



Frameworks for Assessing Resilience

Timor-Leste Country Note

**Centre of Studies for Peace and
Development (CEPAD)**



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

What holds Timorese society together and helps people to overcome past conflict and prevent future conflict? To answer this question, 252 Timorese from throughout the country were consulted over 6 months, and identified a series of “elements of resilience” to explain the factors that facilitated their ability to cope with and overcome conflict or drivers of conflict.

On the whole, although resilience is best thought of as a system of interconnected and related processes, participants during the consultation phase often referred to resilience as a series of elements. These elements of resilience can be thought of as sources or pools of capacities from which strategies and mechanisms for strengthening peace can be deployed. Four main elements of resilience were identified through the consultation phase:

1. Culture
2. Leadership
3. Religion
4. Law and Security

For each of these elements, there are conditions that enable them to be leveraged to enhance peacefulness but there are also factors that make them liable to undermine peace and contribute to tensions and in some cases violence. Thus, resilience is seen as a neutral concept that can be both positive and negative with relation to peacebuilding outcomes.

If this first phase of the research has sought to identify elements of resilience, the subsequent, action research phase should explore these elements in greater depth to define the specific conditions and ways in which these elements that exist within Timorese society can be leveraged to build peace.

Method

CEPAD used a participatory research approach to undertake 15 focus group discussions and 16 key stakeholder interviews across every district of Timor-Leste and at the national level. Participant selection was based on an inclusive and representative set of criteria although it should be noted that discussions took place in district capitals. Discussions were opened with the central question:

what has held Timorese together until today to confront, manage and adapt in the face of conflict in the past and into the future?"

CULTURE

The role of culture in strengthening relations within and between families, villages and districts was described as the strongest element of resilience for Timorese throughout the consultations. Through dialogue, participants were also able to identify the ways that culture can also weaken resilience.

Rituals that foster solidarity

Participants described the strong collective sentiment and sense of solidarity as the basis for their social relations, which is facilitated by cultural systems, symbols and stories.

Fetosan umane is the most important cultural system which creates conditions for solidarity and trust between Timorese. This is a system of inter-familial exchanges and relationships established through the marriage of individuals from two family groups who continue to support each other through important life and community events. The solidarity that results from this is perceived by Timorese as a conflict deterrent in that when people know and trust each other, they don't create conflict with each other. "...some people that don't know each other can create conflict with each other but eventually come to meet each other in a cultural ceremony...and they know that they have a family relation. From this, unity is strengthened." (Aileu District)

This system is reinforced through physical infrastructure called uma lulik (sacred house) or uma lisan (traditional house) which serve as symbols of the group that is represented and it is underpinned by stories told from ancestor times to remind Timorese of their common origins.

"From east and west Timor we may have many branches but we are from just one root." (Ermera District)

Participants described the high costs of traditional ceremonies and exchanges that are often demanded through the fetosan umane system as an exclusionary factor which weakens solidarity and trust between people. The demands made on families are seen something which undermines good relations and can lead to conflict. "The negative impact is that it creates injustice. When there is lia mate and lia moris ceremonies, the fetosan family must bring everything." (Viqueque District)

Non-violent conflict resolution mechanisms

Timorese culture has strong and widely-used non-violent conflict resolution processes which have existed for a long time. These processes involve specific actors, infrastructure, symbols, sanctions and regulations. The *lia nain* are the central figures in dispute resolution at the local level and are trusted for their knowledge of families, communities and ancestral narratives.

“There were problems but there were always solutions because these [problems] are small compared to what keeps us together.”
(Baucau District)

Nahe biti bot is a dialogue tool used traditionally to resolve disputes and which is still used widely today. Commonly, the resolutions involve compensation paid by all parties to a conflict with the aim of restoring harmony in the community into the future. Other tools such as *tara bandu* (a traditional ban or law) and *hemuraan* (a form of peace agreement) may also be used.

Examples of the ways in which power relations undermine the effectiveness of these conflict resolution processes were also revealed during consultations. A strong patriarchal culture in Timor-Leste means that women’s voices and participation are not always promoted in dispute resolution processes and that sanctions do not protect their rights, particularly in cases of sexual and gender-based violence. “The victim doesn’t receive anything...this is the negative aspect of culture” (Liquica District)

Reconciling tradition with modernisation

Consultations revealed some interesting examples of the creative and considered approaches that individuals and communities have used and are using to adapt culture in the face of their changing context.

