

Information Access and Community Empowerment: The impact of media on civil and civic engagement in Bobonaro, Timor-Leste

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Introduction

Study Background

From 2008 to 2011, Trócaire (the development agency of the Catholic Church of Ireland) supported an information access initiative as part of its Peacebuilding Programme. The programme logic was based on the analysis that lack of information was a contributing factor to conflict in addition to excluding many communities in Timor-Leste from accessing government services and development initiatives (Brady and Timberman 2006, 10-11). This study evolved from routine programme monitoring, and seeks to measure the impact of one of Trócaire's Timor-Leste information access initiatives on civil and civic engagement. For the purposes of this study, civil and civic engagement are defined to include the exercise of civil rights, including accessing public services, and participation in civic duties, including voting and advocating for government accountability. The research findings of this study demonstrate a direct correlation between information access and increased civil and civic engagement.

Project Background

The non-governmental organization Bobonaro Center for Community and Education Development (BOCED) was formed in 2006 by youth from the district of Bobonaro. BOCED's main activities include the dissemination of information concerning government administration, development initiatives, and current events to isolated communities. After canvassing the information needs, demographics, and relative isolation of various potential target communities, BOCED elected to focus their efforts on the *sucos* (villages) of Leo-Lima and Gildapil.

BOCED became a local partner of Trócaire's Peacebuilding Programme in 2008. Since the beginning of the partnership, BOCED's activities have focused on increasing access to public information through the "Rural Community Information Access Programme," with the goal of empowering impoverished and isolated communities to actively participate and engage with local and national development. More specifically, BOCED's activities include the founding and maintenance of three information centers: two in Suco Leo-Lima in the *aldeias* (hamlets) of Rai Fatuk and Bour, and one in Suco Gildapil in Aldeia Gildapil. The information center in Rai Fatuk distributes newspapers and pamphlets, while the one in Bour has solar-panel powered television access. In Gildapil, the information center is not yet fully functional. BOCED also facilitates focus-group discussions (FGDs) on current events, development, and community issues in all three information centers.

Country and District Context

Timor-Leste is a developing country that faces many economic, technical, geographical, and social barriers to information dissemination. Telecommunications infrastructure is extremely limited; according to a study conducted by the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste's (UNMIT) Communication and Public Information Office in 2010, only 35% of households have electricity, increasing reliance on battery powered cell phones and radios for information access (Dooradi and Soares 2011, 13-14). Newspapers are a rarity in the districts due to poor road conditions and inclement weather. As a result, weekly newspaper reach is only 21% nationwide (Dooradi and Soares 2011, 3). Internet access is non-existent in most rural areas; only 7% of Timorese reported having ever used the Internet (Dooradi and Soares 2011, 63).

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Social conditions, including lack of education, also contribute to communication problems. UNMIT estimates that 43% of Timorese older than 15 years of age are illiterate. The multitude of official and working languages – Tetun (or Tetum), Portuguese, English, and Bahasa Indonesia – further complicate communication. Only 52% of the population can read Tetun, the main language of most Timorese newspapers (Dooradi and Soares 2011, 17).

The district of Bobonaro is the westernmost in Timor-Leste, with the exception of the enclave of Oecusse, and shares a border with Indonesian West Timor. It is geographically isolated from the national capital of Dili – Bobonaro’s capital of Maliana is a five hour drive over difficult terrain. Given this isolation, Bobonaro faces many issues with regards to information dissemination. Weekly radio reach in Bobonaro is 55%, compared to 87% in Dili (Dooradi and Soares 2011, 36). Weekly newspaper reach is 17%, which is lower the national average (Dooradi and Soares 2011, 51).

The Role of Media in Timor-Leste

Given the limited reach and accessibility of media in Timor-Leste, its impact and significance are far less than in developed nations. This, however, is rapidly changing. UMMIT found marked increase in media reach between 2006 and 2010, particularly for radio, television, and mobile phone use (Dooradi and Soares 2011, 2-3).

Media was particularly important in spreading information about the violent political events that happened in Timor-Leste in 2006. The majority of Timorese first heard about the events through informal personal contacts, such as friends and neighbors, but national radio station Radio Timor Leste was considered both the most important and most reliable source of news during the crisis (Mytton and Soares 2007, 43-45). This indicates that media is gaining respect in Timor-Leste as a reliable information source, especially in times of crisis.

