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Re-imagining Development in Timor-Leste

SAM CARROLL–BELL

Abstract: In the wake of Timor-Leste's bloody 'vote for independence' in 1999, development was one of the many disciplines deployed by the international community to help stabilize and transition the nation from 'post-conflict state' to 'liberal democracy'. Over the next few years a plethora of multilateral agencies and international organizations would implement a vast array of activities and programs aimed at improving the lives of the East-Timorese people. 13 years on and despite significant resourcing and expertise, many of the desired 'developmental' outcomes have failed to materialise: 41 per cent of the country's population continue to live in absolute poverty, while 45 per cent of children under the age of five are significantly underweight. Moreover, there is also growing anecdotal evidence that development orthodoxy is struggling to connect with, as well as adapt to, communities where customary 'ways of being and doing' remain vital to social integration. Now as the United Nations and other agencies begin to draw down their activities in Timor-Leste, this essay asks why has development struggled to deliver more observable outcomes and benefits during this period of sustained international engagement? Exploring and highlighting a number of aspects unique to East Timorese society it also asks how might development be 're-imagined' so as to be more effective in the future?

Keywords: Development, Timor–Leste, development practice, development alternatives, customary practice, ways of being.

1. Introduction

'During the Indonesian time and now is the same. We are just depending on selling firewood to pay for school fees. We have been suffering since the Indonesian time' (Valera, cited in Bachelard 2012).

It's a warm July evening in Dili and a group of development practitioners are winding down from the week-that-was at a well-known restaurant along the Avenida de Portugal. As meals are consumed and liquids imbibed the conversation meanders from the day-to-day frustrations associated with 'keeping the donors back home happy', to the lack of local and institutional capacity, and the condition of the nation's roads. Eventually, the conversation comes to rest on the topic of 'achievement' and a single question now dominates: why, given all of the resources and sustained international attention, has development not been able to deliver more for the people of Timor-Leste? The topic is very much of the moment; after all, the United Nations has just begun to draw down on one of its longest deployments. For last 13 years, Timor-Leste has been home, albeit temporarily, to thousands of international development volunteers, project officers and capacity builders. Backed by over 40 bilateral

and multilateral agencies, not to mention some of the of the world's largest development organizations and hundreds of non-government organizations (NGOs), these practitioners have traversed almost every corner of the country deploying programs and infrastructure in the hopes of improving livelihoods, building capacity and establishing basic services (AusAID 2009, p. 4). Despite the sustained attention and funding, the unfortunate reality is that many of the desired outcomes have not eventuated, nor have development interventions been successful in securing the social traction needed to secure and sustain longer-term progress in Timor-Leste (AusAID 2009, p.3–4, UNDP 2011a, p. 3–4).

For the majority of those at the table, their responses read like those of a Development Practitioners' handbook: poor project design and delivery; poor co-ordination; fragile institutional support and security; limited accountability and transparency; the complexity of the NGO sector in Timor-Leste; International dependency; and the aforementioned issues of capacity. Among the outpouring of technical responses, a senior 'developer' ventures:

'While I think you are all correct, to be honest, I think we are doing little more than prolonging the inevitable here in Timor. For me the single biggest problem facing Timor-Leste is that of its past ... And until the East-Timorese learn to let go of the past, the country will not progress. They have to let go of the rituals, the animal myths and the rigid structures that keep everyone bogged down. It's the social practices that are really holding everything up.'

The statement draws significant agreement from a number of those gathered at the table, but it also invites a challenge from a much smaller minority. A much younger practitioner counters,

'I can understand your frustration, but what you're advocating, well, it strips the East-Timorese people of their culture ... of the meaning that is attached to their day-to-day activities. Rather than laying the blame at their feet, surely it's incumbent on us to find another way, to work with the culture.'

The response is swift and direct,

'Look, at the end of the day, the people here have to make a choice, do you want to be part of the modern world, with all that it offers, or to continue to live a tribal existence. I realize that this sounds harsh and it's certainly not very PC, but for me, it is really that simple.'

