

Mariano Aguirre, Francisco Ferrándiz, José Manuel Pureza

# Before Emergency: Conflict Prevention and the Media



Humanitarian**Net**

Thematic Network on Humanitarian  
Development Studies



# Before Emergency: Conflict Prevention and the Media



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Edited by

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# **Listening to the Voices of the People: The Media, Peace and Justice. The Case of East Timor**

Teresa Cunha

Youth Action for Peace: an old pacifist movement

I would like to present a brief and simple reflection about my cultural background in NGOs. My political training, as concerns Peace Work and Conflict Management, was (and still is) mainly within the international NGO "Youth Action for Peace".

Youth Action for Peace is a European movement with quite a long history: it was created in 1923, in France. Our own legend says that during the First World War, some young soldiers from France and Germany, struggling in the front, were invited to meet for mass and celebrate Christmas together for some hours. After this encounter, they returned to the front lines and had to shoot each other under the orders of their commanders. The legend also says, that some young people, in this extreme situation, promised themselves to stop shooting, to desert and begin a movement for peace in Europe. This small group of young deserters called themselves "Chevaliers de la Paix" and their basic conviction was as follows: we cannot shoot and kill anyone that we have met and who has then become our friend.

The interesting thing of this concept of building peace is that it requires, as a first step, crossing borders, meeting people on the other side of the "line" and building a friendly relationship. It is very much based on a personal/individual approach, and very much rooted in the value of positive emotions. This story has a moral, as somehow they always do: it brings us one dimension of Peace Construction and Conflict Prevention: personal contact, personal relations, no matter the national borders and what is imagined as being national: unique, different, and by definition, in confrontation with other unique and different national identities, on the other side of the border<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> See Pureza, José Manuel.

These “Chevaliers de la Paix” did not succeed in their mission. We don’t have any news of relevant changes in the external relations of their countries (Germany and France), and some years later, another brutal war began, more or less on the same battlefield.

But they didn’t stop their activities for peace and conflict prevention, and during the Second World War, the movement adopted another name and was found throughout Western Europe (Belgium, Switzerland, France, Germany, Netherlands, the UK and Italy). At that time, in these countries, and using Switzerland as the main crossroads for its actions for freedom, the Christian Movement for Peace (the updated “Chevaliers de la Paix”) was engaged in hiding Jewish people and helping them escape from the ruling Nazi and fascist regimes in Europe. In our historical narratives, this period was one when women started to become very important in the decision-making process and their actions very significant. Great leaders were known as very courageous militants. (I met some of them in 1992 in our International Congress in Berlin dedicated to YAP Women and Peace Building).

At that time, building peace was not only a personal measure and was not only based on emotions and friendship. The movement assumed peace as an action against oppressors and for conflict prevention. Taking public positions about political regimes and trying to be coherent via concrete, sometimes risky, actions, was the main way of contributing to peace.

More and more, the discourse on peace began to focus on structural violence in society, and the extent to which war is just the logical conclusion of all kinds of violence in society.

The changes in the world during the sixties and seventies brought another problem to the agenda of YAP: People’s Liberation Struggles. For the first time, YAP crossed oceans and became not merely a European but an international movement: one branch was established in Canada another in South Africa. Co-operation with grassroots organizations (for social changes and with links with national liberation movements) was developed in countries like Palestine, Algeria, India, Salvador, Malta, Lebanon, Guatemala, East Timor, Northern Ireland, Namibia, Western Sahara, Eritrea. Quite often these contacts and projects were mediated by what we call, in general, “progressive Christian communities”.

YAP was asked by these grassroots organizations to do two main things:

- To denounce their oppression as much as we could via the media
- To provide international forums or arenas for their leaders to do it with their own voices.

CMP did so and the early seventies gave us a wonderful tool: the European Youth Centre of the Council of Europe in Strasbourg. The internationalism, the international solidarity started to be a relevant and strong framework of our peace work.

