CHAPTER 12

Building Social Cohesion from Below: Learning from the *Laletek* (Bridge) Project 2010–12

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Introduction

By the end of 2009, most people in Timor-Leste who were internally displaced by the 2006–07 violence had returned to their communities. Nonetheless, many unresolved grievances remained, suggesting that genuine reintegration had not automatically taken place. Multiple small-scale conflicts continued to afflict a number of communities in and around Dili. In response, Catholic Relief Services and the Diocesan Justice and Peace Commission of Dili implemented the *Laletek* (Bridge) Project, a two-year peace-building initiative aimed at rebuilding social cohesion. The project adopted a multi-pronged, evidence-based approach that encouraged opposing groups to learn about one another's experiences, focusing on what connected them, and supported them to collaborate on issues of mutual interest. This chapter reflects on some of the lessons learned from the project. It identifies a number of challenges as well as the tools and preconditions necessary for successful and sustainable peace-building in the complex urban environment of Dili.

Background

While Timor-Leste is often called a 'post-conflict' country, those involved in peace-building work understand that as human beings we cannot avoid conflicts—it is a fact of life. As individuals and groups we deal with conflicts many times each day as we negotiate our different needs, expectations and interests (Caritas Training Manual 2006: 58). Conflict is not necessarily a bad thing as long as it is not expressed through violence. It is through conflict that unjust relationships and structures are often challenged. Conversely, the absence of war or violent conflict does not necessarily mean that there is 'peace'. Rather than labelling Timor-Leste as a post-conflict country, it may be more appropriate to consider it a 'post-war' country that has recently emerged from 25 years of brutal Indonesian military rule. This experience of war and occupation may have contributed to a sense in which, for many Timorese, violence continues to be understood as a legitimate means of resolving conflicts. For the first 10 years after the 1999 Referendum, Timor-Leste experienced numerous violent incidents where grievances were expressed through the burning of houses and attacks upon those perceived as the enemies. This crisis peaked in 2006–07 when over 150,000 people left their homes (ICG 2008: 2), mostly in the capital of Dili, to seek refuge in churches or other public spaces.

After successful parliamentary and presidential elections were held in 2007, the Fourth Constitutional Government of Timor-Leste designed a comprehensive National Recovery Strategy (NRS) that was launched on 19 December 2007 and chaired by the vice prime minister. The NRS consisted of five interlinked pillars—housing, stability, socioeconomic development, trust building, and social protection—to encourage and facilitate internally displaced people (IDP) to return to their homes. The process was co-ordinated by the government, involving the local government, community leaders, various international and local non-government organisations (NGOs), religious leaders, bilateral and multilateral donors, and United Nations agencies. From the time of the launch of the NRS to the closing of the last big IDP camp in Metinaro at the end of July 2009, there was regular and effective co-ordination and division of responsibilities.

Despite the success of the program, the repatriation of IDPs to their homes occurred very swiftly. This did not allow for meaningful processes of reintegration to take place between IDPs and their local communities either before or after their repatriation. To strengthen the Trust Building Pillar (*Hamutuk Hari'i Konfiasa*) of the NRS, the Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and the Diocesan Justice and Peace Commission (DJPC) of Dili designed and implemented the *Laletek* (Bridge) Project.

Design of the *Laletek* Project

The *Laletek* Project was implemented from 15 March 2010 to 14 March 2012. It was designed to achieve the goal of social cohesion by bridging divides between adversary groups while at the same time empowering community members to engage with decision-makers to access services and participate in decision-making processes.

At the time of the project's development, the CRS Team was supporting government efforts to ensure that IDP's could be reintegrated safely back into their communities and live in safe and dignified conditions. The DJPC was also actively engaged in a number of Dili-based communities through its youth engagement and human rights program. Utilising CRS and DJPC's in-depth knowledge about the different communities in Dili, consultations were conducted with the *Ministério da Solidariedade Social* (MSS; Ministry of Social Solidarity), civil society organisations working in peace-building and/or in the capital, as well as government officials and community leaders at the subdistrict and village levels in order to avoid duplication, ensure complementarity of approaches, and leverage resources. Twenty-two conflict-prone *aldeia* (hamlet/sub-villages) in six *suku* (villages)—Becora, Camea, Mascarinhas, Bidau Santa Ana, Fatuhada and Comoro—were selected as the target areas of the *Laletek* Project based on incidents of past, current and ongoing violent conflict.¹ These 22 *aldeia* also had a high number of 'spoilers' who exhibited tendencies to engage in communal conflict and prevent, or actively sabotage, local development efforts.

