

Assessment of the UN's Role in Peacekeeping and Development in East Timor

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| ARTICLE INFO | ABSTRACT |
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| <p>Date received: 29 December 2024 Revision date: 19 August 2025 Date published: 02 September 2025</p> <hr/> <p>Keywords <i>United Nations;</i> <i>Timor Leste;</i> <i>UNAMET;</i> <i>UNTAET;</i> <i>UNMIT</i></p> <hr/> <p>Correspondence Email: syuryansyah@fisip.unsri.ac.id</p> | <p>This article examines the United Nations' (UN) intervention in East Timor, highlighting its success as a model of international peacekeeping in the context of internal conflict. The study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive analysis method, drawing on a literature review of various secondary sources, including UN reports, scholarly journals, and previous research. The study examines three primary aspects: the international context and the foundations of intervention based on peacekeeping and the Responsibility to Protect (R2P); the perspectives of the East Timorese community regarding the UN intervention; and an evaluation of peacekeeping missions, including UNAMET, UNTAET, and UNMIT. The findings reveal that while the UN operations in East Timor were generally successful in supporting the transition to independence and creating stability, challenges in achieving sustainable development and empowering local communities remain significant tasks. This study highlights the importance of adopting a responsive approach to local contexts to ensure the sustainability of peace. The experience in East Timor offers strategic insights for the implementation of future international peacekeeping missions.</p> |

INTRODUCTION

The establishment and maintenance of peace in areas experiencing internal conflict remain significant challenges in the 21st century. These conflicts often lead to widespread violence, displacement, and deep humanitarian crises that necessitate urgent international interventions, particularly by the United Nations (UN) and various international organizations. The UN has pursued the dual objectives of preventing further violence and fostering the development of newly independent or conflict-affected states. However, the greatest challenge facing post-conflict countries is ensuring that the achieved peace is durable and develops into sustainable stability (Sugito, 2013).

Despite the abundance of studies on UN peacekeeping missions, much of the literature emphasizes institutional frameworks, operational effectiveness, and policy design (Bellamy et al., 2010; Doyle and Sambanis, 2011). While valuable, this perspective leaves a gap concerning the lived experiences and responses of local communities in post-conflict societies. Peacebuilding, however, is not only about institutional architecture but also legitimacy, trust, and acceptance by affected populations (Torrent, 2022). Addressing this gap is essential to fully assess the sustainability of peace.

One of the most prominent missions in UN history was in East Timor, now Timor-Leste. After a prolonged struggle, the independence referendum on August 30, 1999, placed the territory at the center of international attention. The UN played a crucial role in managing the transition through missions such as UNAMET (United Nations Mission in East Timor), which oversaw the referendum,

and UNTAET (United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor), which managed the transitional administration (Blanco, 2015; Sahin, 2014). These missions embodied the principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), which asserts that when states fail to protect their citizens from atrocities, responsibility shifts to the international community (Arthur, 2020; Evans and Sahnoun, 2001).

Although Timor-Leste gained independence on May 20, 2002, the country continues to face post-conflict challenges, including inequality, weak institutions, and limited economic development (Butler, 2012). According to a 2020 report from the UN Development Programme (UNDP), Timor-Leste was ranked among the poorest nations globally, with a Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI) of 0.210, or 45.8% (Farida Al-Qodariah, 2020). While poverty levels have declined and Timor-Leste has recently moved off the list of the 25 poorest nations (Amirullah, 2022), its ranking on the Multidimensional Poverty Index illustrates the fragility of its development. During his 2024 visit to Dili, UN Secretary-General António Guterres underscored that Timor-Leste's independence represents a global example of conflict resolution through negotiation and international commitment (Deutsche Welle, 2024).

Timor-Leste's trajectory highlights both the successes and limitations of international peacebuilding. On the one hand, the UN successfully oversaw a peaceful transition, reduced violence, and supported state-building (Call and Cousens, 2008). On the other hand, persistent governance and development issues illustrate the difficulty of turning post-conflict recovery into sustainable peace. This duality makes Timor-Leste a particularly relevant case for exploring how international interventions interact with local realities, and how the effectiveness of peacebuilding depends not only on external frameworks but also on community engagement and acceptance (Tiernay, 2015; Torrent, 2022).

