

Summary:
The role of participatory arts in social change in Timor-Leste
Arte nia funsaun iha mudansa social iha Timor-Leste

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This thesis investigates the role of participatory arts in social change in the small developing nation of Timor-Leste. Arts have been used to assist social change, in the developed and developing world, since at least the 1970s. Over the last decade this has also occurred in Timor-Leste. However, much of this work is not properly evaluated or documented, and outcomes of arts activities are seen as difficult to measure.

This thesis documents five participatory arts initiatives in Timor-Leste: *Istoria Timor* story-writing competition, Dili; *Arte Moris* art school, Dili; *Ba Futuru's Scared Cool* theatre project, Dili; *Afalyca* Community Arts Centre, Baucau and Gillian Howell's community music project, Lospalos.

The evaluation shows that all the programs had positive outcomes. Arts participants and others had positive experiences, particularly in the *cultural, personal well-being* and *social* dimensions. People gained pleasure from their involvement, especially when it strengthened their connection with Timorese traditional culture. The activities also stimulated new learning and thinking, both creative and analytic, amongst participants and some audience members. These are the most profound changes, given the many positive outcomes of creative thinking. Arts initiatives like those studied are beneficial because they offer Timorese people a rare formal opportunity for creative development. Project participants and leaders who engaged pro-actively in creative activities obtained many benefits. Young participants from case studies *Arte Moris*, *Afalyca* and *Scared Cool*, for example, had significant opportunities from their involvement, including increased personal and professional networks; development of artistic, business and management skills; overseas travel and international artistic recognition.

In the *social* dimension, arts participants developed strong positive connections with others through their involvement. This seemed particularly important because many participants have experienced extended traumatic social disruption. Outcomes in the *civic* dimension were evident in the contribution of arts participation to more peaceful communities. Some participants also experienced benefits in the *economic* dimension, through skill development, improvement of employability, opportunities for paid work and income generation from art sales. Two of the projects made a modest contribution in the *environmental* domain by leading activities to raise community awareness about environmental issues.

Other stakeholders including artistic group leaders, non-participating community members and visitors also experienced a range of positive outcomes from the arts programs studied. Artistic leaders reported significant personal and professional growth. Audience members enjoyed attending arts events and gaining a deeper understanding of their own and others' life experiences through viewing the artwork and performances. There were also improved relationships between local people and foreigners as a result of collaboration through the projects. This outcome is

significant in Timor-Leste where few people have yet had opportunity for professional training, and input from foreigners contributes significantly to skilling of the professional workforce.

It was most difficult to understand whether these activities contributed to wider community change. There were strong indications of direct and indirect positive outcomes for the wider community and broader society, including reduced family and community disharmony and positive engagement with the wider world. It was evident that participants in all projects learned and developed significantly through their involvement. In skilling and informing individuals who then applied these skills in their daily lives and in many cases, took leadership roles in their organisations and communities, the activities can be seen to have made a positive, albeit indirect, contribution to broader social change. Rogers' diffusion of innovation theory (2003) offers support for the observation that artistic leaders and participants have significant potential to make an impact on the wider community because of the higher profile and greater access to media they have through their arts participation. While my observations of these initiatives over a period of years indicated ongoing positive outcomes for individual participants and communities with which they engage, further investigation that takes a more focused look at specific goals of arts initiatives would offer additional insight.

While the outcomes of the programs were overwhelmingly positive, there were some potential risk and dangers. One challenge was in the area of leadership, especially the transfer of skills and capacity building, given the need for input from those with relevant professional expertise and the contrasting imperative for local ownership and empowerment. This issue provided a constant tension for all case study organisations. Low participation of girls and women was also evident in many of the case studies, indicating a need for a more active approach to their engagement.

There was also the possibility of no change, or change in the wrong direction, without strong collaboration between artistic leaders and professionals with expertise in assisting positive social change. This was a significant challenge, as few of the professionals involved in these activities had specialised training for their social change interventions, and as yet there are few available experts in Timor-Leste to advise arts projects. Poor use of resources or even harm could be the result of activities directed by inadequately skilled leaders. There were also unconsidered negative impacts of many of the activities, such as the environmental cost of carbon emissions generated through overseas travel of visiting collaborators. These would need to be factored into a truly holistic evaluation.

While these findings are based on case studies sited in Timor-Leste, they confirm the potential of participatory arts initiatives in other contexts to stimulate positive change, particularly if these principles for effective practice are observed. Theories about change from psychology (Ajzen & Fishbein, 2005) and development (Hickey & Mohan, 2004) that recommend interventions be part of wider social change processes also have resonance for participatory arts programs. Initiatives in which arts leaders work with others who have skills in social action, behaviour change, community education and therapy are likely to be particularly effective. However, participatory arts initiatives may be particularly useful because of their potential to impact in different domains; with social action approaches influencing leaders and policy-makers, community cultural development approaches bringing people together about issues of shared concern and arts as therapy approaches effecting change at an individual level.

I conclude by positing that these participatory arts initiatives in Timor-Leste contributed to significant positive change for stakeholders, particularly participants, but also artistic leaders, host organisations, families and the wider community. Factors in the successful change processes, and the reason that participatory arts may be particularly compelling as a change modality are that participation was pleasurable, and involved creativity, collaboration and enjoyable learning experiences. Skilled leadership was a significant factor, with artistic leaders who also provided positive role models particularly successful in stimulating desired change. The most powerful experiences were those that embraced traditional cultural practices while offering new ideas, and brought people together across their differences.

*The complete thesis is available from
http://manyhands.org.au/uploads/files/Kim_Dunphy_PhD_thesis_final_submitted_29.10.13.pdf*