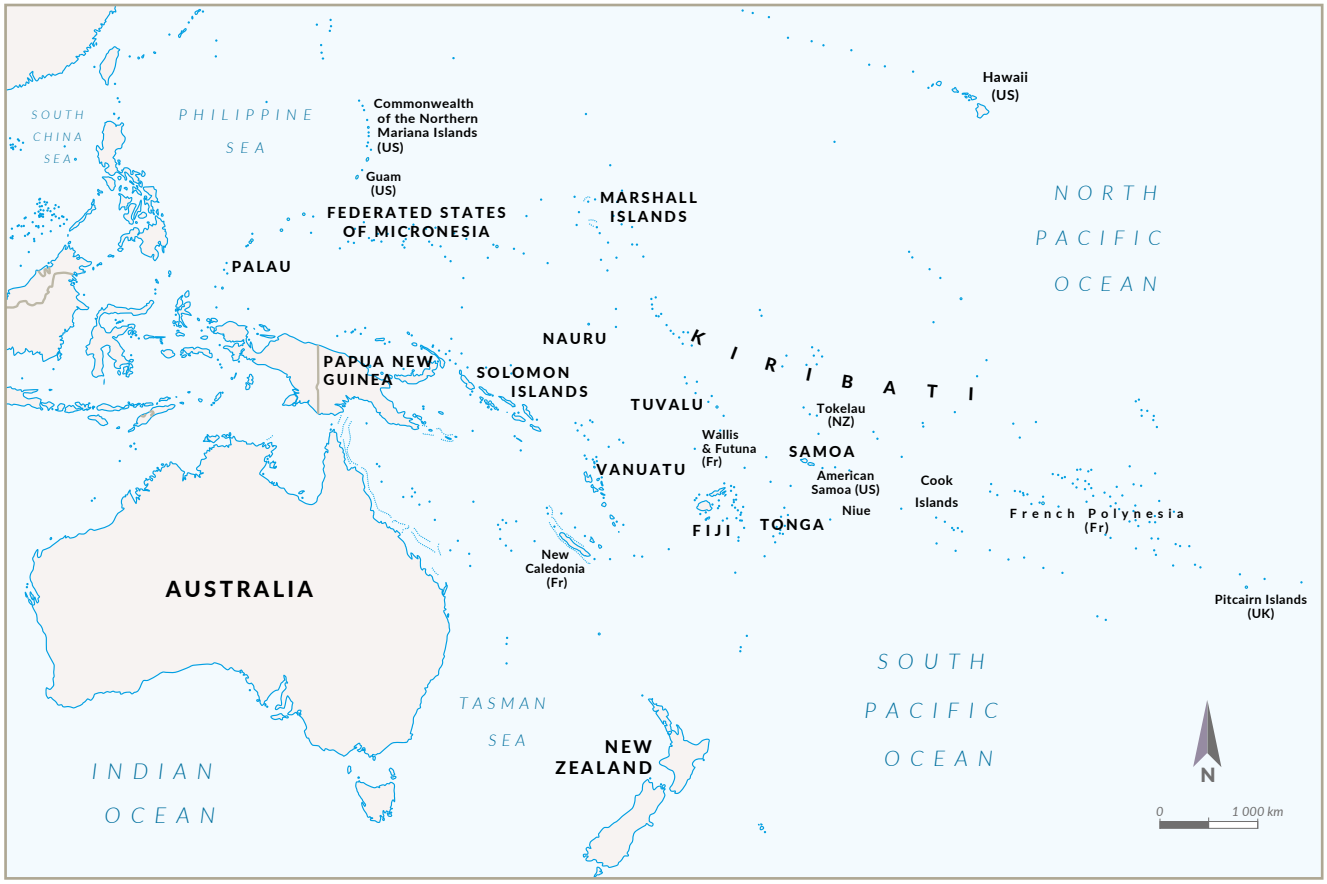

FIGURE 1 Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific island countries and territories.