As the conversation draws to close, I find myself thinking that this debate is similar to those that I encountered elsewhere in Timor-Leste. Moreover, it is reflective of the divergent development pathways that can be found in the country. For although much of the development work undertaken there has been informed, framed and guided by orthodox approaches found elsewhere in the developing world, a small number of NGOs have begun to explore alternative modes of development (McGregor 2007, p. 156, Peake 2013, p. 55). These, to use a term that will be described in more detail shortly, take into account local 'ways of being'; namely, the different ways people see, understand and engage with the world around them. Recognizing and negotiating with customary forms of ritual and practice, these 'alternate modes' are part of a deliberate attempt to 're-imagine' development praxis so as ensure greater relevance, ownership and control for local communities. Moreover they seek to draw together different patterns of social authority and belief in order to instruct and facilitate a meaningful process of development.

Following a brief overview and analysis of development's impact in Timor-Leste, I will draw from primary research conducted in 2011–12, using interview data and case study material to outline how one agency is attempting to refashion development practice to secure and sustain positive long-term development outcomes. In so doing, I will demonstrate how the previously incongruous notions of development and customary practice, ritual and authority are being brought together to form new and meaningful frameworks for engagement and activity. I will also argue that much may be gained by re-framing the way customary practices are viewed and treated by development, moving away from being thought of as a series of 'quaint' obstacles to acknowledging them as deeply embedded 'systems of meaning' which continue to guide East Timorese life.

Figure 1: Timor-Leste and Region



Source: Airman (2011)

2. Development outcomes in post-independent Timor-Leste

In presenting a discussion such as this, it is important to acknowledge the size and complexity of the task that confronted the newly liberated East Timorese nation in 1999; 24 years of Indonesian occupation had left many of Timor-Leste's new citizens malnourished, displaced and dislocated. Moreover, the widespread violence and destruction coinciding with Indonesia's withdrawal resulted in the death of thousands, the loss of physical infrastructure, and a myriad social schisms between those aligned with the previous regime (and associated power bases and structures), and those seeking independence.

Although slow to respond to unfolding violence and destruction, the international response—led by the United Nations in the form of the Transitional Administration in East Timor

(UNTAET)—was significant, with humanitarian aid, personnel and other resources deployed from October of that year. Over the next thirteen years a plethora of multilateral agencies and international organisations would set up operational outposts across Timor-Leste to help transition the nation from ‘post-conflict state’ to ‘liberal democracy’. Now, as the United Nations, and others, begin to draw down their activities, it’s appropriate to spend some time reflecting on what has been achieved over this period of international engagement. In so doing a number of mainstream Development measures and indices will be presented, not in an attempt to legitimise their use in Development practice (or otherwise), but rather to assess Development’s capacity to meet the targets it has set itself, as measured by its own means.

Superficially at least, it would not be unreasonable for many to assume that a solid foundation for the nation’s future has been laid. For instance relatively peaceful elections—presidential and parliamentary—were held throughout 2012; the nation’s per capita income, boosted by oil revenues, has continued to rise (and now stands at around \$US2500); and there have been some significant advancements in measures of primary education and child mortality (UNDP 2011b, p. 5). Though encouraging and welcome, these ‘headlines’ do tend to obscure the lived experience for the vast majority of those in Timor-Leste. 41 per cent of the country’s population for example continue to live in absolute poverty—\$US1100 a year or US\$3 a day or less—and 45 per cent of children under the age of five are significantly underweight (Bachelard 2012). Scarce opportunities for employment and a highly variable agricultural sector also mean that many people continue to be vulnerable at multiple points throughout the year. Social services across Timor-Leste remain weak and dislocated while access to healthcare remains low (UNDP 2011a, pp. 3–4). Most pointed is the disparity between urban and rural settings where 80 per cent of the population continue to live; the UNDPs *2011 Human Development Report* states that while there has been some progress in urban environments, much of the population remains poor, with many rural areas poorer than they were in 2001 (UNDP 2011b, pp. 39–45). They further note that,

‘there remain significant human development problems, notably in the areas of energy provision, food security and nutrition, access to education and health services and high levels of employment’ (UNDP 2011b, p. 5).

