



Edward Rees with Xanana Gusmão at Oecusse airfield Timor-Leste in April 2000 when he was a UN Volunteer.

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UNV is a doorway to the world of the United Nations and its work

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[A UNV assignment at a critical & historic moment for Timor-Leste](#)

In late 1999, the United Nations supported establishing a transitional administration in Timor-Leste, i.e. government, that would be run by the United Nations in partnership with Timorese to operate and establish an administration over the course of two and a half years. I joined as a UN Volunteer Political Officer at this historic moment and, for the next two years, served for the UN Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) in the isolated Oecusse District, as well as in the office of the UN Special Representative of the Secretary-General (SRSG).

“ My work focused on establishing a new defense force and national security apparatus. I was very

“ fortunate to work down the hall from the late Sergio De Mello and be part of an excellent team.



My UN Volunteer journey started with a friend of mine who introduced me to the UNV programme in June 1999. He was serving in the UN Mission in East Timor (UNAMET) as a UN Volunteer. UNAMET was in place to help conduct a popular consultation to determine if Indonesia would continue to govern Timor-Leste. I did not join at that time, because I was a student in London and seeing myself in a South East Asian conflict zone seemed a far-fetched idea.

After three months, the popular consultation resulted in Timor-Leste's decision to leave Indonesia, amidst significant violence. These were the early days of mobile phones and my friend called me again from Darwin, Australia, having been evacuated, and said: "Now the UN is looking to recruit an entire transitional administration; you should apply and get involved in history in the making".

I applied and was selected as a UN Volunteer to be deployed to Timor-Leste in early 2000, as part of the UNTAET peace operation. I was only in my twenties and both eager and nervous about embracing a new challenge. The thought of working with people from all around the world to help a new country get up on its feet after 24 years of occupation was a bit mind bending.

I felt very fortunate to be sent as a Political Officer to the Timor-Leste Oecusse Enclave in Indonesian West Timor – one of the most isolated parts of the country. Access was only available by small military air transport or marine landing craft. From a personal perspective, it was an enriching experience, and I invested a lot of time and effort, trying to understand and build relationships with the community in which I lived and worked. Friendships founded in those days remain among my closest.



For the first six months, I lived in a 10-room hotel destroyed and looted in the violence. We had no electricity and hot water and lived in burnt-out old rooms and slept on military camp beds in mosquito dome tents. The only way that we could communicate with Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste, was by radio and fax machine. At the time, we had a mobile telephone connection, but it worked only within a 150-meter distance from the office.

After some time, a Very Small Aperture Terminal (VSAT) was set up and I had my first-ever work email on a huge office desktop in a prefabricated hut. Some people found it difficult, but I did not mind. I was more interested in being exposed to a unique experience alongside a distinct people in their march towards state hood.

Perhaps the most important thing that I worked on, as a UN Volunteer, which had a positive impact on the Oecusse district, was supporting the transitional administration in working with Timorese to develop the constitution. In a local constitutional consultation process, we helped the community of Oecusse articulate to their fellow compatriots how important it was that their isolated enclave was granted some measure of autonomy and given a special regional status. For over a year, we were involved in consultations and advocacy on this issue. In May 2002, upon independence, the constitution came into effect and granted Oecusse special status. That decision led to the establishment of an autonomous regional administration in 2015, and a new future for the population of 65,000 people.

Given the very useful flexibility of the UNV system, I was subsequently transferred to Dili to work within the

wider Office of the then Special Representative of the Secretary General, Sergio de Mello. "Sergio" as he was known, was already a leading figure in the UN and had attracted many of the best and brightest to work around him.

I was fortunate to have been able to join them – I learned something new and important, every single day. I worked on defense force development, demobilizing ex-combatants and some new-fangled thing called security sector reform. UNV gave me a front row seat to the UN system and to gain great exposure how a new country was to emerge.

How the UN Volunteer experience changed the path of my life

“ I was lucky. My UN Volunteer experience changed my life forever. I fell in love with Timor-Leste and have been going back ever since. Many of my best friends are Timorese and those that I worked with at that time.

It also encouraged me to pursue a diverse and interesting career over the last two decades or more. Before my UNV assignment, I had worked in London, Washington DC and Ottawa. However, the sharp left turn I took with UNV set me on a course where I have had long and short-term experience, not only in Timor-Leste, but also in Afghanistan, Bangladesh, Haiti, Indonesia, Liberia, Kosovo, Myanmar, Nigeria, Pakistan, Rwanda, South Sudan and Sri Lanka.

I am constantly meeting new people, with new challenges and experiences – all of which have had great influence on me. Once in a while, I think I am able to facilitate positive change and give something back in return.

I now work for the high-profile UNDP-DPPA Joint Programme on conflict prevention and can say without a shadow of a doubt that it all started with the UNV assignment in Timor-Leste.

Advice to young people, volunteers and current UN Volunteers

I see the UN Volunteers programme as a fast and flexible pathway into the UN system. Since UN Volunteers perform many different functions, there are almost endless options to choose from when applying. But due to the fact that UN Volunteers tend to have operational roles, there is an upside of having a peer-to-peer experience. If you are a young person who wants to get out there and experience the world through other people and unique work, then being a UN Volunteer is a real opportunity. This is also true for mid-career professionals or those approaching retirement, as UNV offers [volunteer opportunities](#) for people at every stage in their careers. Additionally, I would say to people who want to be a UN Volunteer – look to those places where UNV assignments are being posted in an historically-important moment. You could get a chance, as I did in Timor-Leste, to be involved in something life changing.



• Timor-Leste

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