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¹ Bairro Pite and Vila Verde were also identified during the assessment but were not selected as other organisations, including BELUN and CARE International, were working in those areas.

Figure 12.1 Liliana Amaral, *Laletek* Technical Advisor, leading a mapping exercise in Fatuhada.

Source: CRS Timor-Leste.

Baseline study

The next phase of project development involved conducting a baseline study.² A thorough baseline study was conducted in the six target *suku* using participatory rural appraisal techniques.³ Twenty local facilitators were trained to conduct 23 focus group discussions and 30 key informant interviews with a total of 267 respondents, 42 per cent of whom were women. Baseline studies were not common practice in peace-building projects in Timor-Leste at this time. CRS was of the view that this lack of in-depth analysis had led to the creation of generic projects that risked targeting the wrong people. The generic nature of these projects also made it hard to measure impacts that could be attributed to project interventions.

2 The baseline study was conducted after the Office for Conflict Mitigation and Management of the United States Agency for International Development had agreed to fund the *Laletek* Project to the order of US\$600,000, and an additional US\$84,000 was provided from CRS.

3 The baseline study utilised a participatory rural appraisal (PRA) methodology. In this approach data was gathered from and analysed by community members using diagrammatic tools. The data was then verified by sharing the research findings with community members, who then helped formulate an activity plan for the duration of the project. Semi-structured interviews, FGDs, Venn diagrams, timeline and community mapping were among the main tools selected for this PRA, which focused on collecting conflict- and development-related data and stories of the most significant change (MSC).

The baseline study found that 42 per cent of a total of 192 respondents from the six *suku* had experienced violence in the last six months, 10 per cent of respondents had experienced violence directly in 2010, while 32 per cent knew someone who had experienced it. The Becora, Comoro and Fatuhada percentages were quite high at 56–67 per cent. Camea also had a rate of violence, at 41 per cent, while the other two villages, Bidau Santa Ana and Mascarenhas, stood at 27 per cent and 13 per cent respectively. The types of violence experienced or witnessed included physical and verbal abuse within households and schools, stone throwing and fighting using sharp objects between different youth groups, mostly members of martial arts groups.

The baseline study also found that only 55 per cent of respondents believed that groups within their *aldeia* had developed better relationships with each other since 2007. However, there were still tensions in the community. For example, IDPs had yet to be completely accepted back into the community, especially in Becora, Camea and Mascarenhas; two to three fights per week occurred between martial arts groups in Comoro and Fatuhada, and there were tensions between newly elected community leaders and former leaders in Bidau Santa Ana.

Furthermore, 35 per cent of the respondents said that conflicts could be resolved at the local level depending on the nature and the scale of the conflict, while conflicts involving large numbers of people or those that involved the killing or serious injury of someone needed to involve the police, MSS Dialogue Team, and the justice system. The baseline data also showed that most infrastructure projects implemented at the village level by institutions such as the International Organization for Migration (IOM), the United Nations Development Programme, and directly by the government (such as the MSS for the disaster response and *Ministério das Obras Publicas* (Ministry of Public Works) for road, water and sanitation) were planned in consultation with local leaders in order to identify needs. However, the implementation of the projects was contracted out and did not involve the local population and leaders.

How the baseline informed the strategies

The baseline study provided *Laletek* Project staff with a good understanding of the variety of different conflicts taking place in each *suku/aldeia*, and the frequency with which violent incidences occurred, their locations and the actors involved—whether individuals or groups. It also provided information about the local actors involved in peace-building and existing conflict resolution mechanisms. This exercise helped the project staff to identify the barriers and enablers of peace in order to tailor the project activities, as well as the timing and targets of project activities.

At the time that *Laletek* was implemented, there were numerous government and NGO-led peace-building initiatives in and around Dili involved in various conflict mitigation and resolution activities. Their programs emphasised activities such as skills development for local leaders and youth engagement, women's empowerment, and the identification and resolution of macro causes of conflict or individual cases of conflict. While each might have contributed to a more peaceful Timor-Leste, they did not focus explicitly on building trust and developing healthy relationships. This became an explicit focus of the *Laletek* Project as, based on CRS's previous peace-building experience, without overcoming the animosity that divides opposing groups and spurs violence, communities would continue to experience violent conflict.

