

Timor Leste Ten Years After

What have we learned?

BY EMILIA PIRES

A CRITICAL DIMENSION of the development challenge in post-conflict East Timor is making the transition from a military environment focused on conflict with a common public enemy to a civilian administration facing complexity and uncertainty.

The international community may insist on the immediate adoption of best practice. Indeed, why should we not learn from the mistakes of others? However, in most countries these practices were adopted by iterations and trials in a communal learning process, and each time the people learned

directly what did or did not work. This kind of direct experience is often denied to post-conflict societies like the East Timorese and, as a result, most people simply do not understand why the solutions they are offered are any better than the alternatives.

People who spend a long time in a resistance movement develop finely-honed skills based on solidarity and the survival instinct of their leaders. Disparate groups can be united by a common enemy. In peacetime, areas of shared interest must be found to prevent a splintered, fractious, and potentially confrontational political environment. In East Timor, we tried to build common ground by creating Vision 2020,



An election official shows a ballot paper to residents in Dili, Timor Leste.

which allowed over 40,000 citizens to articulate their aspirations for the country on the eve of independence.

This process is complex and painful, even for a country as blessed with resources as East Timor. Although the former vertical political power structures are no longer viable, transition to new systems takes time. Conversion must be gradual; the old structures cannot be ignored while the new ones are being built.

Similarly, building new leadership takes time. Often following a conflict, a power vacuum emerges as military leaders step aside to allow civilians to rule. Such a vacuum can be easily exploited by peace-spoilers. This highlights why political transition, rather than money, is the main challenge in post-conflict environments.

Externally educated elites have an advantage

IT IS NOT UNUSUAL to see members of a diaspora return after years in exile to take up senior government posts in post-conflict countries. They have the advantages of high-quality education, along with an understanding of modern government systems.

But this can alienate the local population who may resent that those who have learned to play the “western game,” are now able to position themselves to take advantage of the power vacuum.

The Western democratic model is based on opposition, a luxury which is not affordable in times of conflict. Therefore, after conflict, there is a need to dedicate resources to civic education programs that inform the general population on the principles and values of democracy. Such “governance education” interventions are often not made available, because donors seem to generally assume that people will automatically choose western-style democracy. But people emerging from conflict situations may never have experienced democracy.

Leadership continuity can help transition

LEADERSHIP CONTINUITY from the conflict to the post-conflict period may be helpful. East Timor has greatly benefited from having had a unifying leader, Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão, whom enjoys respect and admiration from all sectors of society—from the military and police to ordinary citizens. His ability to play the role of respected arbitrator has considerably eased the management of political and social conflicts in lieu of functioning legal institutions,

Money should be spent quickly

HAVING FUNDS is always helpful; however, the key issue is the speed at which they are disbursed. In the post-conflict period, sensitivities and suspicions can run high. To ensure stability government needs to be able to act fast and quickly disburse funds to agencies, civil society groups and even directly to the citizens whenever possible. This is not an easy task, given fledgling administrative structures. Some external observers may claim that this type of disbursement does not follow the rules of “best-practice financial management,” yet in post-conflict situations a government needs to strike a balance between best-practice financial management and the need to ensure social stability.

In East Timor, where we rely on oil revenues, the introduction of cash transfers proved to be a valuable tool. In sectors such as health and education, where building systems takes a long time, cash transfers help improve both social cohesion and direct poverty alleviation. In the immediate post-conflict period the poorest people are the most exposed to misinformation, corruption and disillu-



Voters walk to a polling station in Dili to elect Timor Leste's new president.

sionment wilfully brought on by players interested in capturing the aforementioned power vacuum. Direct cash transfers to the most vulnerable groups can play a key role in counteracting those negative forces and securing stability.

Many people do not realize how quickly the most vulnerable in society can lose hope, and how potentially destabilizing this is. Public expectations in the immediate post-conflict period are high, and often unrealistic. If in the post-conflict period those expectations are not managed and hope is somehow kept alive, people become disillusioned and disruptive. It is this critical importance of a quick peace dividend that renders some of the long-term solutions offered by donors, no matter how sound, impractical to a government.