Key points

- Geopolitical competition and the influx of foreign actors in the Pacific region have created vulnerabilities that fuel the growth of transnational organized crime by creating economic opportunities that criminal groups seek to exploit.
- Organized crime is not always prioritized as a security threat in the Pacific islands, with many still viewing their countries as mere transit points for illicit flows.
- A reluctance to address organized crime and corruption stems from the involvement of political and business elites who benefit from these activities. It is feared that raising concerns could damage diplomatic relations.
- This policy brief argues in favour of an approach to organized crime that is less focused on a confrontational law enforcement-centric strategy and favours building resilience. This approach would involve strengthening local institutions, empowering communities and promoting transparency, with a strong emphasis on the role of civil society.
- This resilience-centred approach does not mean eliminating or diminishing the role of law enforcement. Instead, it seeks to strengthen cooperation between law enforcement agencies and civil society actors.

- In consultations with Pacific experts, three priorities were identified to assist traditional partners in building Pacific island countries' resilience to transnational organized crime, and especially to counter the presence of entrenched foreign criminal actors:
  - Supporting the media: A free and independent media is key to investigating organized crime, holding authorities accountable and raising awareness about the impact of crime. Journalists can be key allies of other civil society groups, such as victims and anti-corruption advocates, by sharing investigative and communication tools. The work of the media is also crucial for international partners and can help galvanize regional action against criminal actors.
  - Strengthening transparency and data sharing: Open access to information, particularly about company ownership, crime statistics and government activities, is essential for holding power to account and deterring corruption. Initiatives such as beneficial ownership registries and open data platforms can help achieve this.
  - Building civil society capacity: Civil society organizations play a vital role in connecting communities and institutions, campaigning for victims and driving positive change. They are instrumental in implementing community-based interventions, supporting victims, proposing reforms and securing funding for local resilience initiatives.
- Supporting local actors, particularly in civil society, is crucial for effectively building resilience against transnational organized crime in the Pacific islands. This includes providing funding, training and technical assistance, as well as facilitating collaboration and knowledge sharing between local actors and those from other regions.

FOREIGN CRIMINALITY AND THE LOCAL CONTEXT

Foreign criminals

The Pacific has become a crowded space and the focus of greater international attention, politically and commercially. Much of this is driven by unfolding competition between China and Western interests, which has had both beneficial and detrimental consequences for the islands and their inhabitants. As this series of papers has shown,[2] this crowdedness also applies to those that engage in criminal activities, both overt and disguised as legitimate business ventures. They fall into many categories and include actors with a long-standing presence in the Pacific and others eager to exploit new opportunities.

Private-sector actors	Outright criminals
Environmental commodities sector: ■ Fishing companies ■ Logging companies ■ Mining companies	Asian syndicates: ■ Chinese triads ■ Other Asian organized crime groups
Embedded diaspora: ■ Chinese ■ Bangladeshi ■ South Korean	Central and South American organized crime groups: ■ Mexican cartels ■ Colombian cartels
Absentee residents: ■ Seeking citizenship ■ Offshore businesses	Outlaw motorcycle gangs: ■ Gangs from Australia and New Zealand, including criminal returnees from the US, Australia and New Zealand
Schemers and scammers: ■ Real estate ■ Cryptos and the financial sector	Minor actors: ■ Eastern and south-eastern Europeans ■ Opportunistic actors from Australia, the Middle East and Asia

FIGURE 2 Overview of key foreign actors engaged in criminality in the Pacific islands.

SOURCE: GI-TOC, Transnational organized crime and the Pacific islands series, https://globalinitiative.net/analysis/transnational-organized-crime-and-the-pacific-islands/

Figure 2 provides an overview of the many categories of actors shaping the criminal landscape. It is a loose categorization, largely due to the overlaps between some categories. In analysing many recent criminal cases cited in the media and in this series of papers, a recurrent question arises: 'Is entity X a business, a criminal or a political actor?' The answer is often 'a combination that might shift over time and depending on circumstances', suggesting a greying of the lines between influence, business and criminality across the region. The next logical question is what to do about it all.

The level of political and economic embeddedness of many of these actors in Pacific island countries and territories arguably represents the greatest overarching challenge to countering organized crime. 'Lack of capacity' was a recurrent theme during interviews with law enforcement officials. They lamented the insufficient number of patrol boats at their disposal, a shortage of prosecutors, budgets that are too small to buy boat fuel, lack of technical knowledge to identify and tackle digital threats, a general dearth of human resources … the list goes on, and in many respects it is not unusual because of the economic reality of aid-dependent small or micro-states. But these are only operational issues, however, and it is clear that there are higher-level hindrances in the fight against crime. This conclusion derives in part from cases discussed in this series of papers, but it was reinforced by the numerous times law enforcement interviewees (both Pacific island nationals and foreigners deployed to the islands) shared their frustration at their inability to pursue certain investigations, most often due to political decisions.