According to the UN Charter, one of the primary goals of the organization is "to maintain international peace and security" (United Nations, 1945). In the case of East Timor, this commitment was tested by Indonesia's occupation, which left an estimated 200,000 people dead due to military repression, famine, and displacement (Pushkina and Maier, 2012). This situation triggered international attention, including from the UN, which began to take concrete steps to address the conflict and prevent further suffering. The international community responded with missions including UNAMET, INTERFET, UNTAET, UNMISSET, and UNMIT, each with mandates ranging from overseeing the referendum to supporting governance and rule of law (Melsasail, 2016; Prayoga, 2017; Sugito, 2013). These missions illustrate the UN's evolving approach to combining peacekeeping with state-building.

Yet the question remains: how did the Timorese themselves perceive and respond to the UN's presence? Without answering this, analyses risk presenting only half the picture. Contemporary peace operations—in Mali, South Sudan, or the Central African Republic—have repeatedly demonstrated that missions falter when they lack legitimacy in the eyes of local communities. Thus, revisiting Timor-Leste from this perspective is urgent, offering timely lessons for future UN engagements.

Timor-Leste's case underscores a broader research urgency. In an era when peacekeeping increasingly confronts fragile states and protracted conflicts, understanding the local dimension is critical. Studying how communities interacted with international missions in Timor-Leste not only enriches knowledge of its own peacebuilding journey but also informs ongoing debates on local ownership and sustainable stability in modern peacekeeping (Torrent, 2022; Zitzkowski, 2006).

This study therefore makes a unique contribution by focusing on local dynamics in Timor-Leste's post-conflict process. It analyzes how the population perceived and engaged with UN missions, and how this shaped state-building and reconciliation. By bridging institutional accounts with grassroots realities, this research offers insights into the conditions necessary for sustainable peace—both in Timor-Leste and in future UN operations.

Several researchers have explored the role of the United Nations (UN) in peacekeeping missions in East Timor. For example, Oky Prayoga (2017) in his study titled “Peran Perserikatan Bangsa-Bangsa (PBB) Dalam Menjalankan Misi Pasukan Penjaga Perdamaian di Timor Timur” discusses the UN's role not only as a mediator between independence fighters and Indonesia but also in peacekeeping programs, as well as in the economic, political, social, and cultural development of East Timor. Prayoga highlights that the success of the UN was due to a revolutionary strategy involving the establishment of ad hoc institutions with specific mandates, making program implementation more focused.

Furthermore, Flavianus D. Melsasail (2016) in his article in the “Cakrawala Social Research Journal,” titled “Operasi Perdamaian Berkelanjutan PBB pasca konflik di timor leste Tahun 1999-2006,” emphasises the success of the UN in resolving the conflict between pro-independence militias in East Timor and the Indonesian government. Melsa's sail also discusses the UN's role in peacekeeping and post-conflict development, as well as how the strategies implemented can serve as models for future international peacekeeping operations. Additionally, Sugito (2013), in his article “Analisis Terhadap Misi Peacebuilding United Nations Transition Administration in East Timor (UNTAET)” published in the Journal of International Relations at Muhammadiyah University of Yogyakarta, analyzes the implementation of the UNTAET mandate as a peacebuilding institution in East Timor and the challenges it faced. The article discusses how UNTAET sought to build effective government institutions and the challenges encountered in that process.

However, these studies typically focus on the UN's role from an institutional and operational perspective. Few in-depth studies have been conducted on the local dynamics and the reactions of the East Timorese people to the UN peacekeeping mission. This research is crucial as it seeks to fill this gap by focusing on local dynamics in East Timor, including the local population's response to the UN mission. Furthermore, it assesses the extent to which the UN successfully implemented peacebuilding principles at the local level and the challenges encountered during this process. Thus, this research is not only relevant for understanding the specific case of East Timor but also offers lessons that can be applied to future peacekeeping missions.

RESEARCH METHOD

Qualitative Method with Descriptive Analytical Approach

This study uses a qualitative approach with a descriptive-analytical design. According to Sugiyono (2015) in his book “Metode Penelitian Kualitatif, Kuantitatif, dan R&D”, the descriptive-analytical approach is used to systematically, factually, and accurately describe phenomena, and then analyse the data to identify specific patterns or relationships. In the context of this research, the descriptive-analytical approach is used to explore the role of the United Nations (UN) in peacekeeping missions in East Timor, as well as the local response to this international intervention.

Primary data is obtained through document and literature analysis, including relevant UN resolutions such as Resolutions 1246 and 1272 related to the process in East Timor, official

peacekeeping mission reports such as the UNTAET (United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor) documents, as well as related scholarly journal articles. Triangulation techniques are used to validate the data and ensure the accuracy of the analysis.