What is the importance of this development? From my point of view, it brought several strengths and several problems. Starting with the strengths:

- Peace, started to be considered as an issue, related to international relations between countries, worldwide; this is a political problem and not only one of irrational violence.
- Peace is linked with rights, which are “universal” in the sense that they are a common patrimony (like self-determination) of all peoples, nations, countries and persons. Rights have to be respected and guarantees of freedom, justice and peace are also a common and universal duty.
- Peace and building peace is perceived as a global question, touching and dealing with personal dimensions, societies, nations, and the international community. Peace is where and when rights and duties are mutual and reciprocal.

Aiming at peace for all, many studies, many demonstrations, much information was produced and disseminated, many seminars, many study visits, street actions, many exchange and development projects, many contacts were organized and made.

This special period brought two key issues to our NGO:

- How to overcome (solve) the contradiction between refusing violence and violent ways of conflict resolution or even conflict management, and the acceptance of, and even the support for, people’s liberation struggles, with their armies and military actions?
- How to include in our identity, mostly constructed in an western and European matrix and atmosphere, the contributions, discussions and the visions of the world, coming from our African fellows, Muslim friends, Asian and South American compañeros? How to make a synthesis and continue our action for peace?

After 1989 Hungary, Romania, Latvia, Russia and Ukraine joint the movement. The old CMP didn’t reject so many new identities and renamed itself as “Youth Action for Peace” after more than ten years of discussions and debate (started long before the fall of the Berlin wall) about our specificity and our mission, in this new and complex world. Nobody was really satisfied with this name because it does not reveal

any special vision of Peace and Peace Building. It only states a desire for action and gives this privilege to youngsters.

If our name doesn't say much of relevance about us, the preamble to our international constitution gives a framework for peace action and conflict prevention, supported by some values, that goes beyond this challenged identity:

"Youth Action for Peace is an international movement which aims for societies of justice, peace and human solidarity. It struggles against different forms of violence, exploitation, injustice and exclusion; against networks of ideological, religious, sexist, political, cultural and economic oppression and imbalance of natural surroundings. It supports all those, women and men, who want to take their destiny into their hands so as to organize collectively a responsible, liberating society".

In my opinion, work for peace and conflict prevention, in YAP, after eighty years of its founding, is based in three main convictions:

- a) Peace is much more than an absence of military war. So, in this sense, peace building has to be founded on global Freedom, Justice and Solidarity;
- b) Peace is a permanent struggle against any source of oppression or discrimination;
- c) Peace is a collective task which doesn't accept conformism.

The question of the environment is not sufficiently explicit in this text so I don't take it as real concern in the approach of YAP.<sup>2</sup>

What does building peace mean concretely? What do we do to somehow achieve these aims?

As I said before, in peace building, we continually deal with contradictions and ambiguities. It is, indeed, a very complex issue. In the daily life of an NGO, we have to face so many operational, ethical and cultural problems that we need to create a few references, limits and non-negotiated principles for ourselves. So, we participate in peace building, at three levels:

- Heterogeneous action for peace construction and conflict prevention, in local communities at the grassroots. This local action has to be very much based in the self-identification of the needs and skills of a certain territory and the people living there, and goes through a diversity of local development projects, personal empowerment and political awareness initiatives, like:

- Preservation of the ecological environment of turtles in Mexico,

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<sup>2</sup> But for me personally, is ever more crucial.

- The reconstruction of schools and medical centres in Palestine,
- Hosting children from the West Sahara refugee camps for schooling in Switzerland,
- Training unemployed young people and supporting them to create their own jobs in France,
- Provide Portuguese language courses to East Timorese students, in Portugal,
- Setting up a pottery cooperative in Cabo Verde.

At this level, everybody can decide and do what they believe to be relevant to their living place, and build up a “society of justice, peace and human solidarity”. Quite often these actions are quite efficient and recognized as useful and innovative.

This local work allows us to use our oldest method of building peace and conflict prevention: we exchange people, information, ideas and projects. We have quite an important network for these exchanges, and everyone, without any discrimination, can travel and host travellers.