Previous Research on Media in Timor-Leste

Limited quality research has been conducted concerning media in Timor-Leste, and there are almost no studies that evaluate media’s impact on civil and civic engagement. There have been several studies on media usage, including Foundation Hironnelle’s 2007 Timor-Leste National Media Survey and UNMIT’s 2011 Timor-Leste Communication and Media Survey.

Previous Research on Media’s Impact on Civil and Civic Engagement

There is also limited quality research on the impact of media on civil and civic engagement in developing countries. The strongest evidence for a causal effect between media and civil and civic engagement is perhaps a study analyzing data from India that was conducted by researchers at the London School of Economics, which found “that public distribution of food and calamity relief expenditure are more keenly targeted to shocks in states where newspaper circulation is highest”(Besley and Burgess 2000a, 1). The same researchers also found that “richer, more urbanized or more densely populated states do not appear to be more responsive. This suggests that the technological capacity to respond may not be the key determinant of responsiveness” (Besley and Burgess 2000b, 17).

The economist David Stromberg also found a similar correlation between media penetration and government responsiveness during the implementation of the New Deal in the United States in the 1930s. Stromberg found that a one percent increase in the number of radios per household in a particular county correlated with a 0.52 percent increase in relief expenditure (Stromberg 2007, 100).

Methodology

Definitions and Questionnaire

As a post-conflict and nascent democracy, Timor-Leste presents a unique opportunity to study how media impacts citizens’ civil and civic engagement levels. Measuring these levels, however, necessitates strong working definitions. For the purposes of this study, civil and civic engagement are defined to include the exercise of civil rights, including accessing public services, and participation in civic duties, including

voting and advocating for government accountability. The study questionnaire included 60 quantitative and qualitative questions designed to measure the impact of respondents' media usage on their levels of engagement.

Approach

Interviews were conducted between March and May of 2011 by two Trócaire staff members, five BOCED staff, and two staff from Centro Audiovisual Max Stahl Timor Leste (CAMSTL), another media partner of Trócaire's. A total 45 interviews were conducted, 15 in each of the target *aldeias* of Rai Fatuk, Bour, and Gildapil. Efforts were made to interview equal numbers of men and women.

Results and Findings

Profile of Respondents

Of the 45 respondents interviewed, 23 were men and 22 were women. The majority (66.67%) was between the ages of 21 and 50. Nearly a third of both genders had never attended formal schooling of any kind, and only 20% of all respondents had attended secondary school. The vast majority (73.33%) made their living from agriculture, and over half made less than \$15 dollars a week.

The most common native language was Kemak (64.44%) followed by Tetun (40.00%) and Bunak (31.11%). When asked what languages they were able to speak and understand well, the most common language was Tetun (97.78%), followed by Kemak (62.22%) and Bahasa Indonesia (53.33%). Only 15.56% of respondents indicated that they could speak Portuguese. More respondents were able to read Tetun and Bahasa Indonesia than other language, although 26.67% of respondents were illiterate, with a gender disparity between men (21.74% illiterate) and women (31.82% illiterate).

Main Findings

Due to the limitations of space for this paper, only the most pertinent findings of the survey will be presented below. For a complete set of the raw data for all 60 survey questions, please contact Trócaire's Timor-Leste Country Representative Kathryn Robertson at KRobertson@trocairetl.org.

Media Usage

Respondents were asked a variety of questions about their media usage habits. Televisão de Timor Leste (TVTL), community leaders, Radio Timor-Leste (RTL), and word of mouth were all popular sources of information. However, when asked which media source was preferred (the most accurate and reliable), television (of an unspecified channel) was named by 60.00% of respondents, as compared to 4.44% who named community leaders and 4.44% who named word of mouth as a preferred source of information (see Tables 1 and 2).

Table 1 –

From what source do you get information? ²	Frequency	Percent
Televisão de Timor Leste (TVTL)	26	57.78%
Community leaders	23	51.11%
Radio Timor Leste (RTL)	21	46.67%
Word of mouth (friends, family, etc)	17	37.78%
Indonesian Television	10	22.22%
Newspapers	9	20.00%
Text Messages (SMS)	5	11.11%
Internet	0	0.00%

² Respondents were able to give more than one answer.

