

Community arts in Timor-Leste 2001-2011:

the contribution of the arts to international development goals

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Abstract: Artists, artworkers and organisations from other countries have been active in Timor-Leste over the past decade, seeking to contribute to the development of the new nation. Artists have sought to apply their professional skills in art-making for the benefit of others, while international organisations, including aid agencies, have aimed to reach social, political or economic goals through the instrumental use of arts programs. Many of these activities have involved Australians, while other contributors have come from other countries around the world. This paper includes a brief overview of the literature around these initiatives in Timor-Leste, and a summary of activities that have occurred over the past ten years, exploring the intended goals of the programs implemented. The relationship of this work to frameworks including UN Human Rights declarations, Hawkes' Four Pillars of Sustainability and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is considered. A development of the MDGs is proposed in which the cultural dimension of human life is given credence along with social, economic and environmental goals.

Introducing Timor-Leste

The emerging nation of Timor-Leste faces many social, economic, political and cultural challenges as it rebuilds itself after gaining independence in 2002. This tiny half island, north of Australia and east of Indonesia, was an isolated colony of Portugal from the mid-1500s to 1975, when the colonisers withdrew, leaving the country abysmally neglected and poorly prepared for self-rule. Timor's near neighbour Indonesia took the opportunity of that leadership void and invaded the island immediately. Indonesia's subsequent occupation resulted in the deaths of one-third of the population over 25 years through starvation, massacres and the toll of the long drawn-out guerrilla battle. Murder, torture, rape and enforced sterilization were used to great effect (Connelly, 2003).

A long-awaited independence referendum in 1999 saw a massive turnout of the Timorese people (90%), with the overwhelming majority (78.5%) voting for independence (AusAID, 2008) despite the threat of severe consequences. The reprisal was as vicious as expected: 2,000 East Timorese were killed and 75% of the country's infrastructure was decimated by Indonesian militia and para-militia. One third of the population, some 240,000 people, fled their homes and were forcibly relocated to the Indonesian province of West Timor (CAVR, 2005).

In May 2002, the fighting spirit of the people of Timor-Leste finally reaped its rewards. Timor Lorosáe became the first new democracy of the 21st century. A new President, Parliament and government were established, and the UN committed to significant support. Further challenges arose, in 2006 with outbreaks of violence and civic unrest, and in 2008 with assassination attempts on President Ramos Horta and Prime Minister Xanana Gusmao. However, by 2010, this nation of 1.1 million people finally enjoyed relative peace and stability, and President Horta declared the capital of Dili, a 'City of Peace'.

The value of cultural development

There is a growing international recognition of the value of culture, including the arts, to communities and individuals around the world. From the broadest international policy charter to the most specific studies, awareness is increasing of the importance of the cultural dimension in a meaningful life experience. Awareness is also growing of the important relationship between culture and other domains of significance: society, economy and environment.

The United Nations' Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) proclaims that, "Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, and to enjoy the arts and share in scientific advancement and its benefits" (United Nations, 1948, Article 27, 1). The International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, adopted in 1966, further elaborates those rights: "All peoples have the right of self-determination.... (to) freely pursue their economic, social and cultural development" (United Nations, 1966, Article 1, Part I). More recently, UNESCO, in the Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity, offers a clear link between culture and human rights: "Cultural diversity can be protected and promoted only if human rights and fundamental freedoms, such as freedom of expression, information and communication, as well as the ability of individuals to choose cultural expressions, are guaranteed" (UNESCO, 2001, Article 2.1). This broadly framed document, a first for the international community, considers cultural diversity as necessary for human kind as biodiversity is for nature.

Cultural analyst Jon Hawkes argues that the cultural dimension ought to be considered as an essential component of all public planning and policy (Hawkes, 2001). His 'four pillar' framework adds the fourth, cultural, dimension to the triple bottom line approach of economic viability, social equity and environmental sustainability. Pascual (2008) elaborates these dimensions of public planning within a timeframe, with economic based decision making, or creation of wealth, a nineteenth century paradigm; social equity, being the redistribution of wealth, an early-mid twentieth century initiative, and the ecological dimension, watching over responsibility for the environment, added to the first two in the late twentieth century. These factors form the 'virtuous triangle' of sustainable development expounded by Brundtland (1987) that is the foundation of UNDP's work in developing countries (Pascual 2008).