The report’s use of the Multidimensional Poverty Index—an index drawing on education, health and standard of living data to identify multiple deprivations in the same household—provides a sobering account of achievements in Timor-Leste with 68.1 per cent of the population suffering multiple deprivations while 18.2 per cent continue to be vulnerable to multiple deprivations (UNDP 2011c, pp. 4–5).

Progress toward Timor-Leste’s health and education targets—represented by the Millennium Development Goals—is equally patchy with each positive step seemingly undermined by a series of persistent and pervasive and challenges elsewhere (UNDP 2011b, p. 6). For while there has been progress in areas such as primary enrolment, tuberculosis detection, the use of contraceptives, antenatal care attendance and the proportion of births attended by a health professional, Timor-Leste remains off track in areas such as, access to basic health care facilities and,

‘...the proportion of children reaching fifth grade, proportion of children immunized against measles, maternal mortality ratio, proportion of population with comprehensive correct knowledge of HIV/AIDS, incidence associated with malaria, and proportion of population using an improved sanitation facility’ (*ibid*).

In a recent update, the UNDP reported that Timor-Leste's life expectancy at birth (62.9 years) was amongst the lowest in the region, as was the level of immunization across measles, diphtheria, tetanus and pertussis, and the average number of years in school (4.4 years). Conversely, the number of deaths resulting from malaria (83 per 100,000) was amongst the highest in the region as were the mortality ratios for mothers (300 per 100,000 live births), infants (46 per 1,000 live births) and children under the age of five (55 per 1,000 live births) (UNDP 2013, pp. 156–173).

Returning briefly to *2011 Human Development Report*, the issue of food security and nutrition also gives us sense of how much still remains to be done. For example, 70 per cent of the population are reported to be without sufficient food for at least one or more months a year and while food insecurity in urban locations is better than that found in rural communities—both are above 50 per cent. In the district of Oecusse for instance, 92 percent of population go hungry for at least one month a year, while the districts of Ainaro and Ermera report rates of 98 and 100 per cent respectively (UNDP 2011b, pp. 52–53). Moreover, children living in rural areas are still amongst the most malnourished in the world resulting in significantly high levels of underweight, stunted growth, and wasting (UNDP 2011b, pp. 47–48). Again, the UNDP's 2013 update confirmed that almost 45 per cent of Timor's children (under the age of five) were two or more standard deviations below the weight-for-age (2013 p. 168).

Growth in formal sector employment continues to be slow with few opportunities for the nation's burgeoning youth (53 per cent of the nation's population are under 19 years of age). Perhaps the most startling fact is that in rural communities, subsistence farming continues to dominate 'employment-like' activity with private sector employment and enterprise almost non-existent. Young people seeking paid employment in one of the nation's two city centres also confront significant challenges, namely unemployment rates in excess of 40 per cent. Indeed, the pressure on urban job markets is expected to intensify over the coming years, as young people lured by 'bright lights' and the promise of 'a paid job' leave their rural homes and migrate to the city (UNDP 2011b, pp. 23 and 50–53).

Energy provision in Timor-Leste also remains low with at least 185,000 rural household having no access to electricity, except through the use of highly inefficient fuels sources such kerosene, plant oils or batteries. Where budgets allow, household expenditure on these items is high, and in many cases cannot be sustained throughout the year. Those connected to electrified grids are often limited to several hours of electricity per day. Beyond the household, limited access and grid capacity restricts the use of electricity in the farming and agricultural sectors. In urban settings power outages or 'brown outs' are also commonplace (UNDP 2011b, pp. 23–24).

Like the *2011 Human Development Report*, the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID) reported similar concerns around food security, education, maternal health, preventable disease, poverty and unemployment in June 2012 (AusAID 2012a). In so doing, it highlighted two further areas of underperformance, namely roads and water. In the case of roads it was reported that significant increases in government funding and donor programs had done little to improve the nation's roads. Moreover they found that there had been a general deterioration in the road network over the previous 10 years and that up to 80 per cent of the 3,000 kilometre rural road network was in a poor and worsening condition. In the case of water, around 35 per cent of all East Timorese were unable to access safe drinking

water while only 39.2 percent have access to improved sanitation facilities (pp. 7–11). Again, there is ‘a stark contrast between rural and urban areas, with access to water being 91 per cent and 61 per cent for urban and rural areas respectively, and 73 per cent and 37 per cent for sanitation’ (p 9). Despite a range of well-funded hygiene programs, known collectively by the acronym WASH, these practices remain poor with ‘rates of hand-washing with soap after toilet use at around 4 per cent’ (*ibid*).