Table 2 –

What is your preferred source of information? ³	Frequency	Percent
Television	27	60.00%
Radio	8	17.78%
Word of mouth (friends, family, etc)	5	11.11%
Newspapers	2	4.44%
Community Leaders	2	4.44%
Other	2	4.44%
No Response	4	8.89%

Respondents from Aldeia Bour, where BOCED installed a solar-powered television station in the information center, all indicated that TVTL was a source of information for them. These respondents were also asked how many hours of television they watched daily; the majority (60.00%) indicated that they watched, on average, three or more hours per day.

Respondents from all three *aldeias* were asked about what kind of stories or shows they preferred; national current events was the most popular (75.56%), followed by international current events (24.44%). News shows vastly outranked entertainment, including movies (20.00%), music (15.56%) and sports (15.56%).

Media Literacy

Respondents were asked to name the most important national current event they had heard or read recently; the most commonly named current event was natural disasters (6.67%). Despite the preference for national current event news stories, 37.78% could not list a single national current event. Recall of international current events was even poorer; 64.44% could not list a single international current event, although 22.22% named the tsunami in Japan as a recent international current event. Respondents in Bour had the highest level of recall of both national and international current events.

Use of BOCED Resources

Respondents were asked how often they visited the BOCED information center in their *aldeia*. Daily use was highest in Aldeia Bour (66.67%), compared to 6.67% in Aldeia Rai Fatuk and 13.33% in Aldeia Gildapil, most likely due to the draw of the television access.

Respondents were also asked what activities they participated in at the BOCED information centers. There was a marked difference between genders; men were more likely to read newspapers, participate in focus group discussions, and attend community meetings than women. However, women were more likely to watch television (36.36% versus 30.43% of men).

Value, Accessibility, and Impact of Information

Respondents were asked to rate the importance of information access in their *aldeia* on a scale from one to five, one being not important and five being very important. The overwhelming majority, 71.11%, rated the importance of information access as a five. No respondents listed the importance of information access as being below a three.

Respondents were also asked to evaluate the change of access to information in their *aldeia* over time. The findings indicate that since BOCED began its programming, the accessibility of information about both current events and government services has improved. Across all three *aldeias*, 84.44% of respondents stated that it was easier to access information about current events and 91.11% stated that it was easier to access information about government services compared with three years ago.

Interviewers asked respondents to evaluate the impact of media on their *aldeia*. Almost all respondents – 95.56% - stated that media had an impact on their community, and the same percentage described that impact as positive. No respondents indicated that media had a negative impact. Respondents

³ See footnote 1.

were then asked to describe the impacts. Below are some representative responses:

“We are able to access information quickly about new things.” – Male, 55, Aldeia Rai Fatuk

“We can understand better about the situation in our nation.” – Female, 26, Aldeia Gildapil

“The community can understand the government’s work.” – Male, 43, Aldeia Gildapil

Information and Government Accountability

In order to measure the impact of information access on the community’s ability to access public services and hold the government accountable, respondents were asked a variety of questions about what sources they relied on for information about government services and also how they applied that information to their everyday lives. The findings show that isolated communities still rely heavily on personal contacts and face-to-face communication for information about government services, but that certain forms of media, especially television, are also important sources (see Table 3).

Table 3 –

From what source do you learn about government services? ⁴	Frequency	Percent
Government officials	7	15.56%
Community leaders	7	15.56%
Chefe Suco	7	15.56%
Chefe Aldeia	6	13.33%
Radio (unspecified station)	6	13.33%
Television (unspecified station)	13	28.89%
Newspapers	2	4.44%
Word of mouth (friends, family, etc)	3	6.67%

The majority of respondents – 71.11% - stated that they had used information from a media source to make a change in their community, and 82.22% said that information from a media source had motivated them to contact their government. When asked to give an example, most respondents said that they had approached their local government, including Chefe Sucos and Chefe Aldeias. A small number of respondents mentioned the specific issue they inquired about; those issues included pensions for the elderly and mosquito nets.