At this level we go beyond the local community and are already on the path of internationalism, networking, extending good practices, creating transnational solidarity.

In total, YAP organizes almost 300 international work camps, every year in 27 countries from the different continents. We also organize international seminars, study sessions or conferences in different countries and continents. We exchange around 100 volunteers among the different local projects. We create a wider community via projects, but also via personal relations, affection, and emotions between people coming from very distant and distinct places in the world.

3. Finally I want to say some words about the ethical and ideological reference of YAP: Human Rights. We use the Universal Declaration or the European Convention of Human Rights, as the reference, normative and ethical text, for internally and externally legitimizing our action in building peace, in three different ways:

- a) Denouncing in international forums, like NGO Platforms, Conferences, and UN Committees, situations of oppression. The problem is to find consensus about what are the priorities, concerning situations of oppression; when achieved, this is often fragile and polemical.
- b) To take part in the international movement of opinion—in the words of Boaventura de Sousa Santos, this cosmopolitanism, this way of producing counter-hegemonic globalisation for Human Rights, claiming and fighting for the inclusion of every person in

the world, from any space, without any pre-condition, other than being a human being, in a common rule of rights. The indivisibility of Human Rights is also, a main concept in our approach.

- c) As a legal tool, to claim or fight for a certain right. This was quite important to obtain the right of asylum for Algerian refugees in France or for Albanians in Italy in recent years. It was quite important for our work in East Timor, for instance.

But, once more, we have problems, very often, to determine where are the limits; in what measure these charts

- help us to understand the world here and there,
- help when we have to decide what is the most common interpretation (the maximum of meaning) of a certain right or duty
- help us to remain efficient in our action.

A significant number of decisions and actions are made, based on the belief that what is written down in the Chart is a minimum. Associated to this we use criteria like social usefulness in the context, quite a lot of intuition... and a permanent political debate within the organization.

We hold extensive dialogues, and try to exchange ideas and perspectives, before acting.

We have huge discussions when we take a position, which can be considered quite important from the political point of view. For example, on the situation of Palestine, the official position is as follows: Israel is not respecting the International Agreements, and any peace plan has to stop all violence and assume the reciprocal right of existence. However among us this position is not a final one because while it is enough for some, for others it is too little.

Quite often our colleges from the southern branches clamour for more action and less statements.

## **The case of East Timor**

### *Until 1999*

Since the beginning of my work, I have always linked conflict resolution with peace building, because I believe that both go together.

YAP Portugal engaged itself within the international movement of solidarity with East Timor, of which the most important leader has been the CDPM<sup>3</sup>, since 1983.

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<sup>3</sup> Comissão para os Direitos do Povo Maubere - Comissao for the Rights of the Maubere People, based in Lisbon.



The situation during the Indonesian occupation was very hard for the people of the territory; not much information was available and we needed to confirm and update it, continuously. The main “weapon” we had, was the unfinished list of names, dates and locations of torture or murder, some testimonies and a few photos. With that material we tried to make the so-called “civil society” aware of what was going there, in East Timor. Journalists were an important part of the process and they were invited to press conferences whenever we had a little piece of reliable information to offer. We knew that public opinion plays an important role in this context. Knowing, which generally means *seeing*, is a pre-condition for acting.

East Timor was also a sensitive political question for Portugal and the Portuguese government. It was clear for the solidarity movement that we needed to obtain a clear position on East Timor from politicians and make it public, using the media as much as possible.

At the international level, it was important systematically to remind our friends everywhere that the principle of self-determination is an inalienable right of every nation, including East Timor; we also had to redraw the map of the planet to make the little island of East Timor visible.

We needed to approach different publics, repeating to everyone, with full conviction, that history hadn't ended and there was hope for human liberty, bringing justice to East Timor and its people.

Other nations and other peoples were under the same rule of occupation as East Timor and we knew that the proper strategy was to transform this “domestic” solidarity into a transnational movement, in permanent dialogue with the external diplomacy of East Timor. In this respect, this co-operation between the “solidarity movement” and East Timorese leaders was always close.