This should not be taken as a wholly defeatist conclusion. There is evidence that a change of administration, such as in Fiji in December 2022, can help untie law enforcement's hands, at least to some extent. Also, this discussion should not be interpreted only as criticism of local governments and the alliances they decide to build. The head of a Solomon Islands NGO put it eloquently: 'Traditional partners have taken the same approach over and over again, but expecting different results. Therefore our country has looked for new friends, not just China, to fully realise our potential.' Notably, these words came from someone who was concerned about the closeness of the Honiara-Beijing relationship and its implications. All of this is to say that managing diplomatic relationships requires a delicate balancing act, not least when the balance of diplomatic and economic power is disproportionately skewed in favour of certain external partners. However, the well-being of common citizens too often seems to be forgotten in the process, while political and economic elites benefit from the influx of legitimate – and criminal – foreign ventures.

Implications for crime fighting

In addition to the impact on private citizens, geopolitical competition – and donors' race to outdo one another in their attempts to win over Pacific leaders – also has implications for organized crime and responses to it.

First, different – and one could argue competing – capacity building efforts in law enforcement undermine interoperability with their contrasting doctrinal approaches to policing. The most noticeable difference can be observed between the Chinese approach, which emphasises surveillance (especially targeting the Chinese diaspora) and heavy-handed approaches to crowd control, and the human rights-centric style promulgated by the likes of Australia, New Zealand and the US (key policing partners to the Pacific islands). Furthermore, the provision of law enforcement and policing assistance and cooperation is part of foreign partners' broader political engagement with the islands and wider strategic agendas. For China, for instance, the provision of police training and capacity (especially

to developing countries) is an important component of its Global Security Initiative. Announced in 2022, the initiative aims to 'eliminate the root causes of international conflicts, improve global security governance, encourage joint international efforts to bring more stability and certainty to a volatile and changing era, and promote durable peace and development in the world'.[3]

Second, some foreign actors engaged in criminality have government links in their countries of origin. These countries, in turn, entertain government-to-government relationships with Pacific counterparts which raise questions about the possibility of criminal actors promoting political agendas as well as governments affording protection to those same actors. A concerning aspect of this problem is the possibility of ill-gotten financial flows influencing elections, hence undermining democratic processes.

A third crucial issue relates to the domestic appetite to pursue foreign criminals and their foreign and local enablers for fear of undermining political and diplomatic relationships. In some countries this problem has additional negative implications for the media, with articles being heavily edited to protect politically connected individuals and investigative journalists coming under threat for their reporting.

Fourth is the fact that political and diplomatic priorities – viewed through the prism of competition for influence – might take precedence over tackling, or in some cases even talking about, crime and corruption. The consequence is that established and well-known criminal actors and corrupt officials become untouchable.

Pacific idiosyncrasies

These dynamics are not unique to the Pacific. However, the small populations of all islands except Papua New Guinea result in close-knit societies and patronage networks. This can fuel a reluctance to investigate or expose individuals to avoid the risk of undermining social and familial connections and relations (and being ostracised as a result). Linked to this is the strength of deeply rooted customs that, in many Pacific island countries, translate into the coexistence of formal and traditional governance structures, the latter constructed around chiefs and clans. Benefits of this include the fact that in some of the most remote islands traditional chiefs (and religious figures in some cases) provide the only form of governance and justice. However, traditional leaders are as vulnerable to corruption as officials in the capitals. Often, bribes are justified in the context of traditional customs of exchanging gifts, which imply reciprocity. Interviews suggest this extends to bringing money or supplies to village chiefs in exchange for votes during political elections, as well as to obtain access to the natural resources that are present on tribal/customary land in the timber-rich Solomon Islands and Papua New Guinea, where illegal logging is widespread.