In presenting the above information, the intention is not to denigrate the commitment and passion so evident in the work of development practitioners and agencies operating in Timor-Leste. Nor is it designed to deny or obscure the severity of the challenges they face, the starting position for many of these programs, or the multiplicity of approaches they have adopted in response to such challenges. Indeed, as we shall see, a number of organisations have responded to different challenges, and as will be discussed this includes the recognition of the importance of the customary world. Instead, the above is used more generally to highlight how the modernising practice of development has struggled to gain traction and build the momentum required to achieve many of the targets it has set itself. This is especially true in rural areas where customary ‘ways of being’ continue to hold sway. Similarly, it is also used as a starting point for reflecting on way Development has approached its work in Timor-Leste. Consequently, we are called on to consider two questions: First, why, with so much activity and backing, has development been unable to delivery more observable benefits and outcomes? And second, how might the practice of Development be reconfigured so as to improve its delivery and outcome.

3. The Ontological Turn

Before moving on to answer these questions, it is important to establish what is meant by my use of the phrase ‘ways of being’ and terms such as ‘customary’, ‘traditional’, and ‘modern’. I use the methodological framework known as *Constitutive Abstraction*. Formalised by James (1996, 2006 and *et al.* 2012) and later applied to Timor-Leste by Grenfell (2008, *et al.* 2009, 2012a and 2012b) this framework analyses social ontology through a focus on the increasingly abstract forms of social relations and realities that constitute how life is lived and understood. Exploring ontology enables us to move beyond notions of ‘culture’ (though this is obviously important in its own right) in order to understand the multiple subjectivities and constitutions which comprise ‘reality’ or ‘life’ (Hage 2012). Put more simply it is method that helps to explain the ways in which the universe is perceived and understood, and therefore, the different ways in which life is lived in different communities. There are three key reasons for my use of constitutive abstraction as an analytic framework through which to explore Development in Timor-Leste.

In the context of Timor-Leste then, *customary* forms can be described as those social structures and hierarchies based upon familial ties and genealogy, together with the co-existence of the living spirit and natural worlds. This co-existence is strongly associated with a notion of ‘balance’, which in-turn, is maintained and regulated by the attribution of a living soul to, and preservation of, sacred animals, objects, plants and other natural phenomena—*lulik*. This is supported by a customary legal-ethical system operating in recognition of the ‘still-sentient ancestors’—*lisan*.¹ Customary authority is typically ascribed to the *lia-na'in*, a spiritual leader particular to each community. The *lia-na'in* (which literally translates to ‘the

¹ The phrase ‘Still- Sentient Ancestors’ is from Cummins, D. (2010), p. xii.

owner of the words'), is a hereditary role, generally passed down through the male line. Each community is structured around a sacred house—known as an *uma lulik*—and a series of roles, rituals and practices. Social life is dominated by face-to-face relations and indirect modes of communication are rare. Social standing, at least in the first instance, is determined by familial ties which are themselves bound to the *uma lulik*. Beyond this, life is regulated and framed by a deep connection to an ethno-specific mythology passed on—almost exclusively—through oral means of communication (Grenfell 2012a, p. 211). Finally, production is geared toward satisfying the physical requirements of life and tends to focus on the hunting and gathering of food, while bartering and other forms of reciprocity comprise the principle modes of exchange (Grenfell 2012b, p. 90).