This related to traditional bans that have lost relevance, such as a ban on eating fish which was developed in the past when people lived in the mountains and feared the sea, but which, according to participants in Oecussi is no longer relevant. “I need to speak with the ancestors and say no, before, your generation had something different but now people say we need to end that ban.” (Oecussi District)

Participants also referred to the complex mix of ethno-linguistic groups now living in Dili as a result of rural-urban migration, meaning that the separate cultural identities of each group can no longer guide decision-making in conflict resolution processes. Participants in Dili described the need for a ‘Dili culture’ that is based on the effective use of dialogue.

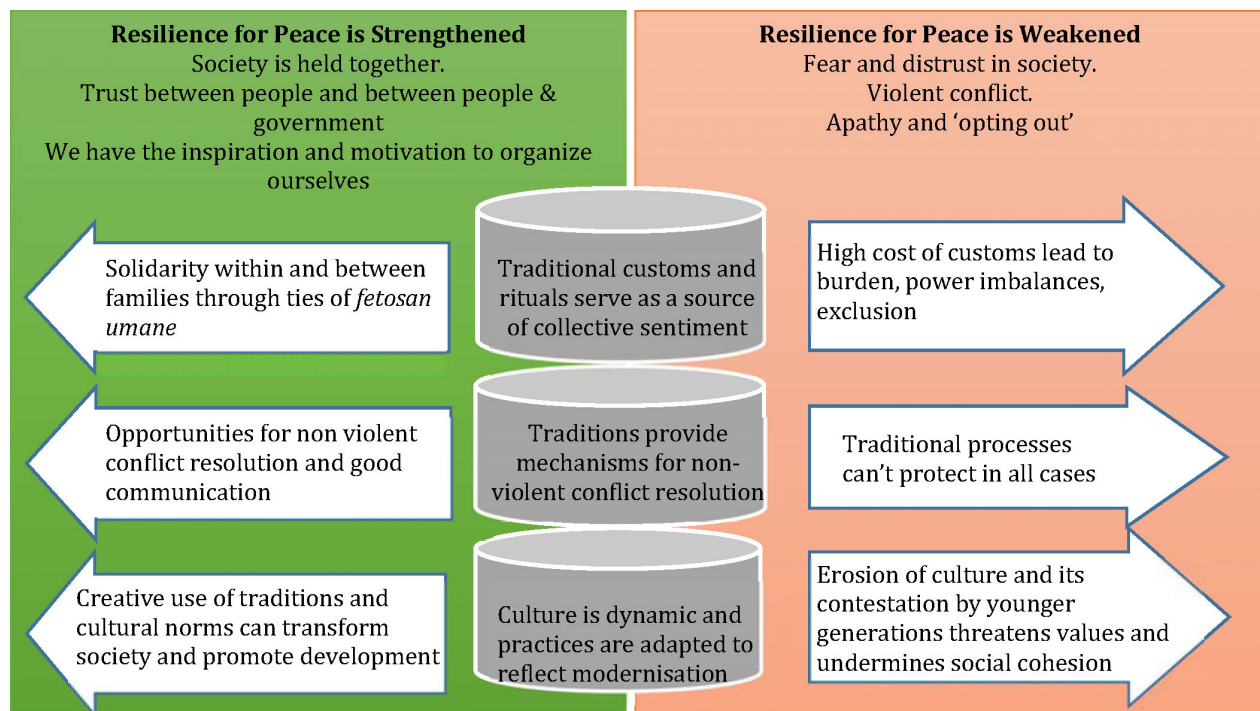
Lia nain in Liquica District reported that for some cases, particularly those relating to sexual violence or incest, traditional dispute resolution is not adequate to ensure a just result and protection for the victim. These cases need to be brought to the formal justice system, despite the barriers faced in doing so.

Recognising the importance of education for community development, in Cova Lima, a new type of ceremony is being practiced by families to redirect resources towards the education of young people who will return to Timor-Leste to help build the nation.

Participants discussed some ways that important cultural rituals, languages and traditions may be lost if not effectively transferred to new generations. Some participants saw this as a result of disinterest on the part of young people, others saw it as a lack of effective transfer processes between generations.

“Culture is dynamic and our system of *fetosan umane* needs a new idea.”
(Baucau District)

The formation of an independent state has meant an increase in access to education, proliferation of human rights norms, rural-urban migration and a range of other factors which have created a need to re-assess the impacts of culture and the ways that cultural values can be upheld whilst specific practices may need to be adapted.



LEADERSHIP

Discussions of leadership throughout the consultation phase in 13 districts revealed a complex picture of resilience with many intersecting components which have changed over time and in varying conditions. The key idea to emerge was that resilience is strengthened where there is trust between people and their leaders. Trust exists where leaders demonstrate, through their actions, that they understand and are responding to the needs of the people.