Shaping approaches to regionalism in this part of the world is the Pacific Way, an approach in which culture determines how countries interact with one another and at the regional level. The term, coined in 1970 by Fiji's prime minister, describes regional interactions centred on dialogue and consultations and a willingness to compromise to reach the best outcome.[4]

A further factor that adds to the Pacific's distinctive nature is the combination of a relatively narrow portfolio of natural resources and economic activities (especially for the smallest countries) which constrains economic diversification and growth; the already tangible effects of climate change, which undermine the existence of entire communities; and the region's high vulnerability to recurrent and destructive cyclones and adverse weather conditions. While these challenges have encouraged creative solutions, such as the well-known case of Tuvalu generating revenues by selling its '.tv' internet

domain,[5] they also leave island governments, eager to grow their economies, vulnerable to embracing questionable foreign business ventures. On paper, these opportunities offer long-term prosperity, but in some cases they have proven fraudulent. The cryptocurrencies sector – an area in which Pacific island countries are yet to develop in-depth technical expertise – seems ripe for criminal exploitation.

Finally, despite Pacific islands' commonalities, the region features a heterogeneous group of countries and territories with a diversity of languages, ethnic backgrounds, social structures, political and legal systems, levels of economic development and diplomatic allegiances. Together, these factors influence how leaders and communities interface with foreign actors descending on the Pacific, notwithstanding the value of unity embodied by the Pacific Way.

The community-based structure and traditional governance systems typical of the Pacific islands, as well as their experience in dealing with climate vulnerabilities, make the region a fertile ground for implementing a resilience-based approach to countering organized crime, as the following section illustrates.

COUNTERING CRIME AND BUILDING RESILIENCE

The factors discussed in the previous section underscore the complexity of tackling organized crime, especially when other agendas – domestic or foreign, legitimate or less so – are likely to take precedence. The GI-TOC believes that countering crime requires a cross-sector and cross-disciplinary approach as well as international, national and local interventions. The importance of a whole-of-society approach is also underscored by the Pacific Islands Forum's Regional Transnational Organised Crime Disruption Strategy 2024–2028.[6] The document, which puts forward the first regional definition of transnational organized crime, notably expands the most common definitions of the phenomenon to encompass not only activities aimed at illegally gaining profit but also those driven by illegally gaining power or influence – an acknowledgement of the ever-growing crossover between criminality and political interference.

From an institutional perspective, the region already has many organizations working to counter transnational organized crime, and they have a crucial role in establishing pan-Pacific norms while allowing for nuanced national-level approaches reflective of different criminal realities, for example the issues of criminal returnees in Samoa and Tonga and illegal logging in Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands. They include the Pacific Islands Forum, the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police, the Pacific Transnational Crime Network, the Pacific Transnational Crime Coordination Centre and the 28 Transnational Crime Units, the Oceania Customs Organization, the Pacific Islands Law Officers' Network, the Pacific Immigration Development Community, the Pacific Fusion Centre, Pacific Financial Intelligence Community and the Pacific Islands Forum Fisheries Agency.

This long list suggests there is no need for new structures. Instead, the emphasis should be on working with and through existing networks and bodies to capitalize on the avenues they have established for cooperation and information sharing. This could involve seconding staff from agencies with wider portfolios to the likes of the Pacific Transnational Crime Coordination Centre, which would widen awareness of transnational crime issues and promote their mainstreaming across a broad range of organizations (hence supporting the cross-sector approach described earlier). From a donor perspective, the approach would involve supporting and strengthening the capacity of these institutions and ensuring effective coordination, for instance by aligning the agendas of regional conferences, reducing duplication of effort and supporting communication between organizations.

A resilience-centred model for addressing organized crime in the Pacific islands region should engage with communities and civil society pressure groups. © *Adek Berry/AFP via Getty Images*

Possibly the only gap in terms of regional institutions is the absence of a Pacific agency for criminal justice cooperation, similar to the European Union Agency for Criminal Justice Cooperation, as lamented by long-serving Vanuatu Public Prosecutor Josaia Naigulevu.[7] The need to support and strengthen the judiciary across the region was also highlighted by the experts consulted for this paper.

