

Researching Friendship Agreements in East Timor: Problems, issues and dilemmas faced in fieldwork

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From 1999 to early 2006, 45 Friendship Agreements were established between various Australian local councils/communities and East Timorese district administrations/communities. These bi-lateral agreements have been set up to assist the peacebuilding process by creating strong relationships between the two communities involved. Not far from Australia, East Timor, a small, independent nation since May 2002, is bordered by Indonesia in the west, the Strait of Wetar in the north and the Timor Sea in the south. The land is very rugged – full of craggy mountain peaks, steep valleys and wide riverbeds. It is one of the poorest countries in the world with approximately 40% of the population living in poverty (UNDP 2006). Sadly, after a traumatic beginning, followed by a few years of relative calm, the country recently plummeted back into civil unrest.

This paper is derived from formative evaluation research (Mikkelsen 1995) that explored the views of many Timorese (from 17 Friendship Agreements) about the perceived successes and challenges so far and recommendations for the future. I discuss various problems, issues and dilemmas that had an impact on doing fieldwork in East Timor including: the logistical issues of poor communication and transport networks; security issues in working in a post-conflict situation; collecting data in an unknown language and working with a translator; experiencing how the social structure of the society can both help and hinder research; and the impact of the gender structure on the research and the researcher.

Communication and Transport

One of the main challenges in doing research in East Timor was communication. Since most people do not speak English it was vital to employ a translator. The translator, who also became the main facilitator of the participatory meetings, was central to the successful collection of data (Laws et al. 2003a). The two of us worked well together. Constant evaluation after each meeting helped us improve the participatory method over time. However, no matter how well we communicated it is important to understand that all information was filtered through two people – each with our own position, power, bias, gender, race, voice and politics (Kleinsasser 2000).

Adding further to communication challenges was the fact that there are very few landline telephones operating in the country and most communities don't have access to the internet. Many people have mobile

phones but it is not possible to get phone reception in all parts of the country. Not even all towns can get phone reception. This meant that in order to use mobile phones the translator and I had to:

- (a) First discuss what it was that we wanted to say
- (b) Rely on the person we needed to contact having a mobile telephone
- (c) Know their number
- (d) Have mobile reception at the same time as the other party
- (e) Have enough credit on the phone to make phone calls.

Phone credit was readily available in Dili but was less readily available in the rural areas which meant we needed to purchase as much as we thought we were going to need before going to the rural areas. Despite often overcoming all these communication challenges there was a bigger communication challenge that we could not control. We always managed to talk to someone in authority to arrange the meeting with each Friendship Agreement committee but the final hurdle (and probably the most difficult) was having that person actually pass on the message and invite the committee members to the meeting at the agreed time. In at least 10 of the 17 meetings that were held, the internal communication failed to function properly prior to our arrival. This meant that we often got to meet with the committee members who were contactable and available on the day we arrived and we were sometimes criticised for not giving them enough notice about the meeting. We tried, whenever possible, to re-confirm each meeting the day before we arrived but even this did not guarantee dissemination of the information. For the sake of preserving good relationships with the people in authority, we felt that it was best to humbly apologise and not point out that we had given plenty of notice and that the communication failure was actually closer to home.

The roads in East Timor are in various states of disrepair and since the country is very mountainous and rugged, it is advisable to travel by 4-wheel drive. Landslides on the main road in one of the western districts meant we had to change our preferred itinerary, early in our planning, and hope that we could get back to Maliana when the landslide had been cleared. After sorting out a revised itinerary of interviews (which continued to be modified over time) we hired a 4-wheel drive, organised a driver for a month and started travelling around the country. April is usually fairly dry in East Timor but this year torrential rain and showers were the norm until April 25th. This made travelling around interesting to say the least. However, apart from making travelling very slow because of the steep, rough, potholed and now very slippery roads, the rain didn't cause us any other major headaches until the Sunday night of April 23rd. We had left Dili at 3.45 pm to travel to the town of Same, about 80 kms south. By 7.30 pm we had travelled about 60 kms when suddenly a landslide blocked the road. We had passed a car earlier, going in the other direction, with a Timorese driver and three female Portuguese teachers. They had found the roadblock and driven back until they could get phone reception so we knew about the landslide before we got to it. They had phoned their other driver in

