

EAST TIMOR: VOLUNTEERS EASE THE TRANSITION BETWEEN WAR AND RECONSTRUCTION

In a Nutshell

When it broke away from Indonesia, East Timor was left bereft of administrative and technical capacity. Amidst the backdrop of conflict and crisis, UNV made use of volunteers to bridge the gap. This case illustrates two areas where UNV helped build local capacity – in a fisheries project and in civic education – using a mix of skills, knowledge, catalytic technical inputs and innovation. The volunteers themselves were mid-career professionals with a high degree of proficiency.

The case profiles how volunteers can serve as powerful instruments of technical cooperation, more so in situations of post-conflict reconstruction where trust and human interaction are critical.

The Story

The decision of the East Timorese to seek independence from Indonesia in August 1999 confronted the country with immense challenges. For almost three decades, East Timor had been administered by the Indonesian authorities through qualified Indonesian nationals; they could not be expected to carry on in an independent nation. Illiteracy rates were high among the Timorese, with the few who had been educated and possessed useful skills having mostly left for other countries. Added to this was the inherent difficulty of a multi-lingual society, where most young people of the Indonesian era speak Bahasa as a first language, while the older generation that would form the fledging government is comfortable with and has institutionalized Portuguese as the main working language.

The outbreak of violence that followed the independence referendum compounded these challenges with the burden of reconstructing what had been deliberately destroyed. More importantly, the Timorese needed to develop the determination and ability to live under and exercise the democratic process that they had voted for.

This is the context within which the UN Transitional Authority in East Timor has worked since 1999. Under the authority and in cooperation with the Timorese, some 3,000 UN volunteers from over 100 countries were recruited and deployed between 1999 and 2002 to work on projects in some 160 areas within the new government, particularly at the district level.

One important initiative involved the revival of fisheries. For generations, coastal communities had relied on fishing for their livelihoods. But at least 90 per

cent of the East Timorese coastal fleet, fishing gear and onshore infrastructure was destroyed in 1999. While thousands of people, including fisher folk, fled the territory, those who stayed behind desperately needed to resume fishing activities, and in a sustainable way. A team of UN volunteers arrived to assist in setting up the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries; some were assigned to the Department of Fisheries and Marine Environment.

The volunteers started by focusing on maritime fishing, helping fishermen acquire nets and boat engines. They conducted workshops on boat building to draw other people into the sector, while ensuring the future repair or replacement of used vessels. By the end of 2001, local fishing reached 60 per cent of 1997 production. Inland hatcheries were also reconstructed in order to support freshwater fish production, and volunteers trained less-experienced East Timorese to raise more than 5,000 common carp fingerlings. They then approached rice farmers and, through field support and demonstration, encouraged them to optimize their use of land and water by breeding fish in rice fields. Across East Timor's 13 administrative districts, this fostered renewed confidence in the country's development potential. Simultaneously, at the department's central office, volunteers also trained a team of 18 fisheries officers, as a means to continuously support the initiative at the local, intermediate and national levels.

Much remains to be done. Technical staffing has touched barely 20 per cent of its level before independence. Yet the country's legal fishing grounds have now expanded considerably. The department's next task needs to be developing and implementing adequate legislation on fisheries and marine resources, with special attention to securing the interests of local communities while tapping the potential of industrial fisheries.

Another UNV project supported civic education. It began during the 1999 referendum when some 500 volunteers, together with teams of nationals, helped organize and supervise the electoral civic education and registration processes. The volunteers also trained and prepared the teams to lead the polling process. This initial investment paid off in subsequent electoral activities, when far fewer international volunteers were needed.

Civic education became all the more crucial after the outbreak of violence. In response, UNDP launched a programme to activate a two-way flow of information between the capital, Dili, and the districts and local communities. It also helped create space and opportunities for people's participation in governance and the wider development process. As part of this effort, volunteers were recruited to work with civil society organizations on developing plans for civic education; producing relevant materials, including those for mass information programmes; and organizing and coordinating financial grants. Throughout, they focused on raising local people's awareness and catalysing their commitment to human rights, democracy and citizenship.

The initiative relied on the strong links tying together civil society organizations in East Timor – mainly indigenous and international NGOs as well as the Catholic Church – and their daily contacts with the population. Particular emphasis was placed on developing the capacity of East Timorese local staff from various organizations to carry out civic education in the districts and sub-districts as part of their ongoing development activities. Fifteen people were fully trained on civic education, including substantive aspects and technical skills. Fifty organizations received grants and training as well. A network of civil society groups was subsequently established, along with resource centres in the three regions of the country. Today, the resource centres have become community-owned and managed, and operate as information focal points for interaction between the government and civil society.

Results and Critical Factors

- Both cases show how technical cooperation can support the development of capacities in post-crisis situations at the individual as well as institutional levels, through locally owned processes.
- In East Timor, the dynamic mobilization and support of civil society has stirred increased local engagement and a determination to foster democratic processes, both in developmental activities and governance. The local resource centres and the network of civil society organizations offer promising ground for increased ownership and sustainability.
- The profiles and approaches of the UN volunteers played a key role in these results; these are mid-career specialists from over 100 countries with 10-15 years of professional experience. They left their homes for a temporary – usually short-term – assignment in East Timor, coping with tough living conditions in rural areas. The volunteers' continued proximity with counterparts and local populations, their non-threatening interaction with them, and the confidence that resulted enabled them to energize local people's drive towards committed engagement in their own development process. Gradually, East Timorese took the lead.
- In any post-crisis situation, short-term results that can stimulate people's enthusiasm and commitment must mix with a longer term perspective reflected through appropriate mechanisms for sustainability and gradual scaling-up.
- It is necessary to involve the local population from the outset of increased autonomy. The human interaction approach of the volunteers is particularly appropriate towards this end.

Further information

United Nations Volunteers (UNV) Timor-Leste (www.unvolunteers.org/dynamic/cfapps/countryprofiles/country.cfm?CountryID=TMP).

Tarik Jasarevic. 2002. "Reviving Fisheries in East Timor - Casting Nets for Development." In *UNV News*, 93 (www.unvolunteers.org/infobase/unv_news/2002/93/02_08_93TMP_fish.htm).

Government of East Timor (www.gov.east-timor.org/).

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