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Sustainable Development: Why Culture Matters



Above: A traditional weaver and traditional singer presenting at the Our Culture, Many Different Stories event telling the stories of the ratu
Top of page: Holly with dance troupe Angel 10 Girls after their performance at the regular open floor community performance afternoons

The heat and smoke are thick as I sit in the crowded front room of Justino's home in Titilari. I am desperate for fresh air, but I'm not leaving my seat; I'm watching and listening to the unfolding of something momentous. *Six lia nain* (traditional cultural leaders) are debating the telling of the *ratu* (kinship groups of the Fataluku people of eastern Timor-Leste) creation stories, together, in a public event through the medium of theatre. In living memory this has not been done before, neither the telling of the stories together nor the telling of them through theatre. Normally, these stories are told separately at events such as the funerals of elders, where the story of that particular kinship group's ancestor must be told at the graveside before the burial can be finalised. This recounting can take all day and night. There is much in these stories that is sacred and cannot be told publicly; the question is, can they be told at all? And some might ask, 'why is it important'?

Culture is not the first (or usually even the last) thing people think of when it comes to addressing poverty, but it has a vital role to play in achieving sustainable development. The beliefs, values, meanings, practices and knowledge systems that are known collectively as 'culture' help affirm identity, maintain social cohesion and sustain livelihoods. As humans, we are as much cultural constructs as we are constructors of culture: everything we know and do, and how and why we have come to know and do it, is the result of our particular cultural framework/s. Culture is thus essential to our being and key to our very development. It is our primary adaptive strategy, the basis for innovation. Where culture is weakened, interrupted or lost through conflict, colonisation, globalisation and/or poverty, we can see a corresponding loss of social cohesion and community wellbeing as people struggle to make sense of, and adapt to, a changing world. Rebuilding cultural knowledge and practice is therefore fundamental to achieving community health and wellbeing. Examples from around the world, including Indigenous and mainstream Australia, clearly demonstrate this. Community capacity building through engagement in the arts and other cultural practices contributes significantly to beneficial social, cultural, economic and environmental outcomes. It is for these reasons that the telling of the Fataluku *ratu* stories is important.

Sitting with me in Justino's home is Catherine Simmonds, a theatre director from Melbourne who is being hosted in Timor Leste by Many Hands International, my Australian

Partner Organisation (APO). Catherine has come to create a theatre work with the community and we have been discussing the importance of culture, the rapid decline in transmission of cultural knowledge and practice in Lospalos and the need to create opportunities for young people to re-engage with culture in ways that are meaningful to them. I have suggested to Catherine that perhaps she could create a work presenting the *ratu* stories. We have put this idea to Justino, a teacher and local researcher dedicated to documenting and maintaining culture in Lospalos. Justino has enthusiastically embraced the idea, both for its purpose of cultural maintenance and for the form of creative expression proposed. As a result, he has organised this meeting in which the *lia nain* are debating the telling of the *ratu* stories.

At first there is protest from some of the *lia nain*: the stories are too sacred, too dangerous to be told publicly. But their discussion about the telling of the stories develops. There is assent among the group that transmission of cultural knowledge is rapidly decreasing. Then, growing excitement about the need and possibilities for cultural maintenance: "[transmission is] important for the future of the younger generation and those who will come after", it is "our responsibility that knowledge is passed on". There is discussion of identity and social cohesion: "It is important that we come together and show through the telling of our stories that we are all from the one family, the one story". "We must not support tribalism". There is agreement: the creation stories can be told publicly, but only the general stories and not the sacred details. Rituals must be performed before and after to pay respect to the ancestors and to 'cool' the participants afterwards to ensure that no harm comes to them from engaging in the telling of these sacred stories (which is how I later come to be covered in palm wine and pig's blood).