Same and asked if he could come and pick them up from the Same side of the landslide. We then had to discuss what we were going to do if we couldn't get the car passed the landslide. One possibility was to see if we could get a lift with the teachers. This would have meant leaving our car and driver and getting him to come back to the landslide site the next day to pick us up. While we all stood and looked at the boulders, mud and vegetation covering the road six young Timorese youths came up and offered to clear a path for us for US\$30. The Portuguese women didn't believe that they could do it without 'proper' equipment but my translator and I decided that we would be very happy to pay \$30 (or even \$40) to get it done. They told us that it would take about two to two and a half hours to clear. Amazingly, the six youths cleared it with two heavy sticks, one shovel and their bare hands in one and a quarter hours. The youths promised to come back the next day and make sure that we were able to get out again. We were worried that more rain would cause another landslide and we might get stranded in Same. We knew that the most direct route from Same to Suai (our next appointment) was cut due to one of the major bridges on the coast road being broken, and this meant that we had to get back through the landslide site and travel through the mountains, turning a two and a half hour trip into a five hour trip.

Security

In terms of the security situation I was blissfully naïve about all the dangers when we started. We did not encounter any danger in our first week and a half of interviews. However, this changed on Easter Sunday night. I had organised for the driver, translator and I to stay at a guesthouse near Baucau on the Sunday night because we had an interview with people in Baucau early Monday morning. The driver and translator slept in one room and I had a separate room, which I had locked from the inside when I went to bed about 10 pm. It was a really hot night and I was still recovering from fainting bouts brought on by severe diarrhoea that I had experienced over Easter. After waking at 6.30 am we discovered that we had been robbed. They had stolen all the work money that we were going to need for travelling around the Eastern districts for one week (about US\$450) from my backpack, US\$55 from our driver's wallet (which had been under his pillow) and they took some of the translator's toiletries because his wallet was empty. Despite the owner of the guesthouse, the translator and later, the police, agreeing that it was probably done by magic, I believe that whoever stole our money must have been in my room and hiding under my bed before I went to bed. I came to this conclusion for two reasons; firstly, I had locked the door from the inside and secondly, I woke slightly at about 11 pm when the electric fan, at the end of the bed, suddenly turned on and I didn't turn it on. Luckily I did not get up to investigate. I discovered in the morning that the fan could be plugged in from under the bed. I woke up at about 4 am and noticed that my door was open. I got up and closed and locked it again. In the morning the owner of the guesthouse kept saying that this was the first time that anything like this had ever happened at his place but we discovered, through the police, that the guesthouse had a very bad reputation and someone had died after a robbery last year in very suspicious circumstances but the police

couldn't prove anything. I was robbed once more four days later when I left my bag unattended for ten minutes while I had my wash. It had not occurred to me that we would be robbed while staying in someone's house. After borrowing money from two different sources we got back to Dili at the end of that week with US\$4 between us.

Since most of our meetings were scheduled for the morning (they were meant to start at 9 am but in reality that meant starting anytime between 9.15 and 10.30 am), and usually went for three to five hours we didn't get to leave each place until well after lunch time. Despite the fact that distances in East Timor are not vast travel is very slow due to the condition of the roads. One trip of 80 kms took us four hours and this was not unusual. Leaving mid-afternoon to travel to our next destination meant that we were often travelling at night. I hadn't thought too much about it but one night I began to be a bit concerned (two nights after the first robbery) when the translator suddenly decided that we needed to have a cover story about why we were out at night. He explained that in some particular areas groups of armed young men block the road at night and demand money and take anything valuable such as money, jewellery, and cameras, etc and people are sometimes hurt. He decided that we should be two priests and a nun visiting the area because he felt that they might be more reluctant to rob or hurt us if we were clergy. I wasn't sure that I would make a very convincing nun and so we changed our story so that he would be a priest, I would be a Good Samaritan volunteer and our driver would be our driver. We travelled safely along this road, thanks in part to the rain because the bandits apparently don't like being out when it is raining. The police were shocked to hear that we had travelled along that particular road at night. They won't travel along that road at night even in convoy. We continued to travel at night through other notorious patches and I was very happy that we never had to test out our cover story.