A historical approach is employed to understand the context of the conflict in East Timor and the role of the UN at various stages, from the referendum preparation to the transition period leading to independence. This study also adopts thematic analysis to identify key patterns in the local response to the UN mission, including the evaluation of successes and challenges faced. The results of this thematic analysis are linked to the peace principles promoted by the UN, such as the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), in order to assess their implementation in the local context. Figure 1 below show the flow of the methodology use in this research.

Figure 1. Research Methodology

Source: Obtained from various sources and processed by the Author (2024)



Responsibility to Protect and Peacekeeping as Theoretical Framework

The Responsibility to Protect (R2P) represents one of the most significant normative developments in international relations, reframing debates on humanitarian intervention. Emerging from the failures in Rwanda and Srebrenica, R2P shifts the discourse from a “right to intervene” to a “responsibility to protect.” According to the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty (ICISS), sovereignty entails responsibility: states are obliged to safeguard their populations from genocide, war crimes, ethnic cleansing, and crimes against humanity. Where states are unable or unwilling to fulfil this duty, responsibility shifts to the international community, which may respond through diplomatic, humanitarian, or in extreme cases, military measures (Bellamy et al., 2010; Evans and Sahnoun, 2001). The principle was endorsed at the 2005 UN World Summit, echoing Secretary-General Kofi Annan’s call that protection of populations is primarily the responsibility of the state, but when states fail, the duty passes to the international community (Noel, 2008).

ICISS further outlines R2P as encompassing three pillars: the responsibility to prevent, to react, and to rebuild—with prevention regarded as the most crucial element, while coercive measures, including military intervention, are considered only as a last resort (Evans and Sahnoun, 2001). The framework also signifies a broader shift in how sovereignty is conceived. Weiss and Thakur (2010) argue that sovereignty now implies responsibility rather than absolute control. This redefinition legitimizes international action when states fail to protect populations, challenging the traditional Westphalian notion of unconditional non-interference.

Closely linked to R2P is the evolving concept of peacekeeping, which provides the operational mechanism for UN interventions. Initially rooted in Chapters VI and VII of the UN Charter, peacekeeping has expanded from monitoring interstate disputes to addressing internal conflicts, including civilian protection, humanitarian relief, and post-conflict reconstruction (Bellamy et al., 2010; Weiss and Thakur, 2010). Although the UN Charter does not explicitly mention

peacekeeping, Chapter VI on the Pacific Settlement of Disputes and Chapter VII on threats to peace form the legal foundation for such operations (Zitkowski, 2006). The Security Council thus holds the authority to mandate Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs) in line with UN rules.

The definition of peacekeeping itself remains contested. In a narrow sense, Alan James views it as an attempt to block unwanted wars, while Roger A. Coate and Donald J. Puchala describe it as collective international action aimed at preventing or inhibiting armed conflict (Lipson, 2007). However, this understanding is not yet capable of providing a functional definition of peacekeeping (Fetherston, 1994). A broader and more functional definition is offered by the International Peace Academy: peacekeeping is the “prevention, containment, moderation and termination of hostilities between or within states, through the medium of a peaceful third-party intervention organised and directed internationally using multinational forces of soldiers, police and civilians to restore and maintain peace” (Stuart, 1984). This broader understanding encompasses diverse UN operations, including conflict prevention, humanitarian relief, military assistance, demobilisation of armed groups, and restrictions on hostile movements (Dobbie, 1994). Thus, peacekeepers are not permitted to use force except in self-defence.

Taken together, R2P and peacekeeping provide both the normative justification and the institutional mechanism for UN interventions in severe internal conflicts. R2P establishes the principle that sovereignty entails responsibility, while peacekeeping translates this principle into practical operations designed to restore order, protect civilians, and uphold human rights in situations where states cannot or will not do so.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

International Context and Basis for UN Intervention

Timor-Leste, formerly known as East Timor, has a tumultuous history, marked by prolonged internal conflict and external intervention that significantly impacted its path to independence and stability. The roots of this conflict can be traced back to the Portuguese colonial period, which led to political divisions between local groups, most notably the Revolutionary Front for an Independent East Timor (FRETILIN) and the União Democrática Timorense (UDT). The civil war that broke out in 1975 was a direct result of this division, with FRETILIN emerging victorious and declaring independence in November of that year. However, this independence did not last long, as Indonesia launched a military invasion and subsequently claimed Timor Leste as the 27th province of Indonesia in July 1976. This occupation lasted for 24 years, marked by severe human rights violations, which caused approximately 200,000 Timorese to die, which was almost half of the population at that time (Chopra, 2002; Glassman, 2003).

