

East Timor AUSAID PROJECT

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Paper Summary

The people of East Timor have been left with a legacy of poverty and devastation. East Timor is a harsh but beautiful little country with incredible natural appeal and will one day probably be on the tourist run. Many years of civil unrest, guerilla warfare and finally an Indonesian withdrawal saw what infrastructure was in place destroyed and severely curtailed.

A team of willing workers from the North-West of New South Wales went to Dili and then Samelette in the mountains to assist in the building and setting up of medical centres at two villages but ended up building bridges of friendship with the local people and learning some Tetun to boot.

Introduction

Here at home in Australia, we have everything from services to transport and technology, we even have technology to make our technology work. Yet in East Timor, the local people have very few physical possessions, tools or infrastructure to assist in making their lives easier.

Happiness, as I discovered in East Timor has nothing to do with wealth, or how much you have, but has everything to do with being alive and just getting on with things. We should all visit countries like East Timor as developing and fragile countries because we could all learn a thing or two. These people, following the withdrawal of Indonesia from East Timor had nothing and were just happy to be alive.

Background

A team of 7 blokes from the north-west of New South Wales organised through Rotary International to undertake a building project in East Timor through AusAid. Our background and skills varied considerably and we did not

have a Builder as such in the team, so an Engineer had to do. Fortunately, most of the team were fairly handy and could put their hand to most tasks assigned.

East Timor was chosen as the destination for the building project as their had been reports through the Christian organisations in Dili of the poverty and complete lack of infrastructure in the rural areas of East Timor. These facts coupled with the human tragedy which was emerging following the withdrawal of Indonesian troops and militia made the decision to choose the East Timor project relatively straight-forward.

There was a huge amount of planning and organisation involved in the preliminary stages of the project ensuring that we knew every aspect of the project, contacts, politics, etc. down to very stringent health requirements. It was an ideal case of the 5 P's of planning (Prior Planning Prevents Poor Performance). In fact, the health considerations monitored through the Department of Foreign Affairs strongly

suggested extreme caution and a heap of injections from Hepatitis A & B, Typhoid etc. through to Meningococcal, Malaria and Japenceph were also high on our list of concerns.

Project Aims and Locations

The aim of the project was to commence the process of building a number of medical centres and basic infrastructure in the mountain areas south of Dili. The villages in this area were Fretalin strongholds and were very basic having very little in the way of any infrastructure. In fact each village had one water point from a galvanised pipe supplying a trickle of water under gravity.

The proposed medical centres would provide assistance for travelling medicos to these isolated villages and would also double as community centres/meeting places.

Samelette was our home for the period of the project and was located high in the mountains south of Dili. Samelette, whilst only 15km as the crow flies from Dili, was 4200 feet above sea level and took 2 hours to drive to along treacherous mountain roads in Toyota Troopcarriers. Getting to the village in itself was a success. The topography was mountainous steep country with their only contact to the world being via a rough bush track which wound its way up the mountain along the ridges where the villages were located. Every day we were flown over by UN helicopter and gunships to make us feel secure.

We were only the second team to go into this area and it was a relatively ground-breaking exercise. We also had to ensure that all of our requirements for tools including hand and digging tools, generators, electric drills, grinders etc. were on-site before we got there. The buildings had been designed as simple portal frame structures which were prefabricated

and shipped to Dili prior to our departure. Hence we entered the Timor factor, not having realised that Murphy was in fact East Timorese.

East Timor

Finally we were on our way to Dili, East Timor having planned for every contingency – almost. The trip via Darwin was eventful as we enjoyed a day of “team building” in Darwin before we hit East Timor. Whilst there was some anxiety, we felt we were pretty well prepared.

Dili was a busy, bustling city with an overload of humanity. Whilst there were some well preserve 2-3 storey buildings, there were no high rise and the bulk of buildings had been damaged upon Indonesia’s departure. The main road from the airport (which was reputedly the best road in the country) was a 2 lane bitumen road which just happened to have four lanes of traffic on it, as well as a passing lane and two cycleways. It was a matter of 1 hand on the wheel, the other on the horn.

We attended a briefing by the Christian Organisation working in this area, gathered our belongings, did our grocery shopping paying US dollars for goods marked with Australian prices. The journey to Samelette was interesting to say the least. A 2 hour trip along narrow ridge roads passing through other small villages before we came to Samelette. It was a beautiful mountain village located on the ridges at about 4200 feet surrounded by thick bush, some large rainforest trees and coffee plantations owned by the people.