Later in April we got stuck in Oecusse (the enclave) for five nights instead of one night due to the deteriorating security situation in Dili. The boat had dropped us off on 28th April (Friday morning). We had originally planned to get back on the boat on Saturday night and be back in Dili on Sunday. However, Friday 28th April was when some people were killed in the first of many demonstrations in Dili and the boat was called back to Dili to help transport people who were trying to flee. We just had to wait until the boat came back. This meant that we ran out of money and had to borrow some. Luckily we had taken lots of work with us. We got most of the translating of the data done while we waited for the boat to return. We eventually got back to Dili on Thursday May 4th and saw most of the people in the city panicking and trying to get out of the city or move to a safe place. Due to the breakdown of security we were unable to travel to Maliana to do our last interview. We got around this by interviewing some people who had come down for the Fretilin congress from the Bobonaro district later in May.

Unknown Language

Language issues in East Timor are fascinating and complex. Most people speak Indonesian after being under Indonesian control for 24 years but speaking Indonesian is frowned upon. The national languages are Portuguese (which hardly anyone speaks) and Tetun (which most, but not all, people speak) and there are a number of other local languages. However, despite Tetun being a national language, until recently, it has mainly been a spoken language. A written grammar of Tetun was only produced 12 months before this research was carried out and the majority of the population have had no access to this information yet. My translator (who could speak fluent Tetun, Indonesian and English but not Portuguese) told me on several occasions that people in East Timor are very good at verbalising an answer but not very good at writing it down. This meant that there was an incredible variety in the way that people wrote. All possible combinations of Tetun, Portuguese, Indonesian and English, with no regularity of spelling, were present in the written answers. Some sentences could have words from all four languages. My translator felt that it was generally possible to work out what was meant but sometimes even the person who wrote a sentence had difficulty in explaining what it really meant when it was read to the wider group. Whenever this happened extra notes were added for clarification so that we could understand what was meant when we read through their written answers later. Since we collected a huge amount of data in a written form, from groups and individuals, a discourse analysis of the language(s) used could provide some interesting insights into social relations, identity, knowledge and power (Luke 1999).

Doing the research in an unknown language and needing to use a translator was challenging. Since I had only been in the country for a matter of weeks before undertaking this research my language skills in Tetun, when we started, were basically limited to greetings and very simple phrases. Being immersed in the language for more than a month meant that my understanding improved quite a lot but my improving language skills provided another challenge. While speaking neither Indonesia nor either national language, I was placed in a position of total reliance on the translator. I knew that I sometimes missed a lot of the finer detail. For instance, a five-minute conversation could sometimes be translated into two sentences. However, it became harder when I began to understand a bit more of the language but I was not yet fluent. This is when more misunderstandings can occur. For example, I would sometimes try to write my own translation of what I thought they were saying and then compare it with what was told to me in the translation. Sometimes I would get it absolutely right and other times I would have totally misunderstood it or I would have understood the bulk of it but missed the one word that changed the meaning of the sentence completely.

Social Structure

The social structure in East Timor is very hierarchical. This provided both advantages and disadvantages for doing this research. The advantages were, once we had the official approval (with a stamped, signed letter)

from the appropriate government minister, doors opened very quickly and easily. We were given a list of names and mobile telephone numbers of the District Administrators, the Deputies and the District Development Officers. Following the hierarchical structure we would always attempt to contact the District Administrator first. If they were unavailable then we would try contacting the Deputy and, if they were unavailable, we would try contacting the District Development Officer. We were able to set up meetings at very short notice by contacting one of the appropriate people in each of the 13 districts. As soon as they heard that we had an official letter from the government they were very keen to help us. This meant that we were able to organise an amazing schedule of meetings (see Figure 1) and incredibly we didn't miss any (although the times on the schedule show what was planned and do not reflect the actual times we started).