Pascual argues that the strongest contribution or value for the cultural dimension is in its relationship with human rights (2008). This connection gives a strength and legitimacy to reflections on cultural policies that are not obtained if culture is justified solely as a resource or an instrument at the service of other ends (economic, social or environmental). Internationally, there is a growing adherence to this idea of culture as an essential domain of policy in its own right. It was adopted, for example, by the international peak body for local government in 2010. UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments)'s Declaration on Culture identified culture as domain of policy, that along with social, economic and environmental domains, strengthens local communities (UCLG 2010).

Culture in international development

This article is published as: Dunphy, K. (2012). Community arts in Timor-Leste 2001-2011: 2 the contribution of the arts to international development goals, in Comte, M. (Ed). Community Arts, North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing.

Alongside this growing recognition of culture in international public policy, an increasing value is being accorded to the contribution of the arts, as an expression of culture, in international development. The literature shows a modest progress, with new areas of research devoted to the contribution of arts to valued domains including health and well being, economic development, education, empowerment of women and peace-building (for example, Chamberlain et al. 1995, INCD 2002, Swain 2009 and Throsby 2008). Şişmanyazici-Navaie and Etili-Serter recommend new “interdisciplinary, multi-sectoral, cross-cultural and creative approaches” to development that consider the contribution of the arts (2008, p. 150). They discuss the contribution of the arts to socio-economic development; through trade in creative goods and services and performing arts and tourism, as well as the opportunity for developing countries “to tell their own story” (2008, p. 150). They consider that social benefits may be even larger than economic, though these can be difficult to quantify, and more long-term: including personal development, organisational development, community development, and socio-economic development. Their website (Arts for Global Development 2008) lists a huge number of organisations and initiatives from around the world that use arts to address various aspects of the Millennium Development Goals, a set of eight ambitious goals that respond to the world's main development challenges, drawn from the targets of the Millennium Declaration adopted by 189 nations in 2000 (United Nations, 2000).

The relationship of cultural development to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) was explored in depth by UCLG, the international peak body for local government, in a report containing contributions from all over the world. They argue that new approaches to development must include a greater understanding of local cultural dynamics and accept the need to protect and promote cultural diversity in a globalising world (Committee on Culture – UCLG, 2009). This interrelationship between culture and sustainable development is confirmed in policy recommendations from the Pacific (Kavaliku, 2005) and the British Commonwealth (Commonwealth Foundation, 2010). The Commonwealth Foundation comments that “because a consideration of cultural values, practices and resources has often been left out of development analyses, many development interventions have failed to achieve their objectives” (2010, p. 7).

Cultural development in Timor-Leste

In the emerging democracy of Timor-Leste, culture is identified as a priority by stakeholders including government, researchers and citizens (Brandao, 2011; Trindade 2006). The first National Plan named culture as one of the five priorities – along with health, education, justice and security – that would assist in achievement of its main purpose, the fostering of economic development and poverty reduction (Timor-Leste National Planning Commission 2002). The first Cultural Policy for the new nation was adopted in 2009. This seeks to place culture in a central position in asserting the East Timorese state (Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste 2009, p. 5). Niner (2007) points to the possible contribution of culture in many of the challenges faced in Timor-Leste. She describes what she believes is a “reasonable assumption ... that the surviving culture will provide a significant contribution to the rebuilding of the new nation and its recovery from its tragic history” (2007, p. 42).

This recognition of the significance of culture is reflected somewhat in figures from the Register of External Assistance report (Ministry of Planning and Finance, 2008) that details aid funding from governments and international government organisations to Timor-Leste between 2002 and 2009. The table

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below contains information extrapolated from that report about initiatives nominated by their donors as related to cultural development, including the arts. However, while some contributions for cultural development initiatives from a number of countries can be observed, the overall amount is modest. Of

Donating country/ group	Initiative supported	Amount	Dates
Portugal	Cultural activities	\$2961	2002/03
	Art school, <i>Arte Moris</i>	\$4107	2006/07
	Portuguese Cultural Centre of Dili	\$606,972	over 6 yrs
USA	Market development of traditional tais	\$28,589	2002-03
	Pilot project for pottery industry	\$53,013	2002
	<i>Land of Discovery</i> and photographic archive project	\$46,118	2002
Japan	Capacity building for East Timor National Museum and Cultural Centre	\$110,222	
Korea	Music concert	\$100,000	
Switzerland	Development of a school of art	\$55,500	2002
	Baucau local craft and adult education	\$15,000	2004
Indonesia	Scholarships for arts and culture studies	\$54,000	
UNESCO	Museum to Museum Partnerships Project	\$30,000	2006

the total donations of \$2,075,213,718, those specifically designated for cultural initiatives were only \$1,106,482 (.018%).