Our home was to be a hut where we also stored our tools and equipment. Whilst it was basic, it was home with a gas fridge (for the beer), gas cooker and beds with mosquito nets (most important).

Project

We took a concrete mixer with us to be assembled on site, as most of the other tools and requirements were already there. The Timor factor and Murphy soon emerged when we realised the prefabricated structures had not yet arrived and would be unloaded off the ship in 2 days time.

Hence we commenced a number of smaller projects, including concreting floors, setting up drainage systems and a community sink and refurbishing approximately 40 desks and stools from the local school. These tasks kept us busy for several days until the structures arrived. We located a site for the first of the medical centres and that was a feat in itself. In mountainous country it is difficult to find a decent flat area for a 12m x 7m building and the best site was still like the back of a bottle. Hence we had to clear the site of trees and vegetation (No. 8 point test was done) and then cut, and fill and compact the site by hand using some local help.

The structures finally arrived on site and upon checking the manifest, we realised something was wrong. The posts and joints were all missing. Hence we had a cleared site with holes dug for foundations but no posts to event start the job. That Murphy was a devious sod, he snookered us in one hit. The team was disappointed but lateral thinking kicked in. I had seen a civil construction firm's sign on the road from the airport and headed back down the mountain in the Troopie looking for steel wherever we could get it.

The roof portals had arrived so with the trusty calculator a roof template was constructed, and the back of a beer box used to trace a template for the missing Apex and knuckle joints. Armed with the beer box templates, we headed off

to Dili to source the essential steel members. Hazzell Constructions in Dili helped us out and were extremely supportive of our project. We cut all of the available C-section and had Apex and knuckle joints cut out of 3mm steel plate. They fitted together like a glove and we were back on track. The trip back up the mountain was precarious with the steel lashed to the top of the Troopie and the rough track eventually took its toll on my truckie knots on a very steep rough section when the lot slid off the roof into a ravine.

The villagers from Samelette were very intrigued by the structure as it developed and were of assistance where they could help. There were always a gaggle of kids in tow wherever we went and they were great value being a happy lot, willing to teach us Tetun in exchange for some English. Gradually the structure began to take shape after we concreted the posts in place and after a bumpy start we complete the structures just within our time allowance, with the villagers organised to provide woven bamboo sidewalls and interior partitions. However Murphy had the last laugh. We purchased about \$1,000.00 worth of corrugated iron for the roofs. It was loaded on a truck but being as valuable as gold in East Timor went A.W.O.L. en route to Samelette. Unfortunately, we had to leave before any further roofing material could be sourced and sent to the mountain site.

Conclusion

Upon reflecting the outcomes of the trip, it was a very successful project with some disappointment that we did not achieve our goal of fully completing the structure with the roof intact. There was tremendous camaraderie between the blokes in the team and we all got on very well working together as a team using our areas of expertise. The team achieved much more than just building two structures for medical centres as we tried very hard to assimilate with the local the local people and village kids in

a friendly non-threatening environment. It was also immensely satisfying working in a team under adverse conditions, having to make do with what tools and equipment were at our disposal and utilising engineering skills and a fair amount of lateral thinking. Any project carried out in developing countries with limited resources is a challenge to say the least, but the hazards encountered with the "Timor

Factor" would take a fair amount of topping.

Author Biography

Name: Gregory Francis MORAN
Age: 48 years
Marital Status: Married with a son and two daughters.
Leisure Interests: Rugby Union and Karate

Education:

1972 – 1975 Completed a Bachelor of Engineering (Hons.) Civil, University of Queensland
1981 Local Government Engineers Certificate (QLD)
1982 Local Government Engineers Certificate (NSW)
1982 - 1992 On a part-time basis, he completed a Master of Engineering Science Degree course, University of Queensland
1991 - 1993 On a part-time basis, he completed a post-graduate Diploma in Management, Deakin University, Victoria

Professional Associations:

Member of the Institution of Engineer (Australia). Wide community involvement with Rotary Club and Karate Club.

Has presented a number of professional papers.

Employment History:

1976 - 1980 Brisbane City Council, Junior Engineer
1980 - 1984 Yallaro Shire Council, Deputy Shire Engineer
1984 - 1993 Severn Shire Council, Shire Engineer
1993 - 1994 Yallaro Shire Council, Director Technical Services
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