In 1999, following the Santa Cruz Massacre that shocked the international community, the UN began to intervene to address the crisis. Timor-Leste's successful independence referendum, approved by a 78.5% majority, despite violence that resulted in widespread destruction of infrastructure and the displacement of approximately 250,000 people, created an urgent need for international intervention led by the UN, led by Butler (2012). The first UN peacekeeping mission deployed was UNAMET (United Nations Mission in East Timor), tasked with overseeing the referendum (Grenfell, 2020). Following the post-referendum violence, the UN deployed INTERFET (International Force for East Timor), an international force led by Australia, to ensure security (Kurnia et al., 2021). Then, in 2000, UNTAET (United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor) was established to lead the transition of the Timorese government to independence on May

20, 2002 (Ingram, 2012). The UN intervention in Timor-Leste illustrated the importance of an international presence in situations where a state is unable to protect its citizens from violence (Simangan, 2017). It also reflected a transformation in the approach to peace, shifting from a focus on interstate conflicts to addressing internal conflicts in states unable to protect their populations.

The UN's intervention in internal conflicts, such as in East Timor, reflects a transformation in international peacekeeping approaches, adapted to the changing nature of conflict. When conflicts shifted from interstate to internal conflicts, Peacekeeping Operations (PKOs) became the primary mechanism for addressing situations where governments were unable to protect their own people. PKOs aim not only to prevent unwanted wars but also involve elements such as conflict prevention, humanitarian aid, and monitoring the demobilisation of warring parties. In the case of East Timor, PKOs such as UNAMET (United Nations Mission in East Timor) and UNTAET (United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor) played a significant role in managing the transition to independence, focusing on stabilisation, civilian protection, and the enforcement of peaceful resolutions.

The legal basis for this intervention can be found in the UN Charter, specifically in Chapters VI and VII, which grant the Security Council the mandate to take action in the peaceful settlement of disputes or in addressing threats to peace. Although the term "peacekeeping" is not explicitly mentioned in the UN Charter, the interpretation of these mandates allows the UN to involve multinational forces, including military, police, and civilian personnel, to mediate and end hostilities in conflict areas. The definition and practice of peacekeeping remain debated, particularly regarding what actions are permissible and when military force is required. For instance, traditional definitions, as proposed by Alan James (1999), focus on preventing war, whereas more modern definitions encompass humanitarian efforts and post-conflict stabilisation. In the case of East Timor, the PKOs' mandate encompassed various elements, ranging from conflict prevention to demobilisation operations, to ensure a fair referendum process and a safe transition to independence (Dobbie, 1994).

In the context of East Timor, the UN's intervention through UNAMET and UNTAET serves as a concrete example of how the R2P principle is applied in real-world conditions. Using a comprehensive approach, this study will examine how the elements of R2P were implemented in the conflict and transition situation in East Timor and assess the extent to which this principle effectively addressed local challenges. The analysis will provide a deeper understanding of the relevance of R2P in supporting sustainable peace in areas of internal conflict.

East Timor, with its complex history of internal conflict, serves as a particularly relevant example of the application of the R2P principle. As a newly independent nation after years of violent Indonesian occupation and human rights violations, East Timor faced significant challenges in achieving peace and stability. Although a 1999 independence referendum resulted in a resounding vote for independence, post-referendum violence involving pro-Indonesian militias and the Indonesian military threatened the transition to independence. In this context, the United Nations, mandated through UNAMET (United Nations Mission in East Timor) and INTERFET (International Force for East Timor), intervened to protect the people of East Timor and facilitate a safe transition to independence (Loch and Prueller, 2011). The application of R2P in Timor-Leste encompasses three key elements that define international intervention in addressing internal violence: the responsibility to prevent, the responsibility to react, and the responsibility to rebuild.

1. The Responsibility to Explain

Before the 1999 referendum, the UN played a crucial role in ensuring that the process was conducted transparently, with international oversight to prevent fraudulent activities and ensure a peaceful referendum (Munhanif, 2020). These preventive measures were instrumental in creating an environment where the East Timorese population could freely express their desire for independence, thus legitimising the democratic process. Although violence erupted after the referendum, these preventive actions established a framework for international intervention, reinforcing the legitimacy of the UN's presence in East Timor. According to a 2004 analysis by Smith, the UN's oversight of the referendum process helped mitigate further escalation of conflict by ensuring that the democratic process was perceived as legitimate by local stakeholders (Smith, 2004). This proactive approach is a key aspect of R2P, aimed at reducing tensions and preventing future conflict.

