

Mainstreaming solidarity on East Timor: the ACFOA experience

International Workshop on Solidarity with Timor-Leste's Struggle for Self-determination

Actors, Institutions, Contexts

Museu do Oriente, Lisboa

16-19 May 2022

Pat Walsh

ACFOA's engagement with East Timor is a 30 year long story which is still going. It's impossible to compress this compact history into 30 minutes so I will be selective but also reflective. The story unfolded over three phases. (a) 1973-1975 (seminal years that preceded my time with ACFOA); (b) 1975-1984 (my apprenticeship years); and (c) 1985-2000 (my time as director of the ACFOA human rights office).

First, however, a word of explanation about the acronym ACFOA. ACFOA stands for *Australian Council for Overseas Aid*. The peak body for Australia's community based overseas aid agencies, ACFOA was founded in 1965, the activist 60s, and had some 70-100 members when I was involved. These days its known as ACFID, has 150 members and understands development in human rights terms, a conceptual development that I like to think is traceable to its East Timor experience. 26 of ACFID's member agencies work in Timor-Leste today mainly in agriculture, health, water, sanitation, gender equity, education, and reproductive health i.e. fields of social and economic rights, another service that arguably owes something to ACFOA's early engagement with Timor.

The seminal years

The East Timor question was first registered as a decolonisation issue by the UN in 1960. However, none of ACFOA's agencies took up the issue during this period. Why this didn't happen in the activist 60s continues to puzzle me but it was probably true elsewhere and probably due to the Salazar regime's rejection of the UN resolution and the depth of its authoritarian control in sleepy Timor.

But in 1973 came a wake up call. On 15 May 1973, the *Australian Financial Review* ran a front page story on Portuguese Timor. The story alleged that the continuing involvement in Portuguese Timor of two big Australian corporations (BHP and TAA) amounted to a violation of UN policy. The article also reported that TAA had transported Portuguese troops to Timor.

The article sparked the beginning of a small, but significant and long-term development-NGO engagement with the East Timor question. In response several ACFOA member agencies, notably *World University Service* (WUS) and *Action for World Development* (AWD), called for an end to all Australian economic ties with Portuguese Timor. This was followed a few months later by the condemnation of a Portuguese trade mission by some

Australian bishops. In consequence, a grateful Jose Ramos Horta, on his first visit to Australia in 1974, made AWD his first port of call to thank them for challenging Portuguese colonisation and to explore future cooperation. This was another seminal moment that also came to bear fruit.

Horta, however, wasn't the only interested party out to make friends and influence people. During roughly the same period, Australia's then prime minister, Gough Whitlam, met with President Suharto in Yogyakarta. Whitlam gave nominal support to the principle of self-determination but agreed with Suharto that '*an independent Timor would be an unviable state and a potential threat to the region*'. This was also seminal. It meant that Australia's government was taking sides with Indonesia while Australia's NGOs were aligning with East Timor. This radical divergence defined the struggle in Australia for most of its duration.

The following year, ACFOA became more deeply involved. In mid-August 1975, in response to the civil war, ACFOA made its first public statement in support of Timor's right to self-determination. The statement also opposed external interference. This was followed in October with the dispatch of a four person fact-finding mission, whose members included Jim Dunn, Australia's leading expert on East Timor. The team consulted widely, including the Fretilin leadership and the Portuguese governor (then on Atauro). Its report addressed the post-conflict situation, including the political situation, humanitarian needs and ACFOA's future role. While noting Fretilin's youth and inexperience, the team said it was impressed with its programs and potential. It concluded that 'the two greatest humanitarian needs' were the restoration of peace and the prevention of an Indonesian invasion. On 12 November 1975, following a public appeal for funds, a barge loaded with food, medical aid, cloth and petrol, left Darwin for Dili. On its return it carried a consignment of Timorese coffee for sale.

This was to be ACFOA's first and only ever delivery of relief assistance to the impoverished and now conflict stricken territory. Further attempts to deliver aid were frustrated by both Australia and Indonesia. A second shipment was blocked by the Australian navy from leaving Darwin and repeated calls over many years for access, including for the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), fell on deaf ears in Canberra. For its part Indonesia forced both the ICRC and David Scott, ACFOA's last representative in Dili prior to the Indonesian invasion, to leave by refusing to guarantee compliance with the Geneva conventions or to provide a neutral zone for refugees and humanitarian services.