Table 1: Funding from international government organisations for arts and cultural initiatives in Timor-Leste, 2002-2009 (Ministry of Planning and Finance, 2008)

While Australian government donations to Timor-Leste are significant, they do not appear in this table, as none of the Australian initiatives listed in the REA report was identified as having an arts or cultural focus (Ministry of Planning and Finance, 2008). Nor did any of the \$226 million provided by AusAID over that three year period appear to be designated for arts initiatives (AusAID, 2008). It is possible however that Australian-supported arts and cultural development initiatives may appear under other headings, categorised according to their intended outcome – for example, economic development – rather than the strategy through which it might be achieved, such as an arts program.

Cultural development and the Millennium Development Goals in Timor-Leste

While the UN and UNESCO Declarations discussed earlier consider the value of the cultural dimension, most arts activity in Timor-Leste that is initiated by organisations and individuals from overseas focus on contributions that the arts can make to other concerns of progress, such as health, peace-building and economic development. These actors include governments as described above, international non-government organisations and individual artists and arts workers.

The paragraphs below introduce some of these initiatives ordered according to the primary goal identified by organisers, although many of them have more than one

identified goal. They have also been framed with consideration to the Millennium Development Goals.

- **Arts for economic development (related to MDG 1, to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger).**

A major focus for organisations that support arts projects in Timor-Leste has been weaving and textile arts, especially tais production, primarily for economic development purposes. Assistance has included financial support and training for weavers, provision of equipment, market development and sales support. National NGOs, Aloia Foundation and Timor Aid have led this work, with many others, including international organizations, East Timor Women's Association TWA (ETWA, 2009a) and Friends' groups from Australia and Canadian International Development Agency (Aloia Foundation and Oxfam 2005). Small business *Women's Woven Art* provides a market for woven products in Timor and Australia (Women's Woven Art, 2009). This work is relatively well documented by practitioners and academics, notably Sara Niner (2007, 2009), who has provided many ideas about possible future economic opportunities for weaving and textile arts.

- **Arts education; arts for leadership and skill development (related to MDG 2, universal primary education).**

While the MDGs name only primary education as a goal within the current timeframe, it is essential for Timor's development that her people have educational opportunities that approach those of other nations (Jones, 2003). Several arts programs initiated by artists from other countries offer young Timorese people creative educational options. The *Arte Moris* school in Dili provides visual and performing arts education from primary through to vocational level (Arte Moris, 2009). *Gembel* art collective, set up by Australian-Indonesian couple Angie Bexley and Jon Priadi, builds capacity for young Timorese as print makers and print trainers, with the intention of inspiring them to think creatively and to become productive members of society (Bexley, 2008a). International NGO PLAN incorporates some arts activities in their work; in recreational and vocational programs with young people and in early childhood education (PLAN International, 2009; Neary, 2009). The *Loke Kurtina* theatre conference in 2005 was organized to assist the many emerging youth theatre groups around the country to develop capacity, skills and networks (Davison, 2006).

- **Arts for social change, including gender equity (related to MDG 3, to promote gender equality and empowerment of women).**

Some arts activities in Timor-Leste are focussed on contributing to changes in the role of women. For example, textile weaving activities described above under the heading of economic development also are intended to empower women. A second type of arts activity that contributes to social change, including ideas around the role of women, is the burgeoning area of social action theatre (Sloman, 2011). These initiatives seek to address social and community norms or practices that, according to a development agenda, need re-consideration. This art form is particularly potent in a society where so many people are illiterate, and where the number of different community languages makes written communication even more problematic. Numerous social action theatre projects and initiatives are supported by local and international NGOs. Australian union organisation APHEDA has had a particularly active role; funding the Expressional

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Arts Project for two activities, a theatre project in which community members created performances on human rights, workers' rights, child protection and youth issues, and the construction of a recording studio, where radio dramas based on these performances will be recorded and distributed throughout Timor-Leste (Union Aid Abroad, 2009).

NGO International Organization for Migration is developing Timor-Leste's first soap opera (IOM, 2009). While this series is intended to be entertaining, it too will have a social change agenda, to generate reflection about community conflict following the 2006 crisis. Arts Access Australia organised arts and disability cultural exchange *Hamutuk*, to introduce creative possibilities for people with a disability (Arts Access Australia, 2006). This pilot was followed by a longer artist exchange with disability organisation *Katilosa*, through the Australian Youth Ambassadors Program, supported by NGO Many Hands International (Many Hands, 2011).