At national level, capacity and capability levels vary considerably from country to country and traditional partners (Australia, France, Japan, New Zealand and the US) and China are heavily involved in providing training, financial aid, equipment and infrastructure.[8] At the time of writing, the most recent and prominent donor initiative in the law enforcement arena is Australia's AU$400 million Pacific Policing Initiative,[9] which was endorsed by Pacific leaders in August 2024. The initiative's Pinkenba Hub, housing and training Pacific officers, was inaugurated in Brisbane in December 2024.[10]

This surge in attention has not gone unnoticed by Pacific leaders and citizens, but when it comes to prioritizing organized crime, experts consulted for this project argue that Pacific islanders frequently perceive their countries as mere transit points for illicit flows, so transnational crime is not prioritized. This is the case with Papua New Guinea, which has reported significant drug seizures in recent years, especially of methamphetamine. Illegal logging is also rampant[11] but forestry activists say the problem is seldom recognized or prioritized by either Papua New Guinea authorities or their counterparts in Malaysia, home to most of the companies involved in these illicit activities.

Acknowledging organized crime's pervasive and widespread impacts on the economy and development, security, public health, the environment and governance is an essential first step in combating it. So is recognizing how, in turn, organized crime undermines countries' overall resilience.

Looking through the resilience lens

For all the aid provision and law enforcement and security cooperation, traditional partners often appear reluctant to tackle discussions on organized crime and corruption head on. At the operational level, this might mean foreign police advisers embedded within Pacific forces have narrowly defined remits and must avoid sensitive issues such as investigating exposed individuals.

This is because some members of local political and business elites have directly or indirectly benefited from the surge in foreign-driven criminal activities on the islands over the past two decades. Raising uncomfortable questions about a prominent individual receiving kickbacks from a foreign company illegally extracting resources from one of the islands, to mention one plausible scenario, could undermine diplomatic relations between, for example, Australia and Solomon Islands. In an era when the imperative is to foster those relations and counter China's ascent as a new partner of choice for the Pacific islands, that is not a palatable option.

This policy brief, therefore, argues for a less confrontational and contentious way of framing discussions about organized crime which presents fewer risks to diplomatic relations between traditional partners and Pacific counterparts. Such an approach is more likely to be considered and adopted by partners on both sides.

A possible approach is to look at the fight against organized crime through the prism of resilience, on the premise that this can be the antibody against the disease of organized crime, as shown by the GI-TOC in other contexts. Once a body – in this case a country and its citizens – possesses a healthy amount of resilience antibodies, it is considerably better equipped to withstand crime and its repercussions, and it develops long-term barriers to organized crime. As a result, organized crime is much more contained, does not risk overwhelming systems and societies, and does not pose a strategic threat (for example, violence is minimal and the risk of state capture is mitigated).

This resilience-centred approach does not mean doing away with law enforcement and neither does it diminish its role. Rather, it strengthens cooperation between law enforcement and civil society actors by engaging with communities to build an understanding of, among others principles, the relevance of the rule of law, protecting human rights and bottom-up approaches. At the same time, however, it acknowledges that there will be instances where a high-profile investigation or naming-and-shaming initiatives might not be productive. It is worth noting that in small island countries the key players involved in criminal activities are usually well known to most, leading to a domestic reluctance to pursue such individuals. It is debatable, therefore, whether external pressures to investigate or prosecute would bear fruit.

This approach prioritizes focusing on the evidence that transnational crime affects the stability of Pacific island countries, heightens vulnerabilities and makes countries less resilient by driving corruption, undermining governance and diverting resources from local populations. As such, it is particularly detrimental to let competition between great powers colour responses to crime. One aspect of this approach is to stress that foreign-linked (criminal) activities feed corruption. In turn, this exacerbates citizens' discontent about their administrations, which may lead to disorder and unrest – something local leaders and traditional partners wish to avoid.

AREAS FOR BUILDING RESILIENCE

Transnational organized crime trends in the Pacific islands unfold against a competitive geo-political backdrop and are shaped by it. There is still reluctance in some quarters to prioritize crime fighting, and even sometimes to acknowledge the extent of the geopolitical competition playing out in the region.[12] However, it is hard to ignore the race to win Pacific friends discussed in the first paper in this series ('Politics at play: Geopolitics and organized crime in the Pacific'), and which is extensively evidenced,[13] as well as the convergence of criminal, business and political agendas normally embodied by foreign actors operating in Pacific island countries.

In fairness, elevating organized crime to a strategic challenge, rather than simply a law enforcement one, has been a work in progress around the world for years. It is not entirely surprising, therefore, that countries facing the existential threat of climate change – the number one security threat to the region – might be slower in changing their perception of organized crime. (However, some changes have started to occur, notably in Fiji due to the recent spike in synthetic drug use and related increase in HIV cases).[14]

This reality further underscores the importance of collecting and sharing evidence to inform decision makers and the public about the pernicious and extensive implications of transnational organized crime, and the importance of building resilience against it.