For this purpose of internationalisation, we gathered in different occasions and places, people from East Timor, Namibia, Southern Africa, Northern Ireland, Guatemala, Brazil, Eritrea, West Sahara, Palestine, and Indonesia. We learnt as much as we could about all these struggles: reasons, purposes, methods and aims. We created a special network and established personal, cognitive, political and cultural relationships. The empowerment was mutual and we constructed a common knowledge about what we can do, together, for peace and conflict prevention, outside of the formal (political or intellectual) arenas but very much rooted in every day peace action. We learnt how much one gesture *here* could bring at least hope, *there*.

The Council of Europe gave us, on several occasions, full support to do so: financing, providing all kind of facilities, including for getting visas for those living outside of Europe. In each seminar, conference or

symposium we invited the media and performed mostly symbolic street actions, to try to broaden the question of East Timor and the right of self-determination of every nation in the world. To reach as many people as possible was our goal, because we already knew that silence is the best friend of oppression, conflict and dictators.

One of the hardest lessons from this period was the following: is really difficult to break out the wall of what is considered important or not, to the media. Often they know almost nothing about the issue and to convince them to listen was a quite difficult job. Step by step, the silence had been broken and, as we know, some journalists, and the media in general, played a crucial role from the very beginning (the work of the four murdered Australian journalists in 1974) until September 1999 when UN troops entered East Timor to stop the violence and mobilize the necessary mechanisms to lead to a peaceful situation.

### *1999 and the preparation of the People's Consultation*

#### FIRST PHASE

In January 1999, a new hope for peace and for the end of the conflict was open by the former president of the Republic of Indonesia, Habibie. Finally a formal and a legal step were foreseen: a people's consultation about the future of East Timor. This was the main claim of the East Timorese People and the solidarity movement: a genuine act of self-determination outlined in the international law and supervised by the international community (UN).

The Agreement of 5 May signed in New York between Portugal and Indonesia under the auspices of the United Nations created the international framework for a Referendum in the territory of East Timor, about the future of the nation. I want to recall three things about this Agreement:

- First, the People's Consultation, as the referendum was called, had the aim of finding out through a democratic process, whether the Timorese wanted to remain in the Indonesian Republic with a political status of a "special autonomy" within the unitary republic of Indonesia or, if they wanted to reject this autonomy;
- Second, this Referendum to be accomplished needed, "immediately after signing of this Agreement, an appropriate United Nations Mission in East Timor"<sup>4</sup>, (UNAMET) which has to work in strait

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<sup>4</sup> United Nations (1999), *Agreement between the Republic of Indonesia and the Portuguese Republic on the question of East Timor*, article 2

co-operation with the Indonesian authorities, which were responsible for “maintaining peace and security in East Timor, in order to ensure that the popular consultation is carried out in a fair and peaceful way in an atmosphere free of intimidation, violence or interference from any side”.<sup>5</sup>

—Portugal and Indonesia should set up an Official Observation Mission to follow the different phases of the implementation of the People’s Consultation.

I recall these questions to make clear that the Portuguese government had, besides all the diplomatic work normal in such situations, the duty to provide official observers, and to be able, through their “observations”, to evaluate if the process of registration, campaign, ballot and vote counting was done according to the conditions previously agreed.

Portugal chose to organize an Official Mission of Observers including diplomats, security forces (army and police), representatives of the 5 political parties represented in the Parliament and representatives of national NGOs.

I was chosen as one of the representatives of the national NGOs platform to this Official Mission of Observation in East Timor in 1999.

To go to East Timor, in June 1999, raised several questions in my mind, of which two were preminent:

What will be most important to observe, to see?

And:

What will I do with my observations?

I knew about the climate of intimidation and permanent conflict. I was also sure that it would be impossible for me, being in the eye of the hurricane, to remain outside of conflict and violence.

