

Workshop Four Summary

Workshop Four brought together a breadth of experience from the Australian NGO sector, including larger development organisations well established in East Timor, and smaller civil society groups engaged in building solidarity and friendships with communities in East Timor. The depth of experience and the insight of East Timorese participants to the conference provided a fruitful forum for a discourse on the challenges and possibilities of working collaboratively with women in East Timor.

A critical challenge identified by the workshop was the forging of authentic and sustainable relationships between Australian organisations and East Timorese women to further the development needs of East Timor as identified by the East Timorese. By failing to foster authentic relationships, a benefactor and recipient relationship tended to emerge rather than one of genuine partnership driven by local needs and recognising local capacities and strengths.

Relationships which assumed a benefactor/ recipient nature are often characterised by unclear expectations from both the East Timorese and internationals. There is concern that a culture of dependency has defined NGO relations in East Timor. The failure to articulate clearly the intentions and capabilities of internationals working in East Timor often leads to unfulfilled expectations, threatening the trust and openness necessary for good development practice.

The forging of authentic relationships however, remains a significant challenge. Communication is difficult because of poor information and communication technologies in East Timor, language differences, and the different cultural contexts of the East Timorese and international groups. Without personal contacts or resources to travel to East Timor it was difficult to partner with East Timorese women's organisations.

These difficulties accounted for Australian NGOs choosing to collaborate with strong, well established East Timorese women's NGOs, such as the Alola Foundation, in an attempt to forge sustainable partnerships. This tendency is symptomatic of a centralisation of resources in the urban centre of Dili.

East Timorese women recognised this as a particular risk for rural women. Because of a concentration on Dili based groups, rural grassroots NGOs seek to link themselves with groups like Alola leading to a centralised model of development partnership. There was concern this will contribute to a disempowerment of grassroots impetus and control over their own development objectives. In some cases this shift was interpreted as failing to address core basic needs in rural areas.

It was further recognised that the empowerment of grassroots NGOs was important for their potential contribution to the shaping of policy in East Timor. It was recognised as important that development partnerships do not disregard or bypass the role of the East Timorese government. The structures and process of governance which should capably address the needs of the nation are still being formed. International NGOs should be sensitive to the work of the East Timorese government in directing development work. Strong relationships between international and East Timorese NGOs and East Timorese government are important for the monitoring of NGO activity, ensuring a coordinated response to need, and contributing to policy formation.