When describing the *traditional*, we refer to patterns of social organisation and hierarchy understood through a common conception of the cosmos together with a connection to the physical world. Traditional forms of authority, therefore, emerge from an extended claim to an all-knowing cosmic creator, or God. This is then extended and legitimised through the institutional forms embodying the claim. In Timor-Leste, the role of the Catholic priest or nun—operating as authorised representatives of the Catholic Church—are exemplars of this traditional mode of authority. Social life is regulated and framed by an individual's relationship to the church—or parish—and then more abstractly to a universal community of Catholics. In this, a diverse collection of people are bound together by common acts of worship—such as the act of attending mass, baptism, or reconciliation—and belief in a common destiny. In terms of production, we see the development of agricultural tools and planting techniques for the purposes extracting surplus, suggesting a move to manipulate nature. Monetised systems of exchange also begin to emerge in support of trading systems. And the consolidation and codification of language is both supported and reinforced by printed forms of communication (although these are primarily related to the activities of the church eg. Bibles providing the basis of faith) (Grenfell 2012b, p. 90).

Finally, the *Modern* is understood as a 'system of social integration characterised by highly abstract systems of social relations constituted predominately through disembodied relations' (Grenfell 2012a, p. 211). Authority is underpinned by the notion of 'merit' while decision making *processes* are based on *science* and *rationality*. In the context of Timor-Leste, the technical advisor, NGO worker or elected official are exemplar's of modern authority. In turn, these positions are supported by notions of citizenship and the emergence of an abstract social contract between the state and the individual. Mass forms of print media, radio and other digital modes of communication are present. The construction and use of mobile phone networks is one such example of the modern mode of communication in Timor-Leste. Production also begins to be formalised within industrial modes of assembly and harvest, and is further promulgated by the sale of goods and services to local and international markets. This is underpinned by digital modes of currency exchange (*ibid*). The creation of export related industries in Timor-Leste, such as coffee and oil, are two examples of this modern mode of production

Having briefly sketched out these three categories it is worth noting that these three formations should not be seen as *rigid* or *incompatible* categories, but rather a series of *semi-porous layers* that have the capacity to operate and co-exist in recognition of one another. Consequently, the nation of Timor-Leste can be seen as more than an 'undeveloped' (or under developed) nation with 'modern' aspirations but as a nation possessing several integrated layers of socio-cultural difference. For while authors such as Babo-Sores (2004), Cummins (2010, 2011, and Leach 2012), Grenfell (2008, 2012a and 2012b), Jennaway

(2008), McWilliam (2001, 2003a, 2003b, and Traube 2011), Palmer (2010), Trinidad (2012), and Wallis (2012 and 2013) have each noted the dominance of *customary ways* across various aspects of life, it is also clear that many in Timor-Leste engage with, as well as move across, traditional and modern formations on a regular basis. As Grenfell notes,

‘It is possible to see how a person may engage in a modern mode of production (working in an NGO as a policy advisor), continue to performing traditional ceremonies of faith (attending mass) and still engage fully in customary culture (for instance the burial of person)’ (2012a, p. 211).

It is this sense of drawing together different patterns of integration and authority, even when in tension, that a number of organisations are now working to re-imagine development practice in Timor-Leste. And we shall return to this shortly.

4. Explaining limited outcomes

Coming back to the question at hand, namely, why has development been unable to produce more observable benefits and outcomes? It is worth noting that approaches to this question have tended to focus on a range of technical factors, such as:

- Poor project design and delivery;
- Issues related to resourcing and co-ordination;
- Fragile institutional support and security;
- Limited accountability and transparency measures;
- An overly complex NGO sector combined with limited co-operation, engagement and geographical focus of donors; and
- Issues related to local or institutional capacity (see, AusAID 2009, 2012a, 2012b; RDTL 2010; APSI 2011; UNDP 2011b).

While not wanting to deny these factors, or their relevance to the success (or otherwise) of Development activities, here, interview data—taken from the Collaborative Learning Project’s (CDA²) *Listening Project: Field Visit Report, Timor-Leste* (2008), as well as those that I conducted in Timor-Leste over June and July 2012—is used to expand this analysis and to explore a number of social aspects and tensions associated with Development practice.