So, how to prepare this experience of participating in a mission of conflict prevention? How to contribute to a *direct, secret and universal ballot, in fair and peaceful way, in an atmosphere free of intimidation, violence or interference from any side?*

I could identify some basic and fundamental actions such as:

1. To update knowledge about the situation in East Timor in as much depth as possible: for instance,

—To estimate the number of Indonesian army and police forces and their apparatus in the field, the militia and their public statements, their leaderships and their localization

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<sup>5</sup> United Nations (1999), *Agreement between the Republic of Indonesia and the Portuguese Republic on the question of East Timor*, article 3.

- To better understand the patterns of acts of intimidation and murder, in remote villages or within cities
  - To assess the possibilities of external communication with East Timor, by phone, email, satellite, etc.
  - To find reliable contact persons in the field, to ensure access to relevant places, events, and persons, to find safe places in case of objective danger.
  - To record prices and general conditions of life.
2. To make contact with the other NGO observers and to check with them if we could agree in certain common procedures, such as having a contact person in Portugal to receive information and know what to do with it, as a backup or alternative source of information for the Portuguese government and the public.
  3. It was also important to talk deeply with Timorese representatives of CNRT, outside of the territory, to better understand the challenges and dangers of the Agreement and also to negotiate in what terms CNRT could be used as a channel of communication to the outside world.
  4. To read the notes of previous experiences in other stages of armed conflict such as Northern Ireland and Western Sahara, and recall the procedures of personal security and how to behave in a hostile environment. In the field, every procedure of security is simultaneously personal and collective because we depend on each other very much indeed.
  5. To take note of experiences that YAP has gathered in years of work in peace building.
  6. Finally, to read carefully all the documentation about the official observers, their role, their legitimacy and their limits.<sup>6</sup>

The main aim of participating in a mission like this one, was to contribute to the implementation of the New York 5 May Agreement, which could lead, I was absolutely persuaded, to the end of the conflict, to peace and to independence for East Timor. To guarantee physical and psychological security was thus, a duty and a responsibility.

## SECOND PHASE

So, it was really important to observe, to see, to touch the truth as much as possible. The truth was, basically, what Indonesians wanted to

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<sup>6</sup> Of course there are other personal procedures, like health, for example, that are not relevant to this reflection.

hide from foreigners. To reach this aim, to see the truth, it is necessary to have an *eye of the way* beside us, to guide our eyes, hearts, movement and questions. The *Mata Dalan*, as they say in East Timor.

To know the field is absolutely fundamental. To be able to move everywhere is essential. Without this linkage with the native people, we are lost in five minutes. In conflict (prevention) we cannot allow ourselves to be confused, cheated, or trapped. We need help from one who knows more about it than anybody; we need to find the proper, the right *Mata Dalan*.

Besides moving always and everywhere, I decided to take notes in a diary. Day by day, in the act of writing, I could also try to re-make or re-organize useful information for the following days. On the other hand, I could use it afterwards for further and deeper reflections about conflict prevention and peace building. Tracking a process, reviewing events and their connexions could help me and others to understand more about peace, or about absence of peace and what is necessary, to make the essential ruptures, in this logic of war and violence.

Being in East Timor during the summer of 1999, I could test my accumulated experience in peace building and conflict prevention that I constructed in the luxurious rearguard in Europe within YAP, during so many years.

#### PEACE IS A PERMANENT STRUGGLE AGAINST ANY SOURCE OF OPPRESSION OR DISCRIMINATION

East Timor had a visible and significant military presence. The East Timor Observatory estimated that there were a total of 32 500 military, police and paramilitary personnel in the territory. The proportion was, according to this Observatory, one official for every 25 inhabitants. The most impressive, was to find troops, recognizable by their radio antenna, in little lost villages of three or four bamboo huts in the mountains or in distant places on the southern coast.

The misery of the population was complete: the people lived from what the little gardens they cultivate could offer. Malnutrition, tuberculosis, malaria, dengue fever, diarrhoeal diseases and Japanese encephalitis were (and still are) endemic.<sup>7</sup>

The development, announced by Indonesian government during 24 years of occupation, concerning roads, electricity, and drinking water, can be summed up as: hundreds of kilometres of roads to give military and police forces access to some villages and check points.

