



consensus

**White Paper**

Facilitating National Dialogue in East Timor:  
Opening Space at a Critical Moment of  
Opportunity and Crisis  
6/22/2006

Zachary Metz  
Chief, Peace Building Practice

1501 Broadway, Suite 1604  
New York, NY 10036  
(212) 391-8100  
[www.ConsensusGroup.com](http://www.ConsensusGroup.com)

**Consensus** is a consultancy that specializes in negotiation, conflict resolution, and international peace building. Comprised of negotiation and communication experts, the firm negotiates on behalf of clients and facilitates conflict resolution strategies in both the private and public realms; we also provide customized negotiation and conflict-resolution training to professionals throughout a variety of industries and around the world. Our clients include publicly-owned corporations, as well as public sector organizations such as the US Office on Government Ethics, the Northern Ireland Peace Builders Program at Columbia University, and the New York Police Department. A privately held company, Consensus is headquartered in New York City.

# Contents

Executive Summary	3
Background: Timor Leste	4
Current Security Crisis Facing East Timor	5
The National Dialogue: Objectives	6
The National Dialogue: Methodology	7
Roles	9
The National Dialogue: Process & Experience	10
Conclusions	13

# Executive Summary

The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (East Timor), the world's youngest country, continues to struggle with the complex legacy of violence, underdevelopment, and poverty left by hundreds of years of Portuguese colonization and Indonesian occupation. A spasm of violence devastated the country in 1999 when it won its independence following a national referendum.

East Timor's President Xanana Gusmão has convened a series of five National Dialogues with the various sectors of East Timorese political and social stakeholders. The purpose of the Dialogues is for the President and stakeholders to collaborate on helping the country address core issues that threaten its peace, stability, and growth.

At the request of President Gusmão, Consensus, in close collaboration with Belun, an organization founded by Columbia University's Center for International Conflict Resolution, and the East Timor NGO Forum, designed and facilitated a National Dialogue that took place in April 2006. The ground-breaking initiative focused on the role of the country's more than 200 Non Governmental Organizations (NGO's) in securing the future stability and prosperity of East Timor. Financial support for the initiative came from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP).

Consensus trained 15 East Timorese development professionals from the collaborating organizations in a unique and powerful large group facilitation technique called Open Space Technology (Open Space). The team, led by Zachary Metz, Consensus' Chief of Peace Building Practice, in partnership with Luis Ximenes, Belun's Community Based Organizations Coordinator, then convened 250 people, representing every East Timorese non-governmental organization (NGO) for two intensive days of national dialogue and action planning. The two-day Open Space, which was held in the former headquarters of the National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT), focused on the role of the NGO sector in the future of the country.

More than 30 small groups met during the process, creating detailed outputs of their ideas and commitments which are to be compiled and presented to the President and government. The working groups addressed core issues, from security to education and from the integration of former militia members to the expanding role of women in political action.

The President, who attended significant portions of the event, passionately supported the effort and commented on the power of the facilitation model that had been designed and delivered. In the end, the President noted that he was not only "satisfied", but rather "surprised and delighted" at the stunning success of this historic initiative.



# Background: Timor Leste<sup>1</sup>

In 1975, East Timor declared its independence, following decades of colonization and exploitation by Portugal, and two years of brutal Japanese occupation. Ten days later, Indonesian troops launched a full-scale invasion. The Indonesians launched military campaigns over the next two decades to incorporate the people of East Timor and to quash the resistance to the Indonesian occupation, during which an estimated 100,000 to 250,000 people died.

In 1999, facing international pressure, Indonesia agreed to hold a referendum in East Timor on independence. An overwhelming majority of the people of East Timor voted for independence from Indonesia. As the results of the referendum became apparent, anti-independence Timorese militias (organized and supported by the Indonesian military) launched a violent effort to disrupt the movement, displace or kill pro-independence supporters, and utterly destroy the physical infrastructure of country. It is estimated that the anti-independence militias killed approximately 1,400 Timorese and forcibly pushed 300,000 people into West Timor as refugees. The majority of the country's infrastructure – including nearly all public buildings, homes, irrigation systems, water supply systems, and schools, as well as the country's electrical grid – was destroyed by the militias.