It is ironic that the donor community spent nearly US \$3.7 billion in East Timor immediately between 1999 and 2007, to little effect, while the new East Timor government that recently increased its spending to US\$500 million, giving significant sums to the most vulnerable in society, received scathing criticism from the international community.

Sadly, in East Timor there is now a perception among the general population that the donor community is riddled with complex rules that only allow them to “talk” and not “do.” This perceived failure consequently places more pressure on the government to “do”—i.e., to initiate activities that have an immediate, direct and tangible impact on the lives of the people.

The importance of dignity

POVERTY IS ABOUT PRIDE AS WELL AS MONEY. Even though people may be poor and uneducated, they still need to be treated with respect and dignity. Even with little or no education, rural communities often can come up with solutions to their problems that are faster and more viable than those proposed by international development experts. This is partly because the communities understand best the “underlying” drivers of their economy and society. Donors often end up supporting ideas expressed by counterparts who may have a good command of English but a low support base within the community. Tapping into local knowledge and getting to understand the social, cultural and political drivers of a society is essential to be effective in sustainable development.

Often very little time is dedicated to skills development, capacity building and, more importantly, building up government systems in the proper way. In East Timor, we faced a situation in which donors were willing to sponsor a program that would last a maximum of three years though they had been advised that it would take at least a generation to build a public service. A concrete example in Timor Leste is the schooling system; many donors were keen to improve it, but few were willing to provide teachers with scholarships that would train them to teach.

Nation building takes time

LOCAL PEOPLE ARE OFTEN not given the opportunity to develop the skills needed to run a modern government. In East Timor, the UN pulled out after only two-and-a-half years, when

many institutions were still fledgling, or did not exist at all. This lack of national governance capacity resulted in an extreme reliance on foreign advisers, with a vested interest not to develop local capacity in order to maintain their healthy salaries.

In Timor Leste, we faced the unrealistic notion that everything should be fixed at once. For example, the belief that one cannot move ahead with economic development until the “land” issue is fixed. This type of ‘holistic’ solution-making may work in theory but is simply unrealistic in the political sphere. One cannot fix all the problems simultaneously. It makes no sense to elaborate all encompassing “master plans” if nobody reads and uses them. Larger problems must be broken down into smaller ones, and those must be fixed as best they can with the participation of all interested stakeholders. One has to be pragmatic and take it step-by-step.

In the private sector it is common to see two businesses fail for every one that succeeds. In the development world, on the other hand, officially, there are no failures! This inability to accept potential failure leads to an inability to take risks and, in turn, to poor and non-innovative solutions. Donors, and especially their officers on the ground, should have the flexibility to make decisions and take risks in line with government needs. Although this may result in a few failed projects, it will also produce more successes.

The decision of the East Timorese government to resolve the issue of 120,000 internally displaced people through the use of cash transfers is an excellent example in this regard. We arrived at this solution through consultation and negotiation with the groups concerned. Our approach was derided by some in the donor community who advocated for a solution involving an eight-year program and foreign NGOs. However, we went ahead and within one year we had returned nearly 100,000 people to their homes, all but one of the camps had been closed, and the risk of developing permanent “slums” which could become a breeding ground of future conflict had been averted. This is not to say that we solved every problem. We know that there will be reintegration challenges, but waiting for an all-encompassing solution that addresses every problem before taking action would have been a far more dangerous strategy.

Working together

IN POST-CONFLICT SITUATIONS, we all make mistakes. Nobody has a magic solution to every problem. This is why communication, friendship and understanding among those interested in genuine development are important. We have been lucky in East Timor. As in any good marriage, we often disagree with our partners, but at the end of the day we overcome our differences in the interest of building an institution which is greater than each individual partner—the East Timor nation. 🌸

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