



Discussion Paper No. 2*

**ENHANCING POST-WAR GOVERNMENT CAPACITY
The National Priorities Process in Timor-Leste**

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The model for enhancing the capacity of post-war governments by placing international technical advisors into the government structure while training national civil servants is sensible and, in most cases, probably appropriate. Recent research in Timor-Leste (August-September 2009) strongly suggests that the application of this model there has generated functional as well as startlingly dysfunctional results. The evident social distance and dysfunctions that mark many of the professional relationships between international and national personnel (which largely center on technical advice and decision-making responsibilities) could create significant problems in the medium and longer term if underlying issues are not addressed.

Carrying out final evaluation research work to assess the impact of LCCNR's second program year in Timor-Leste included field interviews with international and Timorese officials who are directly involved in the nation's National Priorities (NP) process. It incorporated research on the context of LCCNR's leadership training activities for some Timorese government officials who are part of the NP process.

This short discussion paper responds to a request to share findings, analysis and suggestions on the NP. It is based on interviews with 25 Timorese government and international officials who contribute to it.

Findings: The NP is a process through which the government of Timor-Leste (in coordination with international donor partners) identifies priorities and sets out ways to achieve them. A widely shared view among those interviewed was that it has produced substantial achievements in the short term. The NP is operational, it has developed a system of regular reporting, and it provides a framework for substantive discussions involving donor agency and Timorese government officials on collaboration.

The findings also revealed a broad sense among interviewees that the process is troubled and is generating resentment and even alienation among Timorese government officials. Three elements of this dysfunction were widely reported:

1. Interview data with both international and Timorese officials strongly supported the common view that most Timorese officials have significant technical capacity deficits while most international advisors are ineffective at building capacity.

* This paper is meant to stimulate discussion. It draws from findings and analysis which the author carried out. It does not, in any way, represent the views of the LCCNR team, the World Bank or CMPartners, LLC. A discussion of the National Priorities process will be incorporated into the author's forthcoming final evaluation report on LCCNR's second program year.

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2. In a country where few speak English, it is nonetheless the primary language used in high-level NP meetings. In all reported cases, international advisors (among those referred to as “internationals”) who have been assigned to government ministries or secretariats mainly attend these meetings. Many meetings take place where few or no Timorese officials are present. Timorese officials related that many government officials refuse to attend these meetings to avoid embarrassment due to their limited ability in English and the frequent dominance of discussions by international officials.²
3. The central instruments of the NP process – the NP matrix and monthly and quarterly reports – regularly create situations where international officials lead the process and, directly or indirectly, pressure Timorese to follow through. International advisors were widely reported to be carrying out much of the planning and reporting work that Timorese government officials are expected to perform. This result clearly frustrates international and Timorese officials alike.

Many Timorese officials explained the dominance of international officials over the NP process in the following way: international advisors should do more work because they are paid dramatically more than Timorese government officials. While resentments clearly run strong about this issue, a growing sense of alienation from many international officials and the NP process was also evident. There was a pervasive sense among Timorese officials that the NP process is mainly for “big” Timorese politicians and international donor agencies (generally known as “donor partners”). The perception that politicians and foreigners dominate the NP process also appears to have strengthened a view among some Timorese that a hierarchical relationship separates influential international officials and powerful Timorese from nearly all Timorese, even government civil servants of high rank.

Analysis: Significant changes in the functioning of the NP process appear to be necessary because communication and trust between most international and Timorese officials are weak and unexplored. Reliance on a foreign language and imported frameworks, instruments and methods, together with strong pressure to deliver on tight deadlines, appears to have accelerated already deep senses of resentment, technical inadequacy and social separation among many Timorese, as well as profound exasperation among internationals. In addition, the willingness of many Timorese to withdraw from activities and ‘let’ internationals perform them runs the risk of further strengthening the truly damaging stereotype that most internationals have ability and initiative while most Timorese do not. This situation promises to impede efforts to build capacity and expand management responsibility to the Timorese.

The evaluation research indicates that positive short-term results may be achieved only at the cost of exacerbating distrust and distance between internationals (as well as powerful Timorese) and most Timorese civil servants. In addition, capacity-building efforts featuring internationals may prove counterproductive if they reinforce social differences that already plague the NP process and international-Timorese relations generally: the predominance of highly paid international experts over Timorese with limited technical expertise.

² In some cases, a Timorese official related, the NP representative for government departments and institutions is determined not by their position but by how well they speak English.

Suggested Next Steps: The development of a Timorese government process that seems foreign to most Timorese civil servants calls for frank and open discussions involving international and Timorese officials on existing problems and needed reforms. Responsibility for the difficulties that have arisen must be shared. The roles, influence and limits of international advisors and agencies in Timorese government functions and policies should be examined.

Given the depth of frustration and resentment that has arisen, the discussions will no doubt be difficult, uncomfortable and essential. If they are managed productively and fairly (not doing so could make the current situation more difficult), they promise to replace current destructive tendencies and attitudes with far more productive ones.

The outcomes of such discussions on improving ways to build Timorese capacity and feature Timorese participation may call for substantial revisions to the NP process. The following ideas draw directly from findings arising from field evaluation interviews and are submitted for consideration:

1. Seek out and highlight the concerns and priorities of Timorese civil servants with responsibility for NP functions.
2. Develop a viable framework for NP timeframes and products that does not feature the contributions of international officials.
3. Feature Tetum (or Tetum and English) in National Priorities meetings and documents.
4. Simplify or remove complex matrices, spreadsheets and frameworks.
5. Highlight concepts and vocabulary that translate into Tetum.³
6. Find out which international advisors are effective at providing advice. Learn from them and, especially, the Timorese officials with whom they work. Find out precisely why Timorese civil servants may decline or resist new work responsibilities and learning about technical skills. Use this information to:
 - Reform standards and techniques for international advisor ‘soft skills.’ Retrain or, perhaps, replace international advisors who cannot effectively transfer their expertise to Timorese.
 - Revise priorities and methods for training civil servants. Institute training evaluations that accurately highlight retention and relevance concerns and recommend revisions for enhancing effectiveness. Conclude training efforts that remain ineffective.
7. Improve the alignment of the NP process with other central government functions.⁴

³ Some interviewees noted that differences between objectives, goals, outputs, outcomes, etc. are too often unclear to many Timorese officials. They might be replaced by, at most, two categories, such as expected and achieved results. Final decisions on such concepts, however, must be made by Timorese and according to translations into Tetum.

⁴ Such as budgeting, which was a source of considerable discussion and frustration during some interviews.