Resistance leaders as enduring symbols of national unity

Participants tended to refer frequently back to the role that resistance leaders, particularly those within Falintil (National Armed Forces for the Liberation of East Timor) played during the Indonesian Occupation (1975-1999). Looking back on this time, participants commonly asserted that it was the unity of the leaders in pursuing a single objective of achieving self-rule which allowed Timor-Leste to achieve its Independence. This achievement in the face of adversity continues to be viewed as a symbol of the nation's unity and resilience. "Although Timor is small, if we weren't working together during our war, we couldn't have done anything because this unity meant that although we had little, and a small land, we managed to get Independence." (Ainaro District)

This strong resistance legacy means that many of the former resistance leaders continue to hold positions in government or other positions of power. Participants in some districts pointed out the negative impact of this legacy and the potential for leaders to abuse the power they have assumed as a result. In Cova Lima, participants described the futility of trying to protest against policies they believe are not in the interests of the nation, in the face of the charisma and strength of the nation's former resistance leaders.

"Leaders, especially our historical leaders they have a lot of power now, no joke. This strength is related to the resistance [period] and they are the heroes."
(Cova Lima District)

Proximity of local leaders and relations of trust

Participants clearly articulated reasons that local leadership contributes to resilience. Local leaders are likely to be trusted and can strengthen social cohesion. The main reason given was that the local leaders are known to the community and have a good understanding of their particular culture, needs, dynamics and experiences. "Because they are close to the community and they know the community's actions and behaviour and when the community confronts a problem, this person is close...and can resolve." (Liquica District)

Local leaders were also seen to be effective in resolving disputes due to their strong communication networks and ability to collaborate with other local entities, for example line ministry representatives, law enforcement, traditional leaders and Church leaders. Local leaders were seen to be most effective when they took an inclusive approach to decision making. "...in order to resolve a problem or make a decision, they call the community together to listen...and throw it out to the us men and women to see how we all can give a decision." (Bobonaro District)

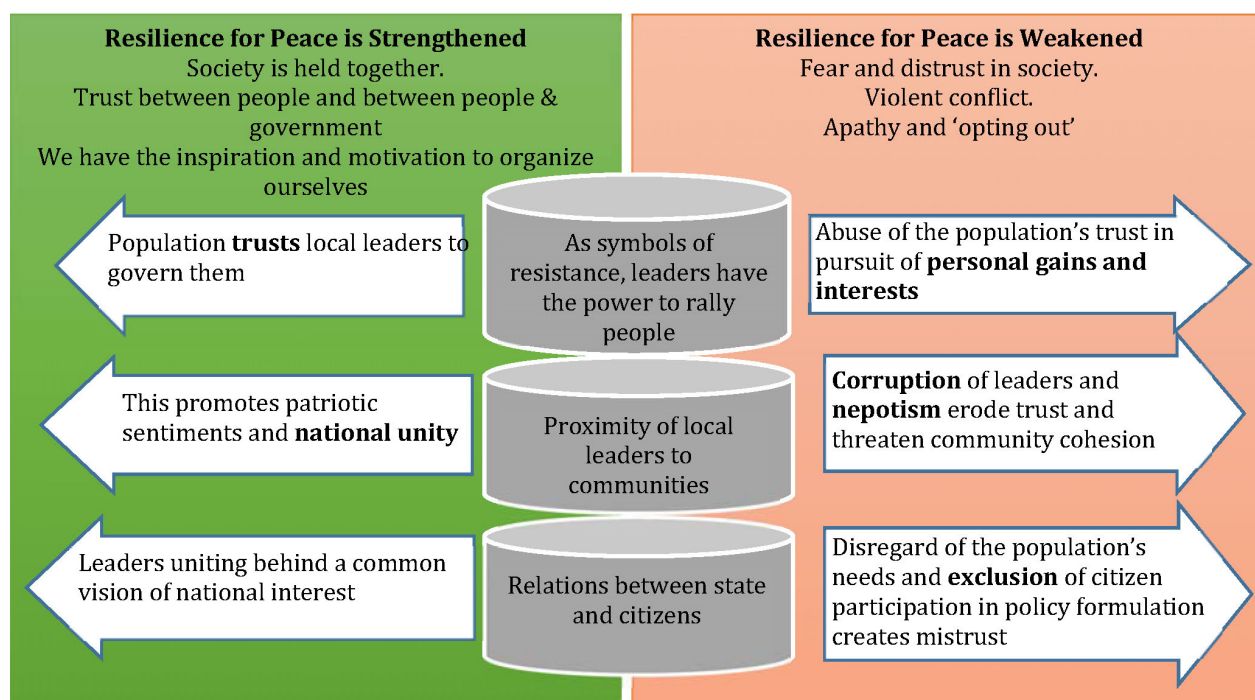
Participants also pointed to the factors which weakened their trust in local leaders which included actions that were seen to abuse their power and put their own or family's interests above the community's interest, a lack of communication and cooperation with communities and other entities.