The *lia nain* begin to recount the stories of the ancestors. They are very respectful of each other and when it becomes clear that some of the stories are fragmented, they help each other quietly, using their knowledge of their own ancestor's story and how it links in with the others. Through the telling of the stories, it becomes apparent that not only do the younger generation not know the creation stories, the *lia nain* too are unsure of aspects of them. We finish our first meeting with a strong sense of purpose and excitement.



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The *lia nain* return to us another day to tell the stories of the ancestors to local performing arts group Sanggar Haburas, with whom Catherine will develop the theatre work. By this time they have consulted with other *lia nain* and knowledgeable persons to flesh out and present more complete stories of their ancestors. The process of rebuilding cultural knowledge has begun. So too has the strengthening of social cohesion. Armindo, one of the younger *lia nain* and deputy leader of a local political party tells me, "This project is very important; it puts culture above politics. Normally, you wouldn't get people from different political parties coming together like this. Sometimes you wouldn't even be able to get them to talk to each other, even if they were from the same family. That's how we are about politics in Timor. But now we are coming together, through this project. It is good to show people that we can work together for the future of the community, that culture is important. Culture is the most important thing."

It's because culture is important that I'm in Lospalos, along with my two children, aged three and six. I'm here for 12 months as a Community Cultural Development Officer, hosted by the State Secretariat of Culture (Government of Timor-Leste) and supported by APO Many Hands International (MHI). I'm working with the Secretariat's district staff to develop capacity in project management through the development and implementation of a range of cultural projects. Much of my work is focused on the establishment of the Lospalos Centre for Traditional and Contemporary Arts and Culture, a project initiated by MHI and now adopted by the State Secretariat of Culture. The centre is being developed to run arts and culture based programs and events for local people and tourists, and will support cultural maintenance, skills development in arts, crafts and cultural tourism, and cultural asset based economic development. I have been championing the project in Timor-Leste and now, after meeting with Prime Minister His Excellency Xanana Gusmao, and through the hard work of MHI's fantastic design team (Richard Blight, Paul Callum, Andrew Lucas and Josh Ho) plus with the support of the UNESCO Observatory at The University of Melbourne, we have secured funding for stage one of the centre's infrastructure development through the Office of the Prime Minister (Timor-Leste). This is significant both for the communities in Lautem (the district of which Lospalos is the capital) and the Government of Timor-Leste. The National

Strategic Development Plan includes the establishment of cultural centres in each of the country's 13 districts and the cultural centre in Lospalos is to be the first. Everyone involved is very pleased.

While we wait for the infrastructure development, I have been working with my counterparts and other community members and organisations to develop activities that will be run out of the centre and which support cultural maintenance and expression. These include arts activities for young children and a program of regular public performances by local performing artists of all ages. We've also developed a cultural research project to safeguard endangered forms of Fataluku cultural expression and have been successful in securing funding for a cultural festival through AusAID's East Timor Community Assistance Scheme. An exciting aspect of the festival's development is that it will be supported through the skills and experience of the Yothu Yindi Foundation (who produce the Garna Festival in Arnhem Land) and The University of Melbourne's Centre for Accounting and Industry Partnerships and Centre for Social Investment Research.

Being an Australian Volunteer has made all these things possible. There is little funding for projects such as the ones I'm working on, essentially because there is little recognition of the importance of culture and its role in achieving sustainable development. As such, having the support of the AVID program is invaluable. It is one of my hopes that through our collective efforts and achievements here in Lospalos that we can demonstrate why culture matters and create more support for culture-based projects.

Holly Schäuble is the Founding Director of Many Hands International, an Australian NGO working with communities through participatory and empowering processes to identify their cultural assets and apply their traditional knowledge to develop a range of activities that assist in the maintenance of culture and develop economic and social opportunities. To find out more about the work of Many Hands International, visit www.manyhands.org.au.



Above: Ritual consumption of palm wine to open the path for the telling of the ratu stories at the Our Culture, Many Different Stories event
Top of page: Young performers of the ratu stories at Our Culture, Many Different Stories event