Information and Election Participation

In order to measure the impact of information access on the community’s participation in elections, respondents were asked a variety of questions about what sources they relied on for information about the voting process, candidates and parties. Voter participation was high across all three *aldeias* and both genders; 95.56% of all respondents stated that they had voted in the last local government (*suco*) election, and 93.33% of respondents from Aldeia Bour and Aldeia Gildapil stated that they had voted in the 2007 parliamentary election.

The research findings indicate that media is not a significant source of information about the voting process, candidates, or parties. Respondents reported that they learned about the *suco* voting process primarily from officials from the government body Secretariado Técnico da Administração Eleitoral (STAE). Respondents learned about candidates and parties for the national election primarily from party campaigns.

⁴ See footnote 1. This question was open-ended, and answers are tabulated as they were given. Government officials, community leaders, Chefe Suco and Chefe Aldeia are not necessarily mutually exclusive answers.

Table 4 –

Where did you get information about the [<i>suco</i>] voting process? ⁵	Frequency	Percent
Secretariado Técnico da Administração Eleitoral (STAE)	24	53.33%
Comissão Nacional de Eleições (CNE)	3	6.67%
Campaigns	7	15.56%
Political Leaders	2	4.44%
Candidates	3	6.67%
Chefe Aldeia	6	13.33%
Chefe Suco	8	17.78%
Radio (unspecified station)	3	6.67%
Television (unspecified station)	1	2.22%

Table 5 –

Where did you get information about the candidates [for the 2007 national election]? ⁶	Frequency	Percent
Secretariado Técnico da Administração Eleitoral (STAE)	7	23.33%
Comissão Nacional de Eleições (CNE)	1	3.33%
Campaigns	18	60.00%
Party Members	1	3.33%
Chefe Aldeia	1	3.33%
Chefe Suco	2	6.67%
Newspapers	1	3.33%
Radio (unspecified station)	1	3.33%
Television (unspecified station)	1	3.33%
Word of mouth (friends, family, etc)	2	6.67%
No response	2	6.67%

Conclusions

The findings of this research have significant implications for media theory as well as policy and outreach in Timor-Leste.

The interviews conducted during the course of this study demonstrate that the medium is extremely important in information dissemination. In isolated communities in Timor-Leste, where newspaper access is limited and illiteracy is high, television can have a significant impact on information access. The results of this study show that in BOCED's target *aldeias*, television was the most preferred source of information, attracted the most respondents to the information centers, was more accessible to women than other mediums, and had the greatest impact on information recall. Watching television is also a communal activity that may strengthen community ties. As Raumeen Islam, the manager of Poverty Reduction and Economic Unit at the World Bank Institute states, "If just one person in a community or village has a television, many others will have access to it" (Islam 2002, 18).

Another important finding is that isolated communities in Timor-Leste welcome information dissemination in their communities and view media as having a positive impact. Isolated communities recognize the correlation between an informed citizenry and government accountability and thus place high value on information. Although increased media reach surely has negative as well as positive impacts in Timor-Leste, including potentially detrimental levels of television use, rural Timorese seem to largely regard the advent of media as a positive development.

This study also demonstrated that communities, once armed with information about public services,

⁵ See footnote 1.

⁶ See footnote 1.

are empowered to demand these services from their government. This finding directly correlates increased information access with government accountability. The research also demonstrates that local government, including the *Chefe Aldeia* and *Chefe Suco*, is the first point of contact in isolated communities when demanding accountability. This finding confirms the research conducted by the National Democratic Institute (NDI) in 2003, which found that “East Timorese see the *Chefe de Aldeia* and *Chefe de Suco* as their key link with the government and world at large” (NDI 2003, 23).

This study did not find strong impacts of media on voting habits. The statistics indicate that face-to-face interactions with candidates, campaigns, and with government bodies such as the STAE are the main sources of information about the voting process and political platforms. In Timor-Leste, media is not yet a major driver in the political process.

Overall, the findings of this research indicate many correlations and several potential causal relationships between media and information access and civil and civic engagement. Information access appears to have an impact on accessing public services and advocating for government accountability, but little impact on voting habits. These findings have powerful implications for the present and future role of media in community empowerment in the emerging democracy of Timor-Leste.

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