The *Laletek* Project also complemented other peace-building efforts by working at the lowest possible level—the *aldeia*—using a people-to-people approach to strengthen intra-communal relationships, as well as engaging various groups in the maintenance and management of new community infrastructure projects. The project activities built on pre-existing and past trust-building efforts, and attempted to benefit the community as a whole rather than focusing on one target group.

The baseline data showed that *suku* Bidau Santa Ana had an existing social contract based on the *suku* law written by the local leaders. This *suku* law, which bound all community members, listed the sorts of behaviours that were unacceptable to the community and the punishments for those who violated them. Similarly, *suku* Camea, Becora and Mascarenhas, which had conducted a subdistrict *tara bandu*⁴ ceremony shortly before the baseline study, had also signed a *tara bandu* law as a binding social contract. This was an initiative by the local government supported by The Asia Foundation through their Community Policing Project. However, when a violent incident took place four days after the ceremony between Camea and Becora, some youth and *aldeia* leaders said that they had not been involved in drafting this law and did not know what its content was. The *Laletek* Project saw an opportunity to strengthen the impact of these existing social contracts by supporting local leaders to socialise the *suku* laws in their *aldeia* and accompanying them to utilise these laws in resolving local conflicts. In several *aldeia* in Manleuana in *suku* Comoro, which had yet to develop a written social contract, the project supported the local

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4 *Tara bandu* is a traditional ceremony that is aimed at regulating people-to-people relations, people-to-animal relations, and people's relationship to the environment (Belun and The Asia Foundation 2013: 4). It is done with an sacred animal sacrifice where the blood is drunk or splattered and oath is taken by parties involved, witnessed by their ancestors.

leaders and the MSS to bring together community and conflicting martial arts groups—*Perguruan Silat Setia Hati* (PSHT) and *Kmanek Oan Rai Klaran* (KORK)—into a peace agreement.

The *Laletek* Project was also committed to addressing the root causes of the conflicts in different localities through dialogue and mediation. By ensuring that those involved in the conflicts were present, and that local leaders were in charge, the project helped to strengthen local peace-building capacities. For example, the population in the *aldeia* of Fatuk Francisco, Camea, accused people of the neighbouring *aldeia*, Buburlau, of stopping their water supply by cutting a water pipe, leaving the community with no access to clean water. The pipe was fixed by the IOM after the IDPs returned; however, because the Buburlau community received no water from the pipes passing their *aldeia*, the pipes were cut again. The mediation provided by the *Laletek* Project brought 40 people from both *aldeia* together, resulting in an agreement that both communities would have access to clean water. Following this agreement, once the pipe was fixed, the water supply was not cut again.

The *Laletek* Project also gave opposing groups, different ethnic groups, neighbouring *aldeia* members, and leaders who had a history of conflicts training in ‘active non-violence’ to equip them with the tools and skills to identify, analyse, and resolve their common problems. The training courses provided a safe venue for members of conflicting groups to share how the conflicts have affected them and to explore ways forward. Conflict maps were used as a visual aid to help participants analyse and identify the root causes of conflicts and to identify lasting solutions. The *Laletek* Project also implemented other activities, including annual traditional dance competitions among *aldeia*, and sporting events in Bebonuk, which carefully selected participants to ensure that each team comprised opposing groups.

Furthermore, the project engaged everyone in the community, including the spoilers, to work together to do something tangible for the community through small community infrastructure projects. This was done when the opposing groups in the community felt ready to collaborate. They identified their needs together using a community resource map developed by the project; they listed all the needs and prioritised one that could be developed as a joint project and would facilitate dialogue and co-operation. *Laletek* Project staff accompanied the participants closely, facilitating activities when requested by the local leaders, and providing small grants of US\$1,000–4,500 for the rehabilitation or construction of community infrastructure water taps, public toilets and *aldeia* meeting venues.

What worked?