In discussions with Pacific experts about realistic and actionable measures, three interconnected areas – the media, transparency and civil society capacity – were identified as priorities for traditional partners as part of building Pacific island countries' resilience to transnational organized crime, and especially to counter the presence of entrenched foreign criminal actors. The thread running through these areas is the emphasis on the role of local non-state actors, specifically civil societies broadly defined. The rationale behind this focus is that the influence of foreign criminal actors, especially those who enjoy the support (or at least the acquiescence) of their governments, is often exerted through the state apparatus in Pacific island countries as it is intertwined with political or diplomatic interests. By concentrating on supporting and strengthening civil societies it is possible to broadly bypass compromised state agencies. This means responses to organized crime can be largely insulated from political agendas and possible compromised officials.

Supporting the media

The value of professional and reliable media is widely accepted as indicated, for instance, by Australia-funded efforts to build capacity among Pacific media outlets via the Pacific Media Assistance Scheme (managed by Australian Broadcasting Corporation International Development).[15]

Specifically, independent media can play multiple roles in building resilience, an important factor when some national newspapers are foreign owned – a reality that could undermine their impartiality and be manipulated to support political agendas at the expense of transparency and exposing corruption and other improprieties.

To help fight organized crime and boost resilience, the media ought to prioritize investigative journalism that exposes the networks, operations and individuals involved in organized crime and corruption. While doing so, it is crucial to highlight the devastating impacts of crime on individuals, communities and societies to educate the public about the complex nature of organized crime, its links to corruption and its detrimental effects on various aspects of society, including the economy, governance and public safety. To achieve this goal accessibility is key, and the content, medium (e.g. written or video) and language (e.g. local vernacular) ought to be targeted at the local audience.[16]

Media platforms are well placed to host discussions and debates involving experts, community members and policymakers to raise awareness, share perspectives and foster dialogue on effective strategies for combating crime. Furthermore, the media offers channels through which stories of individuals and communities successfully resisting crime and corruption can be showcased, inspiring others to act and demonstrating the effectiveness of collective efforts.[17]

By providing information on crime-prevention techniques, reporting mechanisms and available support services, the media empowers citizens to protect themselves and contributes to community safety. In practical terms this could include sharing information on local initiatives, community policing programmes and resources for victims. Linked to this, the media can partner with NGOs and community groups working on crime-related issues to amplify their voices, extend their reach and strengthen their impact.[18] Joint campaigns and initiatives can combine the investigative and storytelling power of the media with the on-the-ground knowledge and experience of civil society.

Finally, the media can use its platforms to support policy changes that strengthen law enforcement, enhance judicial processes, improve transparency and accountability, and address the root causes of crime, such as poverty, inequality and lack of opportunities.

In Pacific island countries, through foreign support, new media outlets have been created in recent years geared towards investigative journalism, e.g. In-depth Solomons and Inside PNG.

However, the first Pacific Islands Media Freedom Index, released in September 2024, indicated that journalists and media practitioners face significant economic and political pressures and are vulnerable to bribery, corruption and self-censorship.[19] Worryingly, respondents to the survey spoke of weak legal protections for free speech and the media, targeted investigations of journalists and even physical threats.

In countries such as Papua New Guinea, some media outlets are connected to industries linked to widespread illegality (logging), which undermines their impartiality. In Fiji, the experience of 16 years of media restrictions under the previous administration (including curbs on reporting government activities)[20] has left a mark on the media landscape.

This is an area where donors could make a substantive difference by promoting and rewarding quality journalism and supporting technical training. It was suggested, for instance, that it is difficult to find good economists in Solomon Islands.

Strengthening transparency and data sharing

A recurrent theme in conversations about organized crime is 'follow the money', and the Pacific is no exception. Linked to the preceding discussion, effective media work requires strong access to information laws and public bodies with the capacity to provide this access. Therefore, building state capacity to grant access to information is key.

It has been pointed out that in Melanesia, in particular, easier access to company information would promote greater transparency. In addition, collaboration on data collection and sharing would help quantify the revenues lost to activities such as illegal logging and mining. For instance, a Swiss-based company produces quarterly reports of Papua New Guinea log exports but checks on the ground to verify these figures appear to be absent or insufficient.