At the time, David Scott was also warned by Australia's department of foreign affairs that Indonesia was hostile to ACFOA because of its association with Fretilin and that 'he would be done away with'. Coming after Indonesia's murder of five Australian based journalists in Balibo only weeks before, this was a warning Scott could not ignore. On his return to Australia, he helped establish the Australia East Timor Association (AETA), facilitated Jose Ramos Horta's last minute escape from Dili, an intervention of almost imponderable significance, then travelled to New York to help Horta establish an East Timorese mission to the UN. In mid December 1975, ACFOA condemned the Indonesian invasion and called on Australia to do likewise and to support UN efforts to uphold self-determination. For the first time, ACFOA also called on Australia to suspend military aid to Indonesia.

I have recounted these events in some detail because they were foundational. They shaped and informed ACFOA's future interventions and policies for the next three decades, including whatever I was able to do.

Three reflections

1. First, the development NGO reaction to the allegation that Australian companies were breaching UN rules is a reminder that some ACFOA member agencies were having radical second thoughts about aid and whether it was the answer to 3rd world poverty. Real change, they felt, had to address the systemic or structural basis of impoverishment and marginalisation. Money or aid in other forms was at best short-term and band-aid. It was also necessary to empower the poor, raise consciousness on the part of both recipients and donors (referred to as development education), advocate for policy change, and work in solidarity with the poor. This sort of thinking was not shared by all ACFOA members but it had practical ramifications vis-à-vis the East Timor question.

On the one hand, this approach raised obvious questions about the development model being pursued in Indonesia by Suharto (undemocratic, top down, centralised); on the other hand, it disposed some agencies favourably to the Fretilin reform program in East Timor. The reverse of the Suharto model, Fretilin's program was highlighted in its title. Wrongly or wilfully interpreted by some as communist in character, the key words 'revolution' and 'independence' referenced its anti-feudal, radical domestic reform program. Its emphasis on adult literacy, agriculture, rural health, land redistribution, appropriate technology and so on, struck a sympathetic chord not just with the left in Australia but also development NGOs. In other words, the latter's sense of solidarity with East Timor's struggle was not only a matter of geography. It was also informed by shared values. And this sense of common cause begged the question: how could Timor implement that program if it could not make its own decisions and determine its identity, direction and future, *a fortiori* if it was part of Suharto's Indonesia that favoured a radically different model?

2. Second, the principal features of ACFOA's future involvement with the East Timor question are discernible in the events of 1973-75. These included:

- Aligning with and looking to the UN and rule of law, particularly the central principle of self-determination. That is, from the beginning ACFOA understood that the East Timor question was an international responsibility. It could not be reduced to interference in Indonesia's internal affairs (still Indonesia's position today).
- Advocating that Australia and big business should respect and comply with UN policy on the issue.
- Working cooperatively with all who subscribed to the principle and implementation of self-determination for East Timor - primarily the East Timorese people, but also – without being party political, with political parties, civil society and solidarity groups, in Australia and internationally.

Negatively speaking, however, the involvement also placed ACFOA at serious odds with both the Australian and Indonesian governments. This presented significant challenges for member agencies that looked to Canberra for grants and those that had projects in Indonesia.

3. My third comment goes to the place of affinity, an influential and legitimate role, in solidarity, a point mentioned by Peter Carey earlier in this workshop. ACFOA's engagement had a solid policy basis but it was also deeply human. Interacting with real people like Jose Ramos Horta, East Timorese refugees who settled in Australia and many others on the ground following the civil war added a significant human dimension to the issue. Any of us who have worked in East Timor or visited know how easy it is to fall in love with the Timorese. It was no different in 1975. It was also intense. ACFOA's representatives admired the new society the Timorese were trying to create. They were also witnessing a slow train wreck. The Timorese were not only facing the approaching violence and savagery of war; their nation building project and very existence were on the line. As Helen Hill, who