The *Laletek* Project applied the Lederach Four Dimensions of Conflict Transformation framework (Lederach, Neufeldt and Culbertson 2007: 18–22) to analyse how conflicts have changed the community in personal, interpersonal, structural and cultural dimensions; to define the root causes of the problems, and establish the changes sought. The four dimensions helped in gaining an understanding of how conflicts affect individuals personally, how they impact trust and relationship patterns, how the systems and structures are organised, and how conflicts disturb the patterns of behaviours. These four dimensions are linked and considered as equally important; therefore, the *Laletek* Project analysed the four to see how each contributed to the *aldeia*-level conflicts in the target areas. The main emphasis of the *Laletek* Project was the relational dimension—to build healthier relationships between opposing groups—as this was the main challenge to preventing sustainable reintegration after the 2006–07 crisis.

The following strategies were adopted to address these factors driving conflict identified in the baseline survey.

Figure 12.2 The four dimensions of a conflict transformation framework.
Source: Lederach, Neufeldt and Culbertson (2007).

Understanding the complexity of local conflicts: *Laletek* did not take for granted what were perceived to be the main fault lines of conflict in Timor-Leste like the ‘east–west’ divide, or disputes between martial arts groups. Instead, the project invested time and effort in learning about the realities in each *aldeia* in order to develop an in-depth understanding of the relational tensions between different groups, and how personal, structural and cultural issues exacerbated these. For instance, the stone-throwing in the *aldeia*, along the river dividing Becora and Camea *suku*, was commonly seen as a conflict between easterners who just came back from the IDP camps and the westerners who stayed behind during the conflict. One of the main issues identified during the baseline study, however, related to who had access to the very limited water in the river. Project staff facilitated the *aldeia* people of Culau Laletek and Mota Ulun, Becora, and Fatuk Francisco, Camea, in finding a solution. The tap water system destroyed in 1999 was rebuilt, bringing water to their respective homes, and violent stone-throwing between the *aldeia* stopped. In the process, all parties got to know each other and learned to work together.

Staying focused: Part of *Laletek*’s success was that it did not lose sight of its key goal, which was for opposing groups to sit together, discuss their problems, and find a common resolution. Activities were carried out not for their own sake, nor according to pre-determined schedules, but only if and when they contributed to the project goal of bringing opposing groups together. This meant that if opposing groups were not ready to work together in a training or community project, the team would step back and find a different entry point and opportunity. For instance, in the first few meetings in Bidau Santa Ana, only those living close by the *suku* office and well acquainted with the newly elected *suku* chief were involved. As it turned out, there were tensions between the outgoing *suku* council and the newly elected ones. Therefore, the local youth suggested a team-building exercise at the beach, to which members of both *suku* councils were invited to discuss their *suku* development informally, share meals together, and make a joint statement to the community. While this was a very simple activity, it showed to the community that the two leaders were working together.

Community ownership: The strength of *Laletek* was the degree of community ownership the project was able to create. Community ownership drove the project, rather than pre-determined project plans and schedules. Team members were consistent in encouraging communities and leaders to take the initiative in addressing their own issues. This was demonstrated throughout the project, including in conflict mapping and monitoring, reconciliation dialogue, and small infrastructure project planning. At the beginning, there was some resistance when those asked to get involved demanded payment. Thus, the staff spent a lot of time working with the informal and formal community leaders

to get their support for the project, and to develop their understanding that the project was supporting their existing efforts. This meant that there were no payments for participation, except for reimbursement of transportation costs when meetings were conducted outside a leader's *aldeia*. The fact that the DJPC Dili was embedded in the community through the Catholic Church also helped to revive the volunteerism spirits of the community.

Vertical relationship-building was also fostered with leaders at the sub-national and national level through accompaniment of local leaders during preparation and implementation of any community reconciliation or community infrastructure projects. For instance, the project worked with the secretary of state for art and culture to provide mentoring to community groups in preparing for the traditional dance competition. Another example is Camea community leaders proposing the building of a water pipe system; the project invited the subdistrict officials and the Department of Water and Sanitation to be involved to ensure there was no overlap with their development plan. When there were violent incidents that were outside the local leaders' authority, these issues were referred to the police and the Department of Peace-Building and Social Cohesion (DPSC) of the MSS.

Committed and dedicated staff: Another strength of the project was that it employed committed staff who understood and believed in what they were doing. After receiving training on conflict transformation skills, they were closely mentored to accompany local leaders and help them resolve existing and emerging conflicts. The staff employed effective community engagement strategies to realise project objectives. For instance, given that the project was designed to bridge particular opposing groups, staff ensured that only those who were directly involved in conflicts were selected for each project activity. These activities included Active Non-Violence Workshops, traditional dancing competitions, mediation and dialogue, as well as community infrastructure rehabilitation or building activities.