There is also a widespread perception that more action should be taken in and by countries where the illicit proceeds of criminal activities in the Pacific islands are laundered. The property sector in northern Queensland, Australia, is often cited as an example.

Experience from the Pacific and beyond indicates that transparency is a key factor in building resilience to crime. Open access to information empowers communities to identify, understand and address the threats they face. There are many ways in which transparency can be leveraged to strengthen resilience to crime:

- Making information about the owners of companies publicly accessible means it becomes more difficult for criminal actors to hide illicit activities and assets behind complex corporate structures.[21] This transparency aids law enforcement investigations, discourages corrupt practices and promotes accountability.[22]
- When governments and institutions are transparent about crime statistics, corruption cases and the effectiveness of their responses, communities can assess the situation accurately. This knowledge is crucial for informed decision-making, campaigning for necessary reforms and holding those in power accountable.[23]
- Open and competitive procurement processes minimize opportunities for corruption and ensure resources are allocated efficiently. Public scrutiny can deter bid-rigging, bribery and favouritism, leading to more effective use of public funds for crime prevention and community development initiatives.
- Openness about law enforcement activities, judicial proceedings and sentencing outcomes builds public trust and confidence in the criminal justice system. Clear communication about the process and rationale behind decisions can foster cooperation and encourage citizens to report crimes and take part in crime-prevention efforts.
- Civil society organizations working to combat crime and build community resilience should be transparent about their funding sources, activities and impact. This builds trust and credibility, strengthens partnerships and encourages collaboration.
- Creating secure and confidential mechanisms for individuals to report wrongdoing without fear of retaliation is essential. Transparency about the process and strong legal protections are crucial for encouraging whistleblowers to come forward and expose corruption and criminal activities.

- Transparent communication with communities about crime-prevention strategies, local security initiatives and the role of civilian defence groups (such as rangers associations) enables informed participation and builds trust.[24] This openness fosters dialogue, facilitates cooperation and empowers communities to take ownership of their safety.

Building civil society capacity

For several reasons, including some linked to the media and transparency issues discussed above, some Pacific leaders lack accountability. Often, however, Western donors are reluctant to deal with actors other than state institutions – civil society organizations, for example – due to the belief that all decisions are the prerogative of the state. This approach fails to acknowledge the traditional leaders and governance structures that remain in place in many of the islands.

Additionally, leaders' lack of accountability is a further reason to engage with civil society directly (notwithstanding the capacity and bureaucratic challenges involved) and help nourish those voices within communities. These actors are indeed on the frontline of building community resilience to organized crime and other challenges affecting islanders. Civil society organizations' crucial role is to bridge the gap between communities and institutions, foster trust and drive positive change from the ground up. They have the power to mobilise communities, campaign for change and hold power to account.

Observations across the Pacific and from the experience elsewhere of the GI-TOC Resilience Fund[25] point to five broad areas where civil society organizations can contribute to building resilience.

Supporting and enhancing community-based interventions

Civil society organizations are crucial in implementing community-based interventions that directly address the vulnerabilities exploited by organized crime. In particular, they can provide training, resources and security support to activists who face significant risks in challenging criminal networks. They can engage youth through sport, arts and educational programmes that offer alternatives to criminal involvement, fostering a sense of purpose and belonging. They can campaign for victims of organized crime, providing legal aid and supporting their families, ensuring their voices are heard and their rights are protected. They can also facilitate the rehabilitation and reintegration of former offenders into society, reducing recidivism and breaking the cycle of crime. Civil society organizations with expertise in organized crime can work with journalists to provide information, analysis and support for investigations, enhancing the impact of reporting on illicit networks.