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<sup>7</sup> See the East Timor Observatory newspaper HEA02-12/03/2001.

The availability of products in the main shops in Dili was scarce and of very poor quality (and virtually non-existent elsewhere). Drinkable water had to be bought in bottles and electricity was very irregular.

Accomplishing a phone call in East Timor in 1999 was an adventure and a test of patience and luck. The newspapers and TV stations were completely controlled by the government.

In East Timor the situation was harder than is imaginable: without free information, without means of access to other sources of information, poor and terrorised by military, police and militias, the Timorese people lived in one giant concentration camp, which was their own homeland. The people were always very reserved towards foreigners. The fear could be felt and recognized very easily. This was all very visible and very impressive.

Despite the continuous militarisation of the society during the war, which destroyed a significant proportion of social relations (local leadership, conflict resolution mechanisms, family loyalties), the people found ways to organize themselves in order to be able to respond efficiently to any situation of danger. They were starving, half naked and full of health problems, illiterate, but found means of efficient communication among them. They took actions, every day, to avoid more risk than was necessary. Their discipline was irreproachable during the dramatic events following the announcement of the results of the Referendum in order to avoid any possibility that the government of Indonesia would invoke civil war or any other argument, to remain in the territory and place the ballot in question.

Their aspiration for peace was greater than any other objective.

Beyond this incredible lucidity they were ready to provide foreigners with all the infrastructure they needed: information, food, maps, guides, interpreters, translators, drivers, cooks... To support observers and independent journalists, was perceived as a strategic role on the path for liberation.

May I say, that during 32 days in East Timor (August and September 1999), travelling every day in the mountains from Baguia near the Mate Bian to Tutuala in the eastern part of island, I only saw one journalist: a free lance Japanese photographer! After the murder of the local leader, Liurai Veríssimo, he disappeared.

But you saw violence on TV broadcast news. How, if my colleagues and I didn't see cameras and people looking for information and images? This is a mystery that I never solved.

Anyway, can you now imagine how much and how cruel was the violence in reality throughout East Timor?

The violence in East Timor at that time was such that I could never have imagined it. No one who was not a hero could have been prepared for it, or able to manage it and to transform it into a tool for peace.

PEACE IS A COLLECTIVE TASK THAT DOESN'T ACCEPT CONFORMISM

I came back, full of new experiences and full of the wisdom of my dearest friends, the eyes of my way, who stayed in East Timor.

I assumed the role of building peace and preventing conflict in East Timor by:

- Telling their story,
- Helping the world to not forget their courage and their capacity to change the destiny they never chose
- Stating that peace building is possible even under extreme conditions
- Saying that liberation concerns earth and soul, territory and society, politics and social relations:

*We should all understand that liberation of the fatherland [and motherland] is only half of the objective of independence. After independence, liberation of the people constitutes the other half of the objective of independence.*

Xanana Gusmão

## 5. Conclusions

After this experience in East Timor, some of the remaining questions about pacifism and conflict management, conflict transformation or conflict resolution and their contradictions have become even more acute.

- I don't pretend to find definitive answers, of course. However I want to raise questions permanently, before and after each step of peace building, within or outside YAP.
- I want to avoid reproducing the simplistic demagoguery and rhetoric (too often becoming the normative discourse), of those that never had to take the position of being there, in the eye of the conflict.
- I believe that it is necessary to be aware of limits, but also, to be aware of the potentialities of co-operation in order to construct a common world of peace.

- We also need, in spite of physical distance or cultural ambiguity, to permanently exchange ideas, information, projects, and people so as to build up networks.
- To prevent conflicts, it is essential to hear the people, their voices, their perceptions, their hopes. They must exist.
- We want an international community strengthened by an ecological vision of the world where everybody has the same dignity and can never become a commodity.
- Peace building is producing and redistributing richness in another type of market where price and value go together. There is no Peace without economical and cognitive Justice.

Peace building and conflict prevention need time, research, perseverance, lots of humility and extreme daring.