Challenges of implementation

The project faced various challenges during its implementation. A few of the critical ones are discussed below.

Lack of readiness for peace: The fact that the project was implemented soon after a major crisis that drove half of Dili's residents out of their homes, and led to the destruction of properties and loss of lives, was a particular challenge. A number of groups and individuals still held grudges towards each other and were not ready for peace when the project started. The most challenging area

was Bebonuk, which had a protracted conflict involving four to five *aldeia*. Martial arts leaders simply said 'no' to the project, stating that they wanted war and revenge for the death of one of their members during the crisis. Project flexibility helped here as staff just took their time and worked separately with the two groups. Eventually, in the second year of the project, it was possible to bring the groups together as the project team decided to take a different approach, asking locally based, respected nuns and a priest to do a house-to-house visit, talking to each of the main leaders involved in the conflict and their parents. This personalised approach managed to open their minds and hearts. This led to various joint activities, including the rehabilitation of the Bebonuk Youth Center.

Lack of participation of local leadership: As the Timor-Leste community is very hierarchical, the blessings and support of local elected leaders is crucial for projects to succeed. *Laletek* staff put a lot of effort into cultivating good relationships with *aldeia* and *suku* leaders; nevertheless, these attempts were not successful in all 22 target *aldeia*. Throughout the project, the *aldeia* chiefs of Culau Laletek and Mococo Mate of Becora *suku*, for example, refused to be involved in the project. In other *aldeia* and *suku*, community leaders were too busy with full-time jobs to be involved. Nonetheless, in some cases *Laletek* staff managed to convince local leaders to appoint someone in their place to liaise with project staff.

Politicising of local leadership: The fact that some community leaders were representatives of political parties and that the project was implemented soon after the *suku* election (when new *aldeia* chief took over the old ones in 14 of the 22 *aldeia*) created additional problems. In most *aldeia*, the names of those newly elected leaders were unknown by the community members and they had not yet met their *aldeia/suku* leaders and council members. Some of the newly elected *aldeia* and *suku* chiefs did not feel that they had the authority to call the conflicting parties together to resolve an issue. The project staff worked to empower the new *aldeia* and *suku* chiefs by accompanying them in preparing and leading meetings with the community, and conducting and mediating a conflict.

Expectation for payment for involvement: At the beginning of the project, both community members and community leaders had high expectations that they would be paid for participating in the project. To address this issue, project staff spent a lot of time and effort highlighting that the project was, in fact, supporting local community efforts. This also contributed to strengthening community ownership of the project. The fact that the DJPC was the implementing partner of the project also helped as the project was seen as coming from the Catholic Church so the community were willing to participate

with no financial incentive. Nevertheless, a mediation dialogue between two conflicting schools in Fatuhada and Aimutin was cancelled as a teacher based at one of the schools expected a payment for participating in this event.

Conclusion

There are a few lessons that can be learned from this two-year project for successful future peace-building works. First, it is important to understand the context well by conducting thorough research, instead of simplifying the conflict based on what appears on the surface. A baseline study is a good way to gain a picture of the situation, including those involved in conflicts, those involved in peace-making, and the sources of local conflicts. This information can be used as an entry point for project activities. It can encourage the local population to work together, and strengthen the potential for conflict resolution and transformation.

Secondly, as mentioned earlier, conflicts are part of day-to-day interactions between people and between groups. Given that conflict is not a one-off occurrence, it is important for any project-based interventions to empower local leaders to resolve their own problems, to support them to network with other organisations, and advocate for assistance from the sub-national or national government, rather than doing it for them. The project will come to an end, but those leaders will remain in the community and can continue to transform any violent incidences constructively beyond the life of the project.

Third, a great deal of thought and preparatory work is needed to ensure that the right people are involved in the project. This includes those involved directly in the conflicts and those who can or have the potential to resolve communal conflicts. In working with spoilers, project staff have to tread carefully so as not to reward bad behaviour by singling those individuals out from the rest of the communities and solely targeting them in all project activities. Instead, spoilers should be treated as members of their community, who, like other citizens, are responsible for maintaining peace in their neighbourhood.

Given that the *Laletek* Project was a small, two-year project implemented in an urban setting, further study is needed to see how it can be replicated in a rural setting where there may be more entrenched violent conflict.

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