2. The Responsibility to React

Following the violence that erupted after the referendum, the UN swiftly deployed international peacekeeping forces through INTERFET with the mandate to restore security and prevent further violence (Linton and Reiger, 2001). This military intervention is a direct application of the R2P principle's second pillar, the responsibility to react. The UN's response through INTERFET, which comprised forces from Australia and other countries, significantly contributed to halting the violence, disarming militias, and restoring order. A 2001 analysis by the International Crisis Group emphasised the impactful role of INTERFET in stabilising the region, illustrating the importance of timely international military intervention in preventing further atrocities (Ballard, 2007). While the deployment faced initial scepticism, it ultimately represented a pivotal moment that showcased the capacity of the international community to act decisively to protect vulnerable populations from large-scale violence.

3. Responsibility for Rebuilding

Following East Timor's formal independence in 2002, the UN continued its engagement through UNTAET (United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor), which was responsible for the long-term development of the newly independent state (de Hoogh, 2000). The responsibility for rebuilding, which constitutes the third pillar of R2P, focuses on establishing governance structures and institutions essential for sustainable peace. UNTAET oversaw the establishment of East Timor's national government, including the development of public institutions and systems of justice and law. Despite successes in laying the foundation for a democratic governance system, challenges persisted in rebuilding infrastructure and fostering economic growth. A 2004 report by the UN Development Programme (UNDP) indicated that while the legal and political framework had been established, significant socio-economic challenges remained, particularly concerning unemployment and infrastructure reconstruction (Ballard, 2007). This underscores the critical importance of not only military intervention but also long-term developmental efforts to address the underlying causes of instability and conflict.

The application of R2P in East Timor provides a comprehensive example of how international intervention can evolve through prevention, reaction, and rebuilding. The UN's role in East Timor illustrates the relevance of the R2P principle in supporting countries through transitional periods of conflict and post-conflict recovery. This study will evaluate the success of these interventions, particularly in terms of how well they met the needs of East Timorese society and addressed local challenges. By analysing the stages of intervention, from the prevention of violence through the referendum to the stabilisation provided by INTERFET and the ongoing state-building efforts under UNTAET, this study will contribute to a deeper understanding of the practical

application of R2P. It will also explore the lessons learned from the East Timor case and how they can inform future peacekeeping and conflict resolution efforts in other regions.

East Timor Perspective Through UN Peacekeeping Mission

East Timor sought foreign intervention to liberate itself from Indonesia's annexation, particularly appealing to the international community through organisations like the UN. The Frente Revolucionária de East Timor Independente (FRETILIN) played a significant role in raising awareness about the dire conditions faced by Timorese during the Indonesian occupation. However, their efforts were hindered by global political dynamics, especially during the Cold War, which often favoured more liberal ideologies while marginalising Marxist movements, such as FRETILIN (Simpson, 2005).

A crucial turning point came with the end of the Cold War, which shifted international attention towards internal conflicts, including those in East Timor. This led to an increased focus on humanitarian interventions, notably illustrated by enhanced UN engagement in post-Cold War conflicts such as East Timor, Rwanda, and Kosovo (Lundry, 2022). The UN took on an active role, starting with preparations for the 1999 referendum, ensuring the security of the post-referendum outcome and facilitating state-building efforts, ultimately supporting East Timor's path to independence (Smith, 2001). East Timor achieved official recognition as a sovereign state in 2002.

Although the UN's role is significant in maintaining peace in East Timor, its existence is not without its critics. First, the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) was considered to dominate the government during the transition era from 1999 to 2002, thereby limiting the people's role in the country's development process. Because, through this mission, the UN has assumed all administrative responsibilities in East Timor, ranging from the legislature to the executive and even the judiciary (Dobbins et al., 2013). In addition, criticism of this mission arose from the national language selection in East Timor, where Portuguese became the national language, even though as many as 95% of the people could not speak Portuguese. This condition makes it difficult for Timorese elites to lobby against UNTAET and the preparation of the state administration written in Portuguese (Dobbins et al., 2013). UNTAET is considered unable to distribute decision-making power to the people of East Timor. In response to these conditions, the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General for East Timor, Sergio Vieira de Mello, scheduled the legislative elections in 2001, followed by the 2002 presidential election.