- **Arts for health promotion (related to MDGs 4, 5 and 6, health issues).**

Many projects in Timor-Leste also use the arts as a means of disseminating health information. In 2006, in response to violence that erupted throughout Timor, and the resulting internal displacement of Timorese people, the *Knua Buka Hatene* theatre group developed a performance relating to health issues affecting the refugees. These plays were performed at refugee centres and key public spaces (Union Aid Abroad, 2009). Also in 2006, the American NGO Health Alliance International undertook a theatre project to raise awareness of maternal and child health issues, sponsoring *Bibi Bulak (Crazy Goats)* Theatre Company from Dili to tour the country, performing a theatre piece that they had created to address these issues (Bryant, 2006).

- **Arts for advocacy and awareness raising for Timor-Leste (related to MDG 8, global partnerships for development).**

Another area of ongoing vigorous activity in Timor-Leste are arts initiatives that seek to raise public awareness of the political and social issues facing the nation. These relate to MDG 8 through their intention to engage people from other countries in the concerns of Timorese. A prominent example is the film *Balibo*, based on Jill Joliffe's 2001 book, but a similar topic was explored in 1988 in the play *Death at Balibo* produced by the Darwin Theatre Group and Timorese Association N.T (Casimiro et al, 1988). In 2002, Timorese director Filomena dos Reis, working with Suai media group, created a short film, *Circle of Stones*, that documented the story of the Suai church massacre. Ms dos Reis took this film on a tour of the United States, which included a screening for the U.S. Congress, to make a plea for justice for the Timorese people (Suai Media Space, 2009a).

- **Cultural tourism and exchange (related to MDG 8, global partnerships for development).**

Global partnerships for development may also be advanced through tourism and exchange initiatives. Culture, including the arts, can act as a medium of sharing between Timorese and people from other countries. One in-bound cultural tourism initiative is the Women's Weaving tours organized by Australian NGO ETWA (ETWA 2009b). Artists' residencies also provide opportunities for deeper exchanges between arts workers from other countries and Timorese artists and communities. Current and recent initiatives have been organised by development agencies AYAD and VIDA, arts organisations Asialink and Arts Access Australia, the Portuguese government and artists themselves. Spanish filmmaker David

Palazon, for example, self-initiated a year long residency as a filmmaker and instructor at art school Arte Moris (Palazon, 2009a), while Italian designer Piera Zurcher works with a co-operative of local women on Atauro Island to make dolls for sale (Instituto de Camoes, 2009).

Outbound cultural exchange initiatives also occur, when Timorese people travel overseas to share their culture and learn from others. The Melbourne based arts organisation The Boite organised such venture in 2003, hosting Timorese performers in Australia to share songs and perform with local singers in their annual Millennium Chorus concert. *Gembel* artists' collective brought Indonesian, Timorese and Australian artists together in Australia to develop and present an exhibition of collaborative work (Bexley, 2008b).

The City of Port Phillip in Victoria hosts a virtual cultural exchange initiated by Melbourne-based filmmaker Jen Hughes. Jen and artist colleagues collaborate with young people in the isolated town of Suai, on *Suaimediaspace*, a decade long exchange facilitated by creative media (Suai Media Space, 2009b).

These initiatives also have outcomes that relate to other MDGs. For example, economic development and empowerment of women are possible outcomes for Timorese women contributors to the ETWA tours. English language learning is a valued skill for economic development in Timor-Leste and is likely to be an outcome of connection between English speakers and Timorese. These outcomes are yet to be formally explored or documented.

Future possibilities: arts for peace-building and healing.

Arts as a contributing element in peace-building, and arts for healing, especially trauma recovery, are two areas of applied arts practice that are as yet not strongly developed in Timor-Leste. These possibilities seem very appropriate, given that the promulgation of peace and security are a major priority for government and development agencies, and that the majority of Timorese people have experienced trauma directly or indirectly (Modvig et al., 2000).

The possibilities for the arts to contribute to peace building in other nations are well documented in the literature (Harris, 2010; Swain, 2009). In Timor, *Gembel* art group have named peace-making as a focus, especially for youth groups (Bexley, 2008b), and *Knua Buka Hatene* theatre group developed radio plays aimed at peace building for broadcast on community radio (Union Aid Abroad, 2009). Local NGO *Ba Futuru* also prioritises peace-making, with arts activities including commissioning of a film about peace (Palazon, 2009b) and theatre projects with young people about conflict resolution (Dunphy, 2011).