monitored the period closely, wrote at the time, ACFOA's representatives were overcome with 'frustration, anger and sorrow' as the tragedy unfolded and they were forced to watch helplessly from a distance. At the same time, the tragedy deepened commitment and gave ACFOA impetus. It's worth noting that during my time with ACFOA several of its presidents were people who were not only leaders within individual member agencies but had also been to East Timor or were closely involved with Timorese: John Mavor (Australian Council of Churches, ACC), John Birch (Community Aid Abroad, CAA later Oxfam) and Bill Armstrong (who was close to several East Timorese leaders in Melbourne though didn't visit the territory till 1989). Sir Ron Wilson should also be included. As a social activist, former high court judge, president of the Australian human rights commission and co-author of a landmark report on the treatment of Indigenous people in Australia (which he said amounted to genocide), Ron Wilson understood the concept of self-determination better than most. In a word, ACFOA sided with the Timorese in a joint quest for the holy grail of self-determination. It was the inevitable and logical outcome of the monstrous injustice ACFOA representatives had witnessed first hand.

Apprenticeship 1979-1984

As mentioned the period 1979-1984 could be called my apprenticeship years. During that period, I was not on the ACFOA staff but ACFOA and some of its individual agencies supported me on a project by project basis. As an apprentice I learned the ropes from a number of people but three were stand outs. These maestros were John Waddingham, Bill Armstrong and Jim Dunn, though Jim was in Canberra so my contact with him was not as close as with John and Bill. Hosted by Bill Armstrong's AWD, John Waddingham and I shared the same office in Fitzroy. Bill Armstrong worked across the passage. Let me itemise a few things we did.

Though gentle souls, Waddingham and I engaged in some metaphorical bomb throwing.

- Our first bomb was our *Aid and East Timor* report. It stated that East Timor was in the grip of a famine for which the Indonesian military was responsible. Thanks to Bill Armstrong the report was adopted by ACFOA and, dropping out of Melbourne University, I went fulltime on the Timor issue from that time.
- Our second bomb was the editing of an ACFOA publication in 1980 in which both ICRC and Catholic Relief Services of the US (CRS) were criticised for collaborating with the Indonesian military in East Timor, and seeming to legitimise its occupation. That same year ACFOA funded Fr Francisco Fernandes and I to attend a memorable US Congressional Hearing on US aid to East Timor. Following the hearing I investigated CRS then visited Europe and Jakarta. In Rome I discussed East Timor with Vatican officials. They told me (*sotto voce*) the Vatican would not agree to an Indonesian bishops request to integrate the church of East Timor into the Indonesian church until East Timor had exercised its right to self-determination.
- Our third bomb was the delivery of a broadside against Gough Whitlam and several other influential Australians whom we said were anti-Timorese. At Fretilin's invitation, I delivered this to the Permanent People's Tribunal in Lisbon in June 1981.
- Our fourth bomb, manufactured with AETA and George Preston in particular, was to convene a very large conference in Melbourne in 1983. It welcomed Roque Rodrigues and Abilio Araujo, who like other Fretilin leaders, had been blackbanned from Australia since 1976. The event also served to renew flagging public interest in East Timor. Around the same time, Christians in Solidarity with East Timor (CISSET) was founded and, concerned that the role of the church inside and outside East Timor, was being neglected,

it set out to renew church engagement with the issue. In 1983, CISET hosted Mgr da Costa Lopes to Melbourne and facilitated his tour of the South Pacific. Demonstrating again how resistant the establishment was to Timor at that time, the Catholic archbishop of Melbourne refused to meet with him.

- We also convinced the Australian parliament to hold a senate inquiry into East Timor (1982) and in 1983 we founded *Inside Indonesia* magazine. Its first front cover featured General Benny Murdani, under a banner headline Climate of Fear.

ACFOA Human Rights Office (1985-2000)

I served as director of ACFOA's human rights office for 15 years. It was the first and only time in ACFOA's nearly 60 year history that it has had a program and office of this kind. In the time that remains, I will reflect on two of its features.

First, why a human rights office, not an East Timor office? The short answer is that this was strategically required because of mounting constraints on East Timor activity at the time. However, it turned out to be a masterstroke for which I credit Bill Armstrong, then a leader in ACFOA.

