

**STOPPING AS SUCCESS:
TRANSITIONING TO LOCALLY LED DEVELOPMENT**

TIMOR-LESTE: CICR AND BELUN

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CONTEXT

Timor-Leste is a country of 1.3 million people, comprising the eastern half of the island of Timor in the Indonesian archipelago. Following almost 450 years of Portuguese colonization, Portugal's 1974 Carnation Revolution provided the impetus for Lisbon to approve a gradual decolonization process. The nascent state was scarcely developed, with few political institutions and an economy focused on the cultivation of sandalwood and coffee. Within this power vacuum, an array of newly legalized political parties began a brief but increasingly violent contestation for power, culminating in a unilateral declaration of independence from Portugal in late November of 1975. Nine days later, political party Fretilin's consolidation of power was interrupted by a large-scale Indonesian invasion. A short conflict concluded in July 1976 with the formal annexation of the short-lived Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste. The next 24 years were marked by a brutal occupation and guerrilla war in which nearly a quarter of the country's population perished. In 1999, the United Nations (UN) sponsored a successful referendum in which 80 percent of the population chose independence over deepened autonomy within Indonesia.

It was in this post-independence period that civil society, previously repressed under Indonesian and Portuguese rule, emerged into the public space and began to flourish, assisted in part by a flood of development aid from major bilateral and multilateral donors. Following the political crisis of 2006, in which deep-seated concerns about the post-independence settlement erupted into political violence, humanitarian and peacebuilding aid surged into Timor-Leste. High spending requirements, low absorption capacity of local NGOs, and limited accountability standards translated into a development sector characterized by questionable financial management (by both national and international NGOs), highly-paid international consultants, and relatively little impact on the economic realities faced by the great majority of Timorese.

Since 2006, major political parties have committed to strengthening political institutions and economic growth. This, along with increased revenues from oil exploitation beginning around that time, suggest a second crisis is unlikely in the near term. As a result, aid flows have begun to ebb from a peak in 2010. This decrease, in particular the departure of the UN in 2012,

has been challenging for Timorese NGOs accustomed to generous international financing. In the absence of significant sources of domestic funding, Timorese civil society – as measured by quantity of NGOs – has contracted significantly.

STORY OF TRANSITION

Belun grew out of a series of projects led by a small team at the Columbia University Center for International Conflict Resolution (CICR). After independence, José Ramos-Horta – former resistance leader and (at that point) future president of Timor-Leste – invited Columbia to conduct civil society and peacebuilding research. This resulted in a report on social and economic conditions, which informed a three-year World Bank grant focused on strengthening civil society. While CICR did field research and worked on the civil society capacity-building project under international leadership, much discussion and collaborative planning between Timorese and international staff led to a shared strategic vision for a new Timorese NGO. This formed the basis for the 2004 USAID civil society strengthening grant (NGOSSP) through which Belun was formed.

One of the principal objectives of the grant was to create a Timorese NGO capable of implementing the work and then carrying on the mission after funding ended. To accomplish this, CICR hired Timorese staff and from the beginning implemented programming, training, and field research collaboratively in order to build local capacity. Management positions were initially held by international staff, but were designed from the beginning to be transferred to Timorese staff. Co-production was an important part of the process, engendering local ownership over projects that Belun continued after CICR's funding ended.

The grant ran from 2004 to 2009, and by 2007 Belun was already under the full control of Timorese staff. Together with international staff – who straddled both CICR and Belun, and continued to provide technical support, business development and fundraising assistance, and informal management advice – Belun began winning additional grants and establishing itself as a leader in the Timorese peacebuilding and civil society strengthening scene. International staff were crucial in designing and pitching the proposal that would become Belun's signature program – the EVER early warning and response system.

Belun's direction has since been guided by Timorese leaders who maintain the core values developed prior to its creation, while its internal reporting and management

continue to reflect the strong emphasis on accountability, democratic governance, and cooperative decision-making that CICR inculcated from the beginning.

KEY LESSONS

- **How an organization enters a country is part of its overall exit strategy, whether this is made explicit or not.** CICR staff learned the local language, co-produced project designs with Timorese, and involved local staff in decision-making from the outset.
- **Planning for transition to local ownership from the outset increases the prospects of sustainability.** Belun's sustainability was written into the proposal, forming one of the NGOSSP's two objectives. Accordingly, international staff saw their roles as temporary and invested significant time, resources, and personal effort into working themselves out of a job.
- **Accompaniment works.** Belun's accompaniment model of capacity building was described by every relevant group of interviewees – CICR, Belun staff, former Belun staff – as a success. As one Belun founder explained: "Accompaniment and partnership relationship is what has helped make Belun stronger. The experience of working together, learning by doing, then going out and applying those factors were a recipe for why Belun has been so successful."
- **Democratic organizational governance builds ownership.** Top-down organizational hierarchies that fail to incorporate local perspectives into their leadership or decision-making processes risk squandering opportunities to build local ownership over their project.
- **Prioritizing internal policies makes a difference.** The socialization of rigorous policies and processes, including accountability, human resources, political neutrality, and financial management systems, enabled Belun to build donor confidence and sustain funding streams.
- **Leaving does not mean saying goodbye forever.** Belun's case shows that continued engagement from internationals, even if limited, can provide a lifeline for local organizations with capacity gaps.

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