The first of these tensions lies in the short-term, cyclical or programmatic nature of development practice—otherwise known as the project lifecycle—and the time required to build sustainable long-term relationships. Many interviewees cited in the *Listening Project* felt that International NGOs (INGOs) and development practitioners did not spend sufficient time with the community prior to commencing the project (CDA 2008, pp. 11–15). Moreover, they felt that the practitioners were more interested in collecting data, writing reports and completing the tasks associated with their deployment, than getting close to the community. For example,

² The Collaborative Learning Project (CDA) is a not-for-profit organization based in Cambridge, Massachusetts (USA) committed to improving the effectiveness of international actors who provide humanitarian assistance, engage in peace practice, and are involved in supporting sustainable development. The CDA’s *Listening Project* undertakes a comprehensive and systematic exploration of the ideas and insights of people who live in societies that have been on the recipient side of international assistance efforts.

‘They just come, do their project, go back, and there is no change. Members always ask INGOs to collaborate with them...INGOs must ask for ideas of the local people, NGOs implements their projects without the consultation with the leaders... there is no clear objective in terms of operation and maintenance... Organizations get their data from the national level and just bring their stuff’ (Local government official, Bobonaro, CDA 2008, p. 19).

And,

‘Some advisors don’t want to share knowledge. They just sit in front of computers, writing reports. In many programs, the local counterparts don’t know about the budget. What’s spent? What’s left? Some (advisors) just do it for themselves and when their contracts are over, they never come back’ (Timorese ministry official, CDA 2008, p. 13).

Furthermore, they expressed frustration at a perceived unwillingness to learn about their ways. Put another way,

‘For planning, NGOs must go down to the village, sleep there, and then ask “what do you want to do?” They should be there for a week asking “what do you want?”’ (Timorese advisor to the government, CDA 2008, p. 14).

And,

‘NGOs never come to us, especially international agencies, to speak with us directly. If they did, they would understand our needs... We ask the international people to come to this village and see our situation... Because of this, we have never had a relationship with an NGO’ (Villagers near Maubisse, CDA 2008, p. 14).

The second tension relates to the notion of pre-set ‘development outcomes’ and the perceived externalisation of the community’s ‘decision-making’ functions. This in turn appears to be further complicated by the need to meet the ongoing expectations of donors, technical advisors and political actors (Timorese NGO representative, Dili, 3 July 2012). As one *Listening Project* participant noted,

‘Sometimes NGOs want to implement their own projects, and don’t really see the problems the community confronts’ (International aid worker, CDA 2008, p. 17).

Another, this time a somewhat reflexive international development practitioner, added:

‘The target groups don’t care for the targets of the donors or international politics. They want to see their situations improved. The NGOs or the implementing organizations are in between the two, managing the expectations of both sides. The expectations of our target groups may differ from those who give us money. We just have to admit that there may be a gap’ (International funder and implementer, CDA 2008, p. 17).

Commenting on the effect of Donor policies and expectations of change, one local NGO representative stated,

‘You have to spend all this money within three months before the project closes and this is not helpful or realistic... There is pressure from the donor to implement a project, even when the community is not ready. This creates a lot of tension’ (CDA 2008, p. 17).

Perhaps the most significant tension of all however, is the regard in which customary society is frequently held by those in mainstream Development. As one interviewee noted ‘our beliefs and rituals are seen by *outsiders* as being untrue and of holding up progress’ (East Timorese NGO representative, Dili, 3 July 2012). On one level this confirms a gap between the *outsiders*’ need for progress and the *insiders*’ need to progress while preserving local ways of being. On another, it highlights that Development can be a point of cultural contestation—with actors engaging, resisting or withdrawing depending on the projects’ sensitivity towards customary ways. As this same interviewee explained, while highlighting the importance of *sacred* water sources (due to a belief that the water has life and will):

‘Believe it or not, that's our culture. You [an outsider] may not believe it, but it's true to us’ (National NGO representative, Dili, 3 July 2012).

Taken individually, each of the above points of tension represents a significant challenge to the adaptive capacities of effective development practice. Taken as a whole however, they also seem to conspire against the identification, recognition and comprehension of other ‘ways of being and doing’. Consequently, customary systems tend seem to be ignored, overlooked or dismissed (Palmer 2010, p. 357–9) in ways similar to those articulated by Post-Development literature (Escobar 1988, 1992, 1995; Esteva 1991, 2001; Esteva and Prakesh 1997).