Relations between government and citizens

Discussions on the role of national leaders in the Dili-based government were fragmented and indicative of the disconnect between citizens and government. Some participants saw the more recent actions of their national leaders to come together in a united front as an opportunity to more effectively work for the national interest. "...they have changed their political roles and positions and they now work together...they are united and want to improve our country." (Manatuto District). Others pointed out the ways that citizens felt disempowered from participating in political and development processes in the face of unity at the top. "If they at the top are together, we at the bottom just follow them." (Ermera District)

"Sometimes the people's concerns... are heard but then put in a drawer... sometimes the bridge has rotting foundations so what can it do?... Leadership is only good if it's a bridge." (Bobonaro District)

Moreover, many participants felt that their government is not listening to their concerns or developing public policy that adequately responds to their needs. This points to the absence of effective mechanisms for citizens to engage with the policy-making process. Consultation activities are carried out by various government actors but are ineffective, taking a top down approach and often excluding marginalised groups.



RELIGION

In all districts, participants spoke about religion as an element of resilience and more specifically, discussed God, the institution of the Catholic Church and religious doctrine and teachings as key components of their belief.

Historical role of the Catholic Church as protector

The contribution of the Church during the Indonesian Occupation has a strong legacy. The Church was seen as being able to protect and motivate people, especially youth. The wider Catholic Church gave people inspiration to fight for justice. “The Pope left behind a message that was important to transform young people’s thoughts from negative to positive to be able to continue on.” (Aileu District)

Church is an enduring symbol of national unity and solidarity today, and more than 96% of Timorese adhere to the Catholic faith. The Church’s continuing role in conflict resolution was acknowledged by participants, particularly when it works in cooperation with traditional leaders and other local actors. The Church’s role in organising community building and training activities for youth was also pointed out by some participants.

Peace Messages promoting solidarity

Participants pointed to religious teachings as well as a belief in God as important tools for pursuing peace. Although recognising the potential for division arising from the proliferation of new religions, it was generally recognised that religious teachings carry messages of peace which promote good conscience. “religion is part of combating conflict, and the doctrine is to educate and orient us not to create divisions.” (Baucau)

However, when these messages are obscured by doctrine which is seen to be out of touch with the daily reality of the majority of the congregation, trust in the Church is somewhat eroded. It was also clear from consultations that trust in the institution of the Church has been somewhat eroded in the post-Independence period, due to abuse of power on the part of Church actors and also a disconnect between the Church leaders and their congregations. This plays out in the fee requirements for the provision of services related to birth, death and marriage.



LAW AND SECURITY

Law and security were mentioned frequently by participants as important aspects of preventing and resolving conflict and ensuring stability in Timor-Leste. Participants also outlined the factors which allow law, and the enforcement of law through security institutions, to weaken trust, access to justice and national unity.

Law as a guarantor of justice

In relation to law participants showed appreciation for the legitimacy of the RDTL Constitution, referring to it as the “father law” given its links to the independence process.

“Law is in the interests of the public and the interests of justice and if we don’t have law, justice can’t be found, but if we have law we have true justice.” (Liquica District)

Law was also seen as a tool to promote positive change by some participants. In Cova Lima, women described the change that has taken place due to the implementation of the 2010 Law on Domestic Violence. This example illustrated the potential of law to support positive change through dialogue, good communication and coordination between different entities. “Before, domestic violence was considered normal inside the family but now, through the work of the courts, people’s minds have started to change.” (Cova Lima District)

Participants also raised the issue of the complex intersection between formal law and traditional justice, and the instances of clashing or complementarity that occurs between the two systems. For example, although traditional leaders recognize that traditional justice is often inadequate in affording justice to women victims of gender-based violence, and that formal law may provide better solutions such as enabling the victim to request a divorce from her abusive husband, this very act may in turn jeopardize the social safety net provided by her community given that divorce has yet to be well accepted by Timorese custom.

Law was also seen to have a negative impact on trust and social justice when it is not implemented consistently, when some are placed ‘above’ the law and where justice it is not accessible to all due to language, physical distance, cost and lack of legal aid. Law was seen as something that contributes to resilience where it is implemented consistently, where it is accessible to all and where it is developed with due consideration of Timorese culture.