Criticism also emerged from the formation of the East Timor military, in addition to its slow formation, as it was only formed in 2001. The society's significance lies in the tension between the FALINTIL-Forças de Defesa de Timor Leste (F-FDTL) and the Polícia Nacional de Timor Leste (PNTL) funds. The PNTL is perceived to receive significantly more foreign assistance than the F-FDTL, as they are trained directly by UN CIVPOL and receive aid from Australia, which is funded by the British assistance government. Tensions do not stop there; PNTL is considered an institution dominated by 'Westerner (Loromonu)' (the Western Timorese population), while F-FDTL is dominated by 'Easterner (lorosae)' (the East Timorese population) (Dobbins et al., 2013). Such perceptions persisted until the outbreak of the conflict in 2006, when the dismissal of 591 (49% of the total) F-FDTL soldiers, most of whom were from the west, led to accusations of discrimination against them by senior officers from the East. They protested this case that ended in conflict on April 29, 2006 (Cooper, 2012). The UN's inability to block the conflict led to many negative perspectives on its role in East Timor at the time.

Despite some dissatisfaction with previous UN missions, East Timor remains dependent on the UN. Immediately after the conflict in 2006, the government of East Timor requested that the UN establish a UN Police Force to maintain security and law enforcement in East Timor while the country undertook its police reconstruction. Responding to the fragile condition of East Timor, the UN finally decided to establish the United Nations Integrated Mission in East Timor (UNMIT) on August 26 with its multi-dimensional mandate to maintain peace. UNMIT was also later accompanied by 1,608 police personnel and 34 military officers and staff (Nations, 2018). The mission was the last UN mission to conclude in 2012, with the withdrawal of UN peacekeeping troops.

The perspectives of East Timorese society regarding the UN peacekeeping mission exhibit significant diversity. Many citizens express gratitude towards the UN, viewing its intervention as pivotal in ending Indonesian occupation and facilitating self-determination through the 1999 referendum (Joshi, 2013). Highlights the UN's vital role as a mediator, which enabled an inclusive political process and empowered East Timorese citizens to play an active role in shaping their future (Joshi, 2013). This perspective aligns with the understanding that international peacekeeping can facilitate conflict resolution by offering governance mechanisms necessary for political stability and self-governance.

However, criticisms also abound regarding the UN's dominance during the transitional period. Chopra (2002) argues that administrative peacekeeping missions often fail to empower local communities, as their primary focus tends to remain on maintaining political stability rather than fostering local capacities (Horne and Barney, 2019). This critique resonates with the dissent expressed by many East Timorese, who felt that the centralisation of authority limited their ability to influence decision-making processes. A 2007 survey conducted by the East Timor Institute for Reconstruction and Development (ETIRD) revealed that 62% of respondents perceived the UN's approach as overly top-down, which contributed to feelings of exclusion from governance (Fadillah et al., 2020; Simangan, 2017). Reinforces this viewpoint, indicating that the lack of local participation stifled long-term capacity-building in East Timor, consequently hindering sustainable progress (Amaliyah et al., 2023).

The UNTAET mission's choice of Portuguese as the national language sparked further controversy. Given that a significant portion of the population did not speak Portuguese, this decision exemplified the UN's failure to adequately comprehend and address local socio-cultural contexts. Pinheiro et al. (2006) note that nearly half (48%) of East Timorese citizens found the use of Portuguese to be a barrier to effective communication and participation in governmental processes, highlighting a broader disconnect between the mission's actions and the needs of the local population (Tiernay, 2015). Berlie (2012) contends that the success of peacekeeping missions should not be assessed solely through the security lens but must also consider how effectively the mission interacts with the local population and incorporates their cultural and social realities (Shigemura and Nomura, 2002).

Moreover, the need for cross-cultural competence in peacekeeping operations is prominently evident. Peacekeepers must engage with the social and cultural dynamics of the communities they serve to ensure that interventions are relevant and practical. Research by Bove and Elia (2011) supports this notion, asserting that peacekeeping missions characterised by high levels of cultural awareness and local engagement tend to yield more sustainable peace outcomes (Bove and Elia, 2011). Enhancing training and adopting context-sensitive approaches could significantly improve the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions. Despite the UN's leading role in East Timor's formal independence in 2012, challenges in building public trust in newly established institutions remain

evident. A 2013 public opinion poll by the East Timor Institute for Public Opinion (ETIPO) found that 59% of respondents were dissatisfied with the pace of institution-building and public service reforms, indicating a gap in the long-term efficacy of the UN's interventions (Nagar, 2016).

Assessment on UN Peacekeeping Mission in East Timor

The discussion then moved on to the UN Peacekeeping Mission in Timor-Leste. Since the UN's establishment in Timor-Leste, several peacekeeping missions have been key UN operations. The United Nations Mission in East Timor (UNTAET, October 1999–May 2002), the United Nations Support Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMISSET, May 2002–May 2005), the United Nations Office in Timor-Leste (UNOTIL, May 2005–August 2006), and the United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste (UNMIT, August 2006–December 2012) played a crucial role in Timor-Leste's transition from a violent past marked by Indonesian occupation and the subsequent struggle for independence to a fledgling democracy. However, despite the notable successes of these missions, challenges remain that significantly impact the effectiveness of peacebuilding and governance processes.