The possibilities for healing through the arts include the healing potential of the practice of creative arts itself (Riggs, 2008) and arts as therapy, for example with young people traumatized by war (Gray, 2008). Examples of such initiatives in Timor-Leste include the short film *Circle of Stones*, mentioned earlier in regards to advocacy, which its producers believed also aids trauma recovery by providing audiences with an opportunity to mourn the past (Suai Media Space, 2009). The mental health agency PRADET is exploring possibilities for arts therapy in its work with women who have experienced sexual assault and family violence (Kendall, 2009).

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This section has described arts initiatives that seek to achieve goals that could be considered within Hawkes' social and economic dimensions; including health, peace-building, gender equality and economic development. The paragraphs to follow describe arts activities that contribute to the cultural dimension.

Considering the contribution of the arts to cultural vitality: cultural maintenance and transmission supported by international organizations and government

In addition to their potential contribution to social and economic outcomes, arts initiatives can also be valued for their contribution to the cultural vitality of communities. The valuing is more concordant with the UN Declarations, discussed earlier in this article, of the higher order realisation of human potential, than with the MDGs which are focused on more basic needs. When citizens have freedom of expression and opportunities to make and express their own cultures, human potential is more likely to be actualised and the desired condition of maximum freedom (Sen, 1999) achieved. It may be that the strongest contribution of the cultural dimension is its relationship with the promulgation of human rights. This gives a strength and legitimacy to reflections on cultural policies that go beyond justification of the cultural dimension as a resource or an instrument at the service of other ends (economic, social or environmental) (Pascual, 2008). Initiatives that celebrate the value of Timorese arts and culture include exhibitions and books documenting weaving practice (Barrkman, 2008; Kaixin & Xiaobin, 2007), recording of traditional music and dance (Tekee Media, 2009; PLAN, 2009; Surik East Timorese Performing Group, 2000) and the Coro Loro Sae choir (Marquez, 2008). These initiatives are supported in a range of ways by individuals, local and international NGOs, and governments from other countries as well as Timorese counterparts.

Issues for the inclusion of the cultural dimension in development in Timor-Leste

While this article documents the significant growth in arts and cultural activity that contributes to development in Timor-Leste, there are ongoing challenges. Almost without exception, these activities are initiated in good faith and with intentions that they achieve beneficial outcomes for Timorese people. However, as yet, most of them are not subject to any kind of formal, or even informal evaluation process, and their effectiveness is therefore indeterminate. One exception is the Health Alliance International project that applied a formal health program evaluation framework to its arts and health initiative (Bryant, 2006). In response to findings from this evaluation, the program and future initiatives were adjusted, and some challenges that arose with a paradigm clash between the values of the arts and health workers were examined.

The Millennium Development Goals do not include any reference to the cultural dimension of life as a priority. Governments and some organisations in Timor-Leste ascribe a low priority to this work, perhaps because of beliefs that culture and within culture, the arts, cannot contribute to issues of the most pressing significance, for example, poverty alleviation, health inequalities or gender disparities. Ambivalence around the value of 'culture' may also be a factor, with some leaders and community members considering that adherence to traditional cultural practices and beliefs can actually impede development (Connelly, 2003).

However, as Hawkes (2001) propounds, all four dimensions (economic, social, environmental and cultural) must be considered for the long-term sustainability of communities internationally. The interrelationship of these factors is gradually becoming better understood, for example, that gender equity is a variable that significantly impacts indicators of GDP and health (McGillivray, 2009), and that social equity is the factor that has the strongest relationship with positive social, economic

and health outcomes for all members of the community (Pickett & Wilkinson, 2009). In Timor-Leste, tourism and international business investment are seen as the two most likely strategies to lead to sustainable economic development. But these will not occur while there is civil unrest. The possible contributions of cultural initiatives to peace are significant, as discussed above. MDG 7 lists environmental sustainability as a goal, a priority that is relatively new, with traditional approaches to development focussing more on economic and political issues. The human race had brought itself to the very edge of survival as a species before awareness developed of our utter reliance on a sustainable environment.

It seems that the dominant development paradigm is yet to fully realise the importance of cultural vitality and diversity. And, to paraphrase Canadian singer Joni Mitchell, we might not know what we've got 'til it's gone. Perhaps cultural vitality and diversity might be the factors that most contribute to the creation of harmonious communities in which all citizens maximise their potential. And therefore, as the UCLG Committee on Culture (2009) recommends, future iterations of the MDGs should include a goal related to the cultural dimension, for example, '*Recognise and value cultural vitality and diversity*'.

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This article is published as: Dunphy, K. (2012). Community arts in Timor-Leste 2001-2011: 15 the contribution of the arts to international development goals, in Comte, M. (Ed). Community Arts, North Melbourne: Australian Scholarly Publishing.