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DOMINGOS