These UN missions played a crucial role in preventing a recurrence of conflict and stabilising the region after years of tension. One of the important achievements of this mission was the restoration of security. UNTAET, as the largest peacekeeping operation, worked to disarm militias and facilitate the return of refugees, which was crucial for maintaining peace and accelerating the process of long-term stability (Croissant, 2008; Freire, 2014). The mission also helped establish essential government institutions, which facilitated East Timor's independence in 2002 (Croissant, 2008; Freire, 2014). In addition, UNTAET conducted the first general elections, a pivotal moment for the newly independent nation. The mission continued by supporting the newly formed state institutions, ensuring the smooth functioning of government bodies, and assisting in the development of sustainable infrastructure (Freire, 2014).

The establishment of a functional judicial system was another significant achievement. This not only helped combat corruption but also bolstered the rule of law. The integration of local customs and legal traditions with the modern legal system strengthened the rule of law and created legitimacy for the East Timorese government (Grendell, 2006).

Despite these successes, peacekeeping missions in Timor-Leste faced significant challenges. One of the most prominent issues was the lack of adequate local participation in the peacebuilding process. Many Timorese felt excluded from the decision-making process, leading to the perception that the international community was imposing solutions rather than promoting ownership and self-determination. This sense of exclusion was exacerbated by delays in establishing key government structures (Ishizuka, 2003).

The bureaucratic inefficiencies that plagued the missions also hampered their effectiveness. For example, delays in police training and understaffing for key government functions slowed the pace of state-building (Suhrke, 2001). Furthermore, the lack of a clear roadmap for self-governance and inadequate consultation with local communities raised doubts about the sustainability of the UN intervention (Martin and Mayer-Rieckh, 2005). These delays and inefficiencies caused frustration among the Timorese population, undermining the credibility of the overall peacekeeping effort.

The UN's role in Timor-Leste, while crucial, highlights the need for a more inclusive and participatory approach to peacebuilding. Successful peacebuilding necessitates the active engagement

of local stakeholders in establishing governance structures that accurately reflect the region's distinct cultural and social realities (Albergaria-Almeida and Martinho, 2015). Without local support, external intervention risks being perceived as a foreign imposition, which could lead to long-term instability and resentment.

The challenges facing Timor-Leste are immense, characterised by widespread destruction, population displacement, and deep social divisions. The UN approach is comprehensive and multifaceted, encompassing peacekeeping, state-building, and capacity-building initiatives. A series of missions—UNAMET (United Nations Mission in East Timor), UNTAET (United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor), UNMISSET (United Nations Support Mission in East Timor), UNOTIL (United Nations Office in Timor-Leste), and UNMIT (United Nations Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste) demonstrate the evolving nature of UN peacekeeping operations, adapting to the specific needs and circumstances of the region (Suhrke, 2001). Each mission aims to address different aspects of the post-conflict environment, ranging from immediate security concerns to long-term governance and institutional development (Borzova et al., 2021; Suhrke, 2001).

Peacekeeping missions are indeed crucial for Timor-Leste. UNMISSET and UNTAET, for example, played a crucial role in establishing government, security, and defence institutions, thereby laying the foundation for Timor-Leste's independence as a new nation. These missions were no longer merely peacekeeping missions, but also expanded into nation-building. During this period, major conflicts in Timor-Leste ceased (Pushkina and Maier, 2012). This also includes other humanitarian assistance provided to restore communities marginalised by the post-referendum military campaign.

UNMIT's role as a peacekeeping mission was also undeniable in helping maintain security and stability after the 2006 conflict. The decline in the number of violent incidents from 70-80 per week in early 2007 to 36 per week in 2008 demonstrated that the mission's presence was able to defuse tensions in East Timor. UNMIT's presence also contributed to the peaceful conduct of elections, preventing another conflict between FRETELIN and CNRT, which the public feared, from occurring. However, behind these achievements, many consider UNMIT as a failed UN peacekeeping mission in East Timor because it was unable to quell the outbreak of conflict in 2006 (Makisaka et al., 2017). Although this mission was expected to be the last UN mission to hand over all state responsibilities to the Timor-Leste government, due to the conflict, UNMIT began operating only when the situation was conducive.