In September 1999, Australian-led peacekeeping troops of the International Force for East Timor (INTERFET) were deployed to the country, and brought the violence to an end. In October 1999, the UN Security Council established the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) to administer the country. And, in May 2002, East Timor was internationally recognized as an independent state.

The world's newest country has made enormous strides in terms of the creation of a vibrant culture of dialogue and political discourse, in addition to the pursuit of human rights and development. However, East Timor remains the poorest nation in Asia.<sup>2</sup> The country is struggling to address a legacy of hundreds of years of systemic, exploitive underdevelopment, and the issues that face the political and community leaders are substantial.

---

<sup>1</sup> Background compiled from the following sources:

"Timeline: East Timor", BBC News, 28 April 2006, [http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/country\\_profiles/1504243.stm](http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/country_profiles/1504243.stm)

"East Timor Background" (various articles), East Timor and Indonesia Action Network, <http://etan.org/timor/default.htm>

"Unfinished Business: Justice for East Timor", Human Rights Watch, August 2000, <http://www.hrw.org/backgrounder/asia/timor/etimor-back0829.htm>

"East Timor - UNMISSET – Background", United Nations Mission in Support of East Timor, 2005, <http://www.un.org/Depts/dpko/missions/unmisset/background.html>

<sup>2</sup> "E Timor 'poor and getting poorer'", *BBC News*, 9 March 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/4788316.stm>



# Current Security Crisis Facing East Timor

The tensions that exploded in May of 2006 were fully present in early April, most notably the emerging struggle between factions of the East Timor Defense Force (Falintil-FDTL). The F-FDTL is partly comprised of former resistance fighters from the movement known as Falintil. In February 2006, several hundred East Timorese troops went on strike over compensation disputes, and in March the government expelled approximately 600 of the 1,400 soldiers in its army. In April, sporadic rioting began in and around the East Timorese capital, Dili.<sup>3</sup> In May, thousands fled the increasing violence and instability, leaving the capital city for rural villages and mountain areas. Several deaths have been reported, and many NGOs and governments have ordered their staff to evacuate. On May 25<sup>th</sup>, Australian troops began arriving, responding to a request from the Government of East Timor for support in addressing the crisis.<sup>4</sup>

With the supportive intervention of Australia, New Zealand, Malaysia, and Portugal, it is believed that the intensity of the clashes will subside. However, the central issues that threaten peace, stability, and prosperity continue to require ongoing attention, while the utterly broken security sector will need a complete overhauling.

---

<sup>3</sup> "Analysis: East Timor's Security Woes", Jonathan Head, *BBC News*, 24 May 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/5012640.stm>

<sup>4</sup> "Commandos secure E Timor airport", *BBC News*, 25 May 2006, <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/5014830.stm>



# The National Dialogue: Objectives

The President intends for the series of National Dialogues to serve as a venue for democratic, participatory dialogue to proactively address some of the core issues that today threaten peace, justice, and prosperity for the people and future of East Timor.

Through extensive needs assessment and stakeholder interviews, Belun, Consensus and the facilitation partners (the "team") understood the core goal of this particular National Dialogue to be *articulating a vision for the role of the NGO sector in supporting a stable and prosperous future for East Timor.*

In addition, the team understood that the methodology would have to engender:

- An action and strength-based orientation
- Quick, deep process buy-in
- Empowerment
- Creativity
- Clarity regarding next steps
- Awareness of the realities of the current state, e.g., Who is where? What are people doing?
- Ongoing and sustained cross-regional and cross-sectoral collaboration



# The National Dialogue: Methodology

Given the goals and objectives outlined in the previous section, combined with the current significant opportunities and challenges in East Timor (particularly within the NGO sector), the team believed that Open Space would best address the challenges and produce the defined objectives for the stakeholders.

