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## Buy Local With SMS: Connecting Suppliers with Humanitarian Operations in East Timor and Afghanistan

10.21.09 | saritamoreira

East Timor is studded with international organizations that are focusing on the country's reconstruction and development. East Timor's two-decade-long independence struggle against Indonesia resulted in the country's independence in 1999. However, after that independence referendum, Indonesian militias destroyed 80% of the infrastructure from which the country is still recovering today.



Thousand of international aid workers move to the country every year but one must wonder how much they consume locally. It is not uncommon when visiting a foreigner's house in Dili to find furniture made by big international chains, or a refrigerator full of food from Australia, Argentina and the US. Meanwhile, 49% of the Timorese citizens live on 80 cents a day. It is possible to connect the markets – supply and demand – better? Are there technologies, such as SMS, that can be used to connect local producers with this market?

That is the goal of [Peace Dividend Trust \(PDT\)](#), an organization founded in 2004 that works on making peace and humanitarian operations more efficient, effective and equitable through its innovative approaches.

Scott Gilmore, the founder of the Trust, used to work for the UN's Transitional Administration in East Timor in 2001. There he experienced hands-on the challenges of re-development. He and his colleagues noticed, for instance, that international aid and peacekeepers were often extremely slow to get going, resulting in setbacks that were largely due to small and fixable management problems; or, that administrative delays procuring something as simple as license plates for UN jeeps hindered the deployment of peacekeepers into the conflict zone.

But one issue in particular caught Scott's attention. A key issue in East Timor, as in most countries recovering from conflict, is the significant level of unemployment. And in this case, despite multiple assessment missions, almost no donor money had been disbursed to support job creation or economic recovery more broadly.

[Recent reports note](#) that even seven years after the first independent Government was elected, East Timor receives one of the highest amounts aid of aid per capita in the world. And yet, even though bilateral and multilateral agencies spent approximately \$5,200 million U.S. dollars between 1999 and 2009 on programs related to East Timor, Timorese people are still poor. Individuals and organizations have begun to question the real impact of such donors' injection of money in the development of local economy.

At the same time, Gillmore watched as his Timorese landlord used his monthly rent to refurbish minibuses burnt in the conflict. By the time the aid money had arrived, Scott's landlord was the biggest employer in the neighbourhood, providing bus services across the country. This was striking, and led to an obvious question - what if international agencies procured more goods locally so that entrepreneurs like his landlord could quickly find the capital needed to rebuild their economy?

Edward Rees, PDT's Senior Advisor in East Timor, explains,

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We can help the peace operation better communicate with "local" communities in their own language. We can target information to specific groups. It has economic, citizen participation, security, political, social, and development applications. The range is huge. A lot of these technologies are already used in developing countries, but very few - if any - are used in post conflict countries - that is where we come in. We are an organisation that works on these issues in the critical 5-10 period after conflict when most people are thinking emergency - we are thinking long term and new.

### Word of mouth: BUY LOCAL

PDT promotes projects aimed at creating jobs and business opportunities through increased local procurement in countries experiencing or recovering from conflict.

This is particularly challenging in East Timor where the violence and destruction that followed the referendum in 1999 devastated 80% of social and communication infrastructures. When the country became the first new nation of the 21st century, it had almost no technological environment. Believing that in order to build a national economy, international buyers must be addressed, PDT provides market information through its [Building Markets](#) database.



The Procurement Database allows a user to search through thousands of different businesses categories organized by region to find information about each formal business, the type of activity, services and products available, contacts, references and other useful information. Edward Rees notes:

We do what no one else in the world does. We conduct business verification. We ask local businesses 35 questions, and put the answers online, in an organized, transparent, accessible, and searchable manner. The survey forms are manually re-verified by phone and SMS, and then the information is uploaded. Businesses are manually re-verified every 6 to 12 months. This community of business people is the hope for the future in post-conflict states when it comes to solving the unemployment issue, and yet to the best of my knowledge no one but us asks the questions we do, and transmits it to the World Wide Web.

PDT also operates and supervises so-called Tender Distribution Points in its marketplace offices. Tender Distribution Points, which are open to the public, offer access to current tenders from international organizations, private business, government line ministries and military organizations.

### Mobile Tech at Scale from Afghanistan to East Timor

Mobile technology, mostly via SMS, plays an important role in the management and administration of staff and allows for broadcasting alerts to local businesses in even the most isolated areas.

In the first Marketplace project in Afghanistan where PDT also operates, the organization explored the use of SMS messaging using its procurement database. The extensive roster of local businesses were sent specific messages announcing new international tenders as they are received.

A new platform is currently being tested in Afghanistan for sending bulk SMS for tender alerts. Anne Wilson, PDT's IT Manager, says:

PDT is using the Clickatell Bulk SMS Gateway combined with their PHP API. This API is connected to a customized Drupal installation which is the backbone to the [Afghanistan Online Procurement Directory](#). Suppliers can indicate to the verification team whether they wish to receive tender notifications via Email or SMS. As tenders come into the PDT office in Afghanistan we use a web interface to send out alerts about new tenders.

Tenders notifications are sent out based on different supplier sectors (for example in construction where Civil Engineer Tenders only go to suppliers who have been identified as being able to provide engineering services). The tenders can also be targeted based on the location of the supplier and location in which the tender is to be carried out.

Mobile technology also plays an important role in the PDT work in Timor. PDT trains local agents for helping individual and institutional buyers' source goods and services from local suppliers. These staff communicate their activities and results to the Head Office on a daily basis using coded SMS which then replies giving ideas, contacts and whatever the field need via SMS.

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PDT uses [Nokia PC Suite](#) for managing staff SMS. Rees explains how Nokia PC Suite was chosen:

I owned a Nokia and installed the PC Suite and discovered how to manage my phone better. So I thought - so should the staff. It allows people to cut and paste SMS messages for reporting purposes. I tried FrontlineSMS as well, but could not make it work.

Although the staff is equipped with mini computers and Open Office for their work, the use of SMS has proven to be more advantageous since it allows the organization to save both time and money in phone calls and field trips. The use of SMS also allows getting around the Internet gap in the districts while not depending on web based platforms. But because of Internet costs and bandwidth, the organization can not take full advantage of SMS – namely PDT cannot automatically integrate SMS and web based platforms in order to manage the exchanged information. There is still too much time being spent on manually uploading information to their databases. Says Rees,

Currently our use of SMS [in East Timor] is limited seeing as we have a TT [Timor Telecom] obstacle, paying 1200USD/month for a 128kbps broadband connection shared by 15 terminals.

Despite the considerable challenges, PDT believes in the power of using mobile technologies for other purposes such as to populate databases with telephone numbers and associated demographic information that would allow for sending messages to specific segments of their constituencies. This would enable PDT to provide a multitude of new SMS services to both the peacekeeping and humanitarian communities, including announcements to specific groups, and security updates.

Possibilities are huge and the projects are expected to expand. PDT even considers providing donated mobile phones to ensure the greatest possible membership. Rees expresses the enthusiasm,

By providing income and job opportunities, local procurement contributes to prosperity and therefore stability. Our verification team used to have to seek out businesses - now businesses seek us out. The Government uses our services as well as international buyers. We have become the go-to people for this kind of market information. It is a big claim but it is true. We own the territory. We could do it a lot better, but given funding and technology constraints we are hamstrung. But SMS done in a really good way gives this a huge boost.

*Photo: Courtesy Peace Divident Trust. Depicts assistants during training on how to operate mobile phone for daily report.*