

Transcript

In 2001 the UN peacekeeping mission UNTAET, as it was the Transitional Authority of East Timor, was, in effect, the government of the territory. The Electoral component of UNTAET was, therefore, the Electoral Commission. In the lead up to the August 2001 Constituent Assembly elections– the Constituent Assembly being the body that would write the constitution of (East) Timor– I was part of UNTAET electoral component, holding the position of Area Manager for the country's Eastern districts.

The role itself was new to me, because along with the area manager for the Western districts, I was directly supporting the chief of operations in organizing and conducting the electoral process for the UN Transitional Authority in East Timor. So, this position Area Manager, which in later UN missions would be titled 'Field Coordinator' involved backstopping the electoral field offices and ensuring coordination between the headquarters and the field. This position would become a central feature of all UN electoral support missions.

In any case, shortly after arriving in Timor in February of 2001, I was tasked by my supervisor to develop an electoral operational plan for the election. To be honest, I wasn't quite sure what that was, as I'd never heard the term before. That weekend, however, I set about tackling the assignment. I remember going into the office on a Sunday evening, and there, after thinking about the challenge, I began to do a little research using whatever available documentation there was. Among these was the ACE project database, which at that time was on CD ROM. I toiled on the challenge, and then at around 12 hours later, at around 5 am that Monday morning, I left the office having produced a four-page outline of the plan. When I came back to the office later that morning, I presented the outline to my boss, who happily confirmed that it was exactly what he wanted.

So over the following two weeks, I began engaging with fellow colleagues, team members, to elaborate the detailed content of the plan, which included the key phases and activities of the electoral process, as well as some of the main assumptions, risks and contingencies. The plan further delineated responsibilities between the headquarter team and the district teams, and also provided guidance on some of the important or relevant information to be collected, the timelines for the conduct of certain activities, and included reporting templates as well.

After all this was done, the Chief Electoral Officer eventually signed off on the plan, which then had to be shared with HQ and field staff. It was also presented to the incoming electoral UNVs [United Nations Volunteers] who were undergoing their induction in Darwin, Australia in April or May 2001, prior to their arrival in Dili. The electoral laws, along with this plan, were among the key documents for the orientation of the UN electoral volunteers [UNVs]. Of course, as you would expect, the plan couldn't cover every aspect of the election, and would require both customization at the district level and revision as well, based on feedback received from the field, as it underwent implementation. But it remained the foundation document for implementing the electoral operations for what was viewed as the successful August 2001 Constituent Assembly elections.

On reflection, I would say that the development of the 2001 Electoral Operation Plan also had significant consequences for electoral planning in Timor and worldwide. The Electoral Commission of 2001 was an internationally led body, with the key decisions being made by UN international staff. However, for the presidential elections that would follow in 2002, the body transitioned to a Timorese-led institution with international electoral support provided. So it was Timorese led with international support. The plan therefore became an important capacity-building tool for that election. The result of this on-the-job capacity building complemented, of course, by the BRIDGE electoral administration training [Building Resources in Democracy, Governance and Elections training], which had been piloted in Timor was that a cadre of electoral officials that would form the nucleus of future Timorese electoral commissions was formed. And, of course, we know that in 2002 Timor became the world's newest nation. Such was the level of the capacity development that many years later, in 2018, I was heartened to see Timorese colleagues, some of whom I had worked with in 2001 providing technical assistance on voter registration to the Electoral Commission of Guinea Bissau. So, they've come a long way.

Secondly, the operational plan outlined key phases and activities of the elections, e.g. the legal framework, voter registration, voting and polling and counting, etcetera. So given this fact, and that the 2001 election would immediately be followed by the 2002 elections, it was an important precursor of this approach for what would later be known as the electoral cycle approach that was popularized in the mid-2000s.

I would say that the third unexpected consequence was that the plan would become a template to be used in many other UN electoral support missions. I have worked in several countries since when the structures of the operational plans there were still very similar to the initial incarnation of the plan in 2001. When I look back, on developing that plan, I consider it to be one of the highlights of my career with the UN and I'm proud to say that I was able to contribute so significantly to both the Timorese independence process and to UN electoral assistance worldwide.