Saturday	Sunday	Monday	Tuesday	Wednesday	Thursday	Friday
1	2	3	4	5	6 Manatuto 2.30pm	7 Natabora 11.30am
8	9	10 Ermera 2pm	11 Dili 3.00pm	12 Aileu 10am	13 EASTER	14 BREAK
15 EASTER	16 BREAK	17 Baucau 9am Venilale 2.30pm	18 Viqueque 9am	19 Baguia 9am	20 Los Palos 9am	21 Iliomar 9am then return to Dili
22 Arrive Dili 1am	23 Leave Dili 3pm	24 Same 9am	25 Suia 9am	26 Ainaro 10am	27 Liquiça 9am 4pm Boat to Oecusse	28 Arrive 6am Oecusse 9am
29 Originally planned to return to Dili	30 Translated	May 1 Data	2	3	4 Arrived Dili 9.30am	5
6 Translated charts	7	8	9	10	11	12
13	14	15	16	17	18	19
20 Maliana group in Dili 4.30pm	21	22 Translated Maliana info				

Figure 1 *Timetable of Friendship Agreement meetings April – May 2006*

In each place we visited we tried to interview the people on the Friendship Agreement committee. However, the disadvantage of the hierarchical structure meant that these groups did not always include the people

most involved with the work of the Friendship Agreement in their community. For instance, in two of the places that had Friendship Agreement centres with a paid coordinator we didn't get to speak to the coordinator because they were not invited. It would only be part way through the meeting, when some of the answers to the questions were being translated, that I would discover that such a person existed and by then it was too late to do anything about it. It was probably partly our fault for not being more specific when we first made contact with the District Administrator. Since we had asked to speak to the committee then we only got to see people from the committee. We had assumed (wrongly in some instances) that these would be the people who would know the most about the Friendship Agreement in their community. In hindsight we would have liked to be able to include more people from each community, especially more women and general community members.

However, we managed to change the normal hierarchical structure of the meetings to run participatory meetings. This was a radical departure from the norm. Most meetings are run in a way that only the highest-ranking individuals speak and the rest just have to sit and listen. We had decided before we started that we wanted everybody who attended to be able to contribute. According to Laws et al. (2003b pp.50-52) participatory research is one way of facilitating community members' participation in decision-making. A major issue with participatory research, however, is that it does not guarantee equality of power between groups. Women, children and people with disabilities will often have difficulty in getting their voices heard. This was certainly the case in this instance. It was participatory in the sense that all the people who came to the meetings were able to participate equally but men dominated all the groups that participated. No children or people with disabilities were ever present and very few women participated. Despite this obvious bias, two aspects of community participation in research were applicable: the respondents were able to work in groups to formulate their views on a range of questions; and individual respondents could fully express their views on recommendations for the future (Laws et al. 2003b).

Gender

Besides being hierarchical, East Timor is overwhelmingly patriarchal. Outside the capital, Dili, very few women are in positions of authority and power. Even official documents acknowledge that women generally have a lower status than men (UNDP 2006). While doing this research I was constantly made aware of the huge gulf between male and female roles. In fact I was told that most men would probably value their roosters more than they would value their wives.

The gender imbalance was starkly obvious in the Friendship Agreement committees. The committees tended to be formed either by election from the community or be made up of people from the District Administration. Either way the committees were completely dominated by men. Nine of the 17 groups interviewed were

exclusively male and the other eight groups averaged 20 per cent women. Of 164 participants only 22 were women (an overall average of just over 13 per cent). As a female researcher I became excruciatingly aware of my gender in a way that I never had before. Being served in a subservient way by other women made me uncomfortable. The men I met always accorded me respect but it is difficult to say how much that was due to gender and how much was due to; my nationality; my skin colour; my connection to the university; or our letter of support from the ministry.

Conclusion

The research methodologies used by people wishing to undertake research in East Timor and many other cross-cultural settings need to take into account the practical challenges of working in the field. These include encountering and reconciling issues of cultural difference and diversity to the more mundane tasks of organising travel schedules in remote and challenging locations. The essential learning points from the experience in the field relate to the need to be flexible, adaptable and relevant to the context. On the ground, the critical questions of communication, transport, security, language and the social structure are all issues which can impact on a researcher's ability to (a) organise the fieldwork (b) survive the experience (c) understand what is going on and (d) interpret the data.

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