Supporting victims and survivors

Civil society organizations are essential in providing direct support to victims and survivors of organized crime. This involves campaigning for legislation that guarantees financial and other forms of support for victims, enabling their recovery and access to justice; pushing for stronger legal protections and support mechanisms for whistleblowers, recognizing their crucial role in exposing corruption and criminal activities; and campaigning for the establishment of dedicated funds to provide comprehensive support services to victims, including psychological counselling, legal aid and safe housing.[26]

Promoting prison reform

Civil society organizations should push for prison reforms that focus on rehabilitation and reintegration rather than punishment. This involves promoting alternatives to incarceration such as community-based sentencing, restorative justice programmes, and diversion programmes for non-violent offenders, focusing

on rehabilitation. Furthermore, civil society organizations can campaign for better living conditions, educational and vocational training programmes, and mental health support for incarcerated individuals, preparing them for successful reintegration into society.[27]

Focusing on land rights

Land tenure insecurity is a driver of conflict and instability, creating fertile ground for organized crime. In Pacific island countries, especially Papua New Guinea and Solomon Islands where illegal logging takes place on customary land, civil society organizations can work with communities to develop sustainable land management practices that benefit local populations while protecting the environment, reducing the likelihood of exploitation by criminal actors.

Civil society organizations can also campaign for the adoption of modern land administration systems and technologies that enhance transparency, security and accessibility of land records, empowering communities and deterring land grabs.[28]

Scaling up funding for local resilience

Initiatives such as the GI-TOC Resilience Fund have been successful in supporting grass roots organizations combating organized crime. Civil society should understand that securing sustainable funding for local resilience initiatives requires exploring diverse sources, including public-private partnerships.[29] Moreover, building on the Resilience Fund model, civil society can create a strong network of environmental defenders, journalists, activists and anti-corruption organizations, facilitating collaboration and knowledge sharing that is done in a culturally appropriate manner and in line with Pacific customs and values. It would also be worth connecting with similar civil society organizations in other regions, such as neighbouring South East Asia, which in some cases operate along the same supply chains for illicit commodities, and with whom it would be possible to share experiences and lessons.

This area of support raises the issue of donor coordination, which is crucial to the effective disbursement of funds. Pacific experts consulted for this paper lamented the duplication of effort stemming from often poor coordination, even among like-minded foreign donors, which may result in the 'usual suspects' receiving financial support at the expense of less well connected NGOs.

A church service in Tuvalu. Islanders' community-based and cultural structures should be recognized as critical components of an effective resilience response to organized crime. © *Fiona Goodall/Lumix via Getty Images*

CONCLUSION

To effectively combat the rise of transnational organized crime in the Pacific islands, the solely (or primarily) law enforcement-centric approach must move towards a resilience-based strategy which empowers local actors, particularly civil society organizations (including the media), to play a central role in exposing and disrupting criminal networks. Transparency is paramount, requiring open access to information, beneficial ownership registries and public scrutiny of government activities and institutions. By fostering a culture of accountability and good governance, the Pacific islands can effectively address the root causes of organized crime and build a more resilient and secure region. This will require a concerted effort from all stakeholders, including governments, regional organizations, civil society and international partners, to prioritize and invest in building long-term resilience against transnational organized crime.

The GI-TOC is implementing a multi-pronged approach to support the achievement of this vision. It involves shedding light on organized crime activities, actors, harms and implications to raise awareness of the risks and vulnerabilities associated with crime among civil societies, government stakeholders and law enforcement in the Pacific islands and partner countries. In parallel, the GI-TOC Resilience Fund is supporting Pacific civil society groups working in communities affected by environmental crime, drug trafficking and human exploitation. The aim is to strengthen their capacity financially and connect them to a global civil society network through which they can learn and share experiences. As part of these efforts, the fund has started working in the region to address the lack of awareness of traditional landowners among indigenous communities who might allow foreign logging companies to fell trees illegally on their land. Interventions include training community members to identify and report illegal activities on their customary land and empower traditional landowners to add value to their agricultural products to deter them from selling their land to foreign interests. Additionally, all Resilience Fund partner organizations will implement national awareness campaigns on environmental protection and indigenous rights in 2025.

The GI-TOC also uses its platform to amplify Pacific voices and issues at events[30] (including the 12th Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organized Crime in 2024) and in written outputs.[31] Overall, the GI-TOC strives to consult Pacific islanders throughout all activities, starting from the design phase, to ensure that what is delivered meets local needs and contributes to making communities and the region more resilient to transnational organized crime.

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ABOUT THE GLOBAL INITIATIVE

The Global Initiative Against Transnational Organized Crime is a global network with over 700 Network Experts around the world. The Global Initiative provides a platform to promote greater debate and innovative approaches as the building blocks to an inclusive global strategy against organized crime.

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