The implementation of the peacekeeping mission was not without obstacles. UNTAET, for example, experienced operational delays due to the Indonesian military attack in East Timor, as well as delays in recruiting expert staff due to bureaucracy (Martin and Mayer-Rieckh, 2005). One of the impacts was the formation of a new police force in 2001. However, the most serious obstacle was the negative public perception of UNTAET, as it did not provide a participatory mechanism for local communities in the formation of their country (Suhrke, 2001). Through Security Council Resolution 1272, UNTAET was granted full administrative power over East Timor and, consequently, had complete authority in preparing for self-government.

However, the UN mandate was not accompanied by a clear roadmap, so that mechanisms for public participation in the development of its government were not included (Martin and Mayer-Rieckh, 2005). Jose Ramos-Horta said that “there was a sense of frustration and a lack of trust in UNTAET among the local population” (Ishizuka, 2003). These obstacles initially led to a decline in the credibility of this mission. UNMISSET also faced several challenges in carrying out its mission. The first challenge was the repatriation of refugees who had fled their countries due to past violence,

including refugees who were previously pro-Indonesian. Another challenge was border security between Timor-Leste and Indonesia. This border was vulnerable due to the smuggling of illegal goods and ongoing violence, making the border region the only area with a medium level of threat (Ishizuka, 2003). Several acts of violence involving casualties also occurred during this period, although they did not escalate into full-blown conflict. Although UNOTIL and UNMIT worked together, the most significant challenge was mediating the conflict in 2016.

The UN's role in Timor-Leste aligns with the Responsibility to Protect (R2P) principle, which underscores the international community's obligation to act when a state is unable or unwilling to protect its citizens from mass atrocities. The UN intervention in Timor-Leste aimed to prevent further violence and protect citizens from human rights violations that occurred during the Indonesian occupation (Cotton, 2000). Nevertheless, the challenges faced by this mission demonstrate the importance of ensuring that international interventions are not only timely but also designed to create sustainable peace by engaging local communities.

While international assistance, both in the form of military personnel and financial support from countries such as Japan, Australia, and the United States, was crucial, the role of the Timorese people was equally vital. The ability of local communities to rebuild and recover, particularly after the violent referendum of 1999, was key to the success of the peacekeeping mission. Civil society organisations played a significant role in rebuilding trust between communities and fostering reconciliation (Smith, 2001).

Furthermore, the involvement of local leaders and political groups in governance processes is crucial to creating a stable and legitimate state. Without their participation, the effectiveness of peacekeeping missions will be compromised, and the establishment of democratic institutions may be hindered. Timor-Leste's experience underscores the importance of peacekeeping missions collaborating with local communities to foster ownership and ensure long-term sustainability (Albergaria-Almeida and Martinho, 2015).

UN peacekeeping missions in Timor-Leste have demonstrated success in maintaining peace and supporting state-building, but they also reveal important lessons for future international interventions. Effective peacebuilding necessitates the active engagement of local communities, the implementation of inclusive processes, and a well-defined roadmap for transitioning to self-governance. These elements are crucial to ensuring that interventions are not only effective in the short term but also sustainable in the long term.

The experience of Timor-Leste emphasises the need for peacekeeping missions to view peacebuilding as a long-term strategy, not a temporary solution. The international community should learn from this experience to improve its approach, ensuring that future interventions empower local communities and foster self-reliance. Thus, the UN peacekeeping mission in Timor-Leste offers a valuable model for future peacekeeping efforts, with an emphasis on comprehensive and inclusive strategies for post-conflict recovery and state-building.

CONCLUSION

This article emphasises the strategic role of the United Nations (UN) in assisting East Timor in establishing a sovereign state after enduring a long period of conflict. In response to the international need for peacekeeping based on the principles of peacekeeping and Responsibility to Protect (R2P), the UN implemented a multidimensional mission to create stability, establish

governance institutions, and build an effective defence and security system. These efforts also included preventive actions to avoid the recurrence of conflict, such as guidance on human rights, security patrols, and assistance in optimising the performance of state institutions. While the mission was praised for its successes, its implementation faced significant challenges, including local capacity limitations and difficulties in integrating the aspirations of the local population into post-conflict development programs. The UN's experience in East Timor reflects the importance of adopting a responsive approach to local dynamics in creating sustainable peace. The success of this mission lies not only in achieving short-term stability but also in building an institutional framework that allows the new nation to develop independently. By learning from the experience in East Timor, future peacekeeping missions can adopt more inclusive approaches, placing local communities at the core of the peace process, and ensuring more relevant success that aligns with the needs of the affected population.

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