Collaboration between security actors and communities

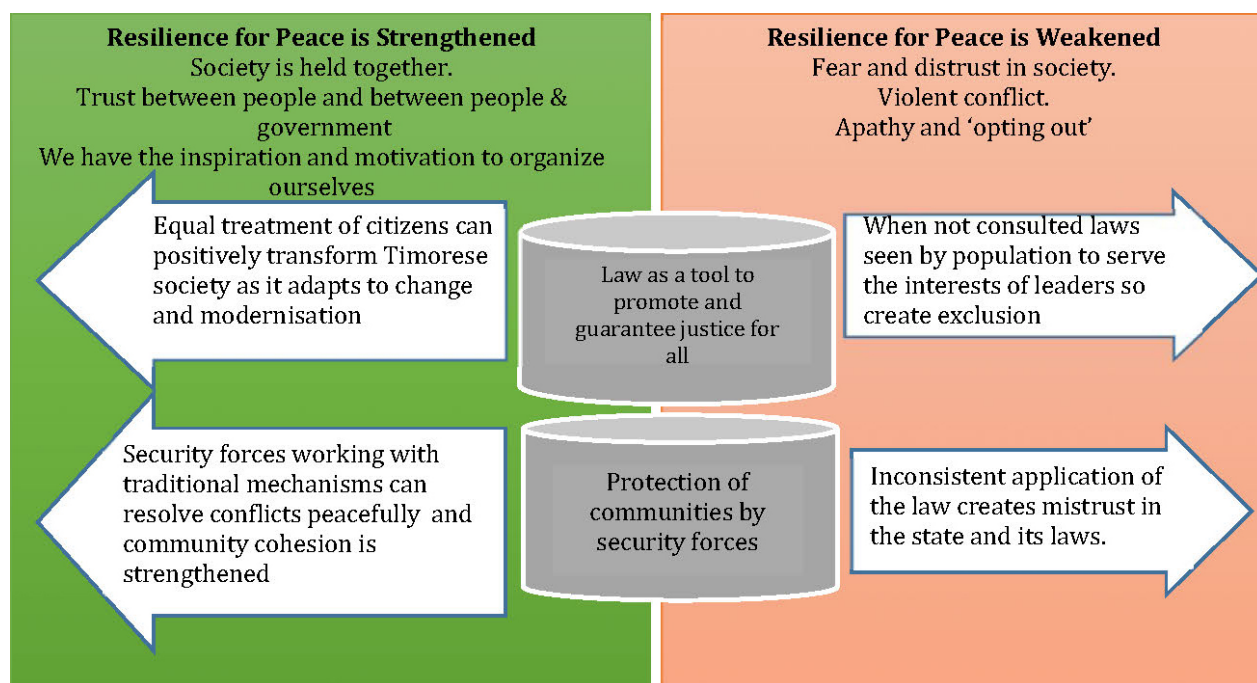
Security was defined in terms of the national police force (PNTL), the army (F-FDTL) and also local conflict prevention and security networks which may or may not involve state security actors. Security forces are responsible for the local level enforcement of laws developed at the national level and in this regard often act as a link between the state and communities.

In some districts, participants said that their local security forces (PNTL) had good relations and communication with the community and with local authorities in implementing daily work. In Manufahi District, participants said that their PNTL officers were also part of the National Directorate for the Prevention of Community Conflict (DNPCK) group composed of government institutions, traditional leaders and NGOs, which implements various activities related to conflict

“The PNTL is an important institution and always do this [use violence] and always appear in the media and sometimes when we see this we feel shame...people in the rest of the world sees this...they need to improve themselves.” (Lautem District)

prevention and resolution. In Cova Lima, participants agreed that the cooperation seen between PNTL and local leaders and Church leaders, helped to reduce martial-arts related conflict following the national resolution which placed a ban on marital arts groups in 2013.

The main factor contributing to a lack of trust in security personnel related to a lack of consistency in implementation of law. Participants in some discussions asserted that those who have a family or other link to security personnel often have immunity from the law. Another factor was the excessive use of force that participants see security personnel using, which is often contrary to law and also contrary to the values underpinning traditional non-violent conflict resolution processes. Referring back to the sacrifice Timorese made to achieve Independence, the wrong-doings of the security personnel can be a source of shame.



CONCLUSION

The FAR project in Timor-Leste has, based on its first consultation phase, outlined four key elements of resilience as described and prioritised by an inclusive cross-section of Timorese society. For each element, a number of entry-points have been articulated which help to define those factors which allow culture, leadership, religion and law & justice to both strengthen and weaken resilience in Timor-Leste. For the next phases of the FAR project, selected entry points will be examined in more depth by a National Working Group and through the use of a nation-wide perception survey.