Again, in presenting the above discussion, the intention is not to provide definitive statements that cover all development related activity in Timor-Leste. Nor is it designed to obscure the diversity of approaches adopted by NGOs in responding to the challenges they encounter. Indeed, there are examples of organisations whose respect, recognition and understanding of customary practices has seen their ‘modern’ work drawn into customary domains to form new and meaningful frameworks for development. However my argument here is that these alternative forms of development (i.e. those which move beyond the *technical* acts in order to more fully appreciate the *social reality* in which development operates) are often restricted to the margins of practice, as exceptions, rather than the rule. In an attempt to illustrate how mainstream Development practice might be reconfigured so as to be more effective, I now turn to a case study to illustrate a positive example of a development organisation drawing together different patterns of social integration and authority.

5. Clean drinking water in Ainaro

In this case study we examine the sensitive issue of water management in a small mountain village located outside the township of Manutaci (Manutassi), in the district of Ainaro. The village is home to a population of approximately 700 people or 100 households. Its nearest source of drinkable water is a ‘well-spring’ located several kilometres away from the village (Project Officer, Caritas Australia, Dili, 2 July 2012).

Socially, the people of Ainaro, and particularly those in its mountainous reaches, have been able to retain strong connections with customary forms of authority, practice and ritual.

Indeed, life in these areas continues to be framed by a living understanding of the past and an ongoing connection with the living, ancestral and natural worlds. This connection is particularly strong around specific water formations where the drawing, drinking or diverting of water is heavily regulated by the customary ‘owner of the water’ known as the *bee na’in*. Despite its sacred status, much of the water accessible around Ainaro continues to be unsafe to drink, especially if unfiltered (Project Officer, Caritas Australia, Dili, 2 July 2012).

Between 2002 and 2010, three attempts to install a safe drinking water facility in the village by *outside* organisations (national and international) each failed; rejected by the local community. At times this rejection was quite overt. On one occasion the water piping was deliberately damaged by villagers operating in fear of ancestral reprisal, on another the piping was removed and hidden from the contractors. As was explained to me, the problems of these development interventions were twofold. First, the location of proposed water source and piping trails were considered to be *lulik* (sacred), and disturbing their natural flow and formation without paying due recognition and sacrifice was anathema. Second, the time spent within the community by the agencies and NGOs overseeing the project was to be insufficient by the local villagers (Project Officer, Caritas Australia, Dili, 2 July 2012).

Working alongside a number of local leaders and the population of Manutaci at large, the Catholic development agency Caritas Australia opened a 12-month consultation with the community in early 2011. The local leaders included those from customary forms of authority such as the *bee na’in*, representatives of traditional institutions such as the Catholic priest, and a host of modern officials including the *xefe aldeia* (hamlet chief), *xefe de suku* (village chief), district administrator and the PNTL (national police force) (Project Officer, Caritas Australia, Dili, 2 July 2012).

The consultation process itself involved multiple visits by Caritas staff based in Dili—often staying in the community for days or weeks at a time—a series of community based meetings and a number of ceremonial acts. Guided walks or ‘surveys’ were also undertaken by Caritas staff with customary leaders in order to identify potential water sources and ‘safe’ corridors for piping and filtration. Discussions around the community’s financial and physical ‘contributions’ toward the upkeep and maintenance of the system, were also held. Ultimately, the project was ‘given permission’ by the community and sealed in a ceremony involving community elders, the sacrifice of a buffalo and the signing of a contract. In recognition of the project’s ongoing connection with both the natural and ancestral domains another ceremony was held upon completion of the building stage of the project. Beyond recognition, the ceremony also called for the continued favour of the water spirits and that of the ancestors,

‘Yeah, to get permission, like the ceremony and then we start a project. But when we finish we also invite again the leader to make a ceremony, that hopefully the water will run properly, will run to follow the pipe’ (Project Officer, Caritas Australia, Dili, 2 July 2012).

Finally, a number of community members were trained in the maintenance and upkeep of the system. An internally regulated community contribution scheme—based on 50 cents per household per month—was also established cover the cost of maintenance and repair work.