## What is Open Space?

Open Space facilitation is a means of helping people in groups, communities and organizations listen to each other and address the challenges they identify with creativity and passion. The most important aspect of Open Space is its fundamental focus on issues, questions, challenges, and opportunities for which participants feel a strong sense of passion and responsibility *in the moment*. The facilitator creates a robust, intuitive structure in which the group quickly identifies its core areas of concern. The core areas of concern dictate the agenda. The agenda is broken up into a series of concurrent group sessions which are convened and managed by the participants who first identified the respective issues (areas of concern) throughout the Open Space process. These conveners (or “initiators”) take on a leadership role to bring together all participants who wish to address “their” topic at hand, and ensure that clear notes/minutes of the session are taken; the minutes from the series of concurrent sessions are collected and captured in a comprehensive book of proceedings. The entire process is driven through the small group sessions, and each day culminates with a “closing circle” in which all participants are invited to reflect on the experience and their (new) commitments to the issues.

## Open Space Principles<sup>5</sup>

In addition to its structure, Open Space rests on a few basic principles which make it a powerful tool for addressing deeply challenging and urgent issues in complex large group settings.

The principles are:

1. Those who are present are most prepared to address the issues at hand: *“Whoever comes are the right people.”*

---

<sup>5</sup> Owen, Harrison, [Open Space Technology](#), Berrett-Koehler Publishers, San Francisco, 1997



2. The group takes responsibility for managing its own time and tasks: *"Whenever it starts is the right time"* and *"When it is over, it is over."*
3. The process is effective and the people have the skills and knowledge to address the challenges: *"Whatever happens is the only thing that could have happened."*

# Roles

President Gusmão served as the Convener of the Open Space, creating a mandate of passion and responsibility for the National Dialogue. He welcomed the participants at the outset of the program, and opened and closed each day of sessions.

The facilitators, representing Belun, the NGO Forum and Consensus, designed and implemented the structure, flow, and organizing spirit for the Open Space.<sup>6</sup>

In addition, ten-facilitator support teams addressed every aspect of the process, from room set up to food and information technology.

---

<sup>6</sup> The facilitation team gratefully acknowledges the support and wisdom of Lisa Heft of Opening Space, on the design of the National Dialogue Open Space.

# The National Dialogue: Process and Experience

## The Opening Question

The Open Space process is driven by a predefined opening question of critical importance. For the National Dialogue, the facilitation team worked in conjunction with the office of the President and a cross-section of stakeholders to craft the opening question: "*How can we better support each other in the service of the people so as to carry Timor-Leste (East Timor) into a future of stability and prosperity?*"<sup>7</sup>

This question provided the central catalytic opening for the Open Space process. It was intended to be broad and open to individual understanding. It was also designed to invite significant creative thinking. The opening question, which was referred to frequently throughout the National Dialogue by the President Gusmão, became a focal point for the process.

## The Agenda

From this opening question, and with the ongoing support and guidance from the facilitators, participants created and managed their own agenda and facilitated sessions related to the question. Each participant was invited to add their issue or concern to the agenda, which was captured on a prominent wall of the meeting space using a grid representing four time slots during the day and 25 meeting spaces throughout the compound. Each convener – the individual who suggested a particular topic for discussion – wrote her or his name and the title of the session (often in the form of a question, i.e. "How can we support rural youth through economic empowerment?") on the session posting, which was posted to a time/meeting space on the grid.

The agenda that was developed and defined during this phase of Open Space was a comprehensive inventory of the most pressing issues facing East Timor, as seen by the NGO sector.

## Working Sessions

Once the agenda was created, the facilitator opened the working sessions. During each working session, the small group conveners welcomed people to their session,

---

<sup>7</sup> The opening question was crafted through extensive consultation with key stakeholders, lead by Belun, Consensus and the NGO Forum.



facilitated conversations related to their respective topics, and ensured that their conversation was documented. The session notes from each working session have been collected and compiled into a book, ensuring that the work from every session can be shared with all stakeholders. This book will become the tool for addressing the next steps, based on the work and ideas that come out of the sessions.

Each working session lasted approximately one hour. Groups ranged in size from two to twenty-five people, with significant movement and cross fertilization from one group to another as people shared ideas from one discussion group with participants in other groups. Facilitators actively engaged with participants on process questions, without interfering in the substantive ongoing dialogues, freeing groups to address their issues.

On the first day of the program, 30 small-group working sessions were convened, while on the second day 39 sessions were convened. Topics included such themes as education, health, gender, violence, security and human rights. There was particular emphasis on issues relevant to NGO relationships with government and the international community, which has particular urgency at this time given the ramp-down of international presence in East Timor.