In essence, the idea was to take the spotlight off East Timor by including it with a bunch of other pressing regional human rights issues. Along with East Timor, these included Burma, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and West Papua. This step was also taken to make more explicit East Timor's status as a human rights issue, to mainstream it, as it were, and have it seen as greater than a fading single political issue on life support. Unlike Amnesty International, for example, ACFOA did not separate the right to self-determination from other human rights. We felt that the principle of treating everyone as an adult was fundamental to all other human rights. We also believed self-determination had great merit as a practical problem solving measure (as it was in Timor in 1999) and that it should inform all the development activity undertaken by ACFOA's member agencies, including in relation to the Indigenous community in Australia.

I believe the transition worked very well. In a sense human rights became our Trojan horse. Re-branding East Timor this way opened doors to sections of the community that were politically wary of East Timor. These included those in the East Timorese community in Australia who assumed ACFOA was pro-Fretilin, the Department of Foreign Affairs (that had also established a human rights program), and a range of civil society bodies.

Human rights also became our passport to the UN. For example, it facilitated the participation of diaspora Timorese women like Mimi Ferreira, Ines de Almeida and Emilia Pires in UN women's conferences in Nairobi and elsewhere where they learnt on the job and made many friends for East Timor. It gave me a ticket to the UN Commission for human rights in Geneva, to the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights in Vienna and introduced me to a host of Asian NGOs who collaborated in regional preparatory work. In addition to talking up Timor, the latter served as a battleground to contest and defeat the relativist so-called Asian concept of human rights favoured by significant figures such as Lee Kuan Yew, Suharto and Mahathir. In addition to arguing the case for the universality and indivisibility of all human rights, Vienna was an opportunity to join forces with Jose Ramos Horta and other Timor activists to push back against Indonesia and the likes of Mauk Moruk's who testified on its behalf. Horta also took the Free Xanana stickers that I had brought to plaster surreptitiously on escalators, windows and other public places, including the back of toilet doors as relaxatives for any Indonesian officials who visited.

A second innovation was ACFOA's decision to build people-to-people relations with Indonesia. The re-garbing of East Timor in human rights clothes made this easier. It also served to invalidate claims made by our Australian critics that Timor activists were anti-Indonesian and that the Left in particular was using the East Timor issue to bring down Suharto who had not been forgiven for liquidating their Indonesian comrades and embracing capitalism and the US. John Waddingham and I had the same idea when we launched *Inside Indonesia* magazine in 1983. We believed East Timor's freedom rested on change in Indonesia. Each of us also had a soft spot for Indonesia and good Indonesia credentials.

ACFOA elevated this Indonesia strategy to another level. We joined the International NGO Indonesia forum (INGI now INFID), and set up an Indonesia-Australia program of cooperation (IAPC). Under IAPC auspices, ACFOA undertook bi-lateral visits, participated in workshops and dialogues with Indonesian NGOs, and hosted visits to Australia by prominent Indonesians such as Adnan Buyung Nasution, Asmara Nababan and Addurahman Wahid (Gus Dur), each of whom were good friends of East Timor. Visits to Indonesia also allowed me to meet clandestinely with East Timorese activists and to act as their *estafeta* to Australia, Ramos-Horta and the world. Indonesian intelligence (BAKIN) caught up with me after the Santa Cruz massacre and expelled me from Indonesia for three years; and in 2005 my duplicitous record worked against me when the Indonesian side of the Commission for Truth and Friendship (CTF) froze me out of the process despite Timor-Leste's foreign minister, Jose Ramos-Horta, having introduced me to his Indonesian counterpart, Hassan Wirajuda, as someone who cared about Indonesia.

All this culminated in the improbable and deeply moving 1999 referendum which ACFOA, believe it or not, was invited to attend as part of Australia's official delegation. It was one of my life's peak moments. It was also in the words of the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, adapted by me, the day that hope and history finally rhymed in East Timor.

*Pat Walsh is writing a memoir on his East Timor experience to be called *Rat Up a Drainpipe*. His website is <www.patwalsh.net>*