Reflecting on this experience, perhaps the single most important factor behind the project was that the process and practices underpinning it held intrinsic value and meaning for people of

the community—they arose largely from the dominant customary ways of being. Moreover, these practices drew upon, and integrated, prevailing social values and beliefs, recognising multiple authorities and ways of knowing the world, including those in which water has spirit and life of its own. Such an approach contrasts strongly with what often appears to be an un-reflexive modernity on the part of the development industry which often attempts to introduce and operationalize external practices through a myriad of integrative means. Put another way, rather than seeking to overlay customary practices and beliefs with a modern technological approach to safe drinking water, Caritas allowed their work to be re-interpreted and re-constructed in ways that maintained meaning for the local community.

Another factor underlying the programs success lay in its capacity to re-locate development's decision making functions from those found *outside* the community to those already operating *within*. Ceding control of elements of the development process allowed the community to interpret the proceedings with differing levels of adherence, recognition and legitimacy, which, in-turn ensured the community's capacity to mediate change and maintain social cohesion. This was ultimately reinforced through the establishment of an internally regulated maintenance regime and contribution scheme.

It also worth highlighting the timeframe adopted to consult, design and implement each step of the project. As we have already noted, a prolonged and intimate engagement (of the type seen in this case) is all too often the exception rather than the rule, due the demands of 'project life cycle'. However, the lengthy periods of engagement in this case study appear to have been critical to facilitating discussion, debate and the contestation of new ideas. In this sense, Caritas helped to create a localised space in which different patterns of integration and authority could be negotiated and adapted to suit local ways.

6. Areas of tension

In presenting a Development Framework which seeks to integrate itself across customary and moderns of practice it is important to acknowledge the challenges that could well emerge. For instance the community's need to retain social harmony and cohesion may well impinge upon/override the rights and needs of an individual. There is also the potential for existing power structures to be reinforced within a community. Moreover, the prevailing social structures and norms could be used to limit representation and participation, or worse, coerce community based projects for individual or familial benefit. There is also the very real prospect that organizations may be perceived as valorising customary practices, which in-turn, could jeopardize much needed funding and political support. Indeed, those development organizations who depend on the funding and support of national or international human rights based agencies may well struggle to overcome some of the latter's concerns about the human rights (or wrongs) within customary social formations, and lose their support. Finally, there is a danger in agencies and practitioners viewing and regarding customary practice and authority in operational terms only, that is a collection of readymade frameworks and community gatekeepers which can be 'utilised' for the purposes of furthering a particular outside-directed Development agenda. To be clear, this is not what is being argued for here. Rather, it is suggested that Development must work towards opening spaces in which 'local people and organisations are able to appropriate development interventions to their own ends' (Escobar 2007, p. 10).

These and many other problems could emerge from the development framework being advocated here, as each of the above noted challenges reflect possible points of tension that lie between modern and customary practice. At first glance, the resultant intersection could be problematic: any development framework which seeks to integrate itself across customary and modern patterns of practice would almost assuredly face these very same tensions. However, it is argued that, as we have seen in this case study, much more can be achieved by working through these tensions than persisting with orthodox approaches which seek to establish one mode of being at the cost of another. Working in this fashion also seems to go some way towards generating the space for communities to genuinely determine their own future as it allows for meaningful acts of exchange, negotiation and mediation that would not otherwise occur.

Conclusion

With the help of a case study, this paper has attempted to create a space in which the apparently ‘incongruous’ notions of development and customary practice could be re-interpreted, re-framed and most importantly, re-imagined. The justification for considering such a framework is straightforward: the people of Timor-Leste remain deeply connected to the customary world. Furthermore, the practices, rituals and authority associated with these ‘ways of being’ continue to be observed and respected on a daily basis. These practices have also shown themselves to be remarkably robust and adaptable. For some, this re-imagining may well challenge the essence of what they consider ‘Development’ to be. It is clear however that, despite considerable time and resources, Development’s modernising processes have struggled to significantly reduce poverty and improve human development in Timor-Leste. Perhaps now is the time for development actors to embrace the challenge of reflecting on their processes, to learn and adapt to their ‘on-the-ground’ experience.

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