### Closing Circle

The first day of the National Dialogue Open Space ended with a closing circle in which participants were invited to reflect on their experiences and share their comments and concerns with the President. He listened intently to the comments, and then shared his own reflections and feedback, strongly encouraging the participants to continue to actively engage with these critical issues, rooted in a sense of passion and responsibility. In particular, the President spoke directly to those participants who raised questions, concerns, and critiques of the Open Space process, given its emphasis on the power of the participants. Some felt that the lack of coercion in the process allowed key stakeholders, including members of the government, to not engage. The President eloquently connected the present crises in East Timor with a stance of powerlessness, and encouraged participants to embody the spirit of Open Space to counter passivity and hopelessness. President Gusmão noted that many in the government had indeed chosen not to engage, but noted that "I am here. You are here. We are all here. So let's get to work."

At the second day's closing, every participant was invited to read aloud their own personal commitment to moving the ideas and actions from the National Dialogue forward. As each participant spoke, they passed a *tais*, the traditional symbolic cloth of East Timor, to the next speaker.

Following these powerful commitments, the President took the *tais*, and concluded the Open Space National Dialogue with a passionate and powerful review of the meaning of the dialogue as well as the central importance of this experience and what will follow for the future of the country.



## Infrastructure and Support Teams

Throughout the two-day Dialogue, a team of 15 professionals from Consensus, Belun, and the East Timor NGO Forum created a welcoming, energizing, and supportive environment for the participants. Following two days of training in Open Space, the following teams provided critical support:

- Facilitator support team
- Logistics and materials team
- Information Technology team
- Food team
- Registration team
- Language team
- Money and budget team

## Outcomes and Next Steps

Nearly seventy small groups met over the course of the two-day National Dialogue Open Space. Most of these groups created notes that have been compiled into an edited book of proceedings. This book has been organized and annotated by the Belun team in consultation with the East Timor NGO Forum and Consensus. In addition to compiling the thinking of each working group, the book also highlights recommendations and next steps that came from each session. This information is critical to both the conveners (including the Office of the President) as well as the participants.

Belun and the East Timor NGO Forum will deliver the final report, including the book of proceedings, to the Office of the President, all of the participants, and relevant government and international focal points. A small stakeholder group will continue to meet to reflect on the outputs from the Open Space National Dialogue and to provide input regarding next steps and ongoing efforts.

In concluding the Open Space, President Gusmão expressed the sentiment that this event was the beginning of a longer journey. In this spirit, the facilitation team looks forward to future opportunities to offer Open Space and other participatory processes to support peace, prosperity, and engagement in East Timor.



# Conclusions

The National Dialogue represented one of the most challenging and unique uses of Open Space Technology to date. In addition to the endemic and ongoing problems of staggering unemployment, poverty, illiteracy, and compromised infrastructure, the timing of the National Dialogue coincided with the rapid escalation of violence and instability in East Timor.

The energy, passion, and creativity that were unleashed in these two days were testament to the power of the individuals and groups that make up the NGO sector in East Timor. In reviewing the process and outcomes of the National Dialogue, it is evident that the use of Open Space as the vehicle for interaction was the right choice. Open Space created a rich, diverse, and dynamic environment in which new connections were developed and innovative ideas and actions were catalyzed.

Open Space worked because of its inherently democratic and integrative structure and spirit. Social change actors, working to challenge deep social trauma, underdevelopment and tension, often struggle to find space, safety, and legitimacy for themselves and their work. The sense of working without connection to others, especially peers and power structures, can be debilitating, especially as situations worsen, as is the case in East Timor today. Open Space interrupts this sense of isolation, allowing people to integrate and aggregate everything from technical know-how to narratives of loss, in an environment that simultaneously feels both totally familiar and radically different. Participants in the National Dialogue left the program with a renewed sense of not only being "in this", meaning engaged in the critical work of post-conflict reconstruction, but also being "in this, *together*", united by the President's call for dialogue, by the process of Open Space, and by the powerful work they had done to engage the challenges and pursue the visions of the NGO sector in East Timor.





1501 Broadway, Suite 1604  
New York, NY 10036  
(212) 391-8100  
[www.ConsensusGroup.com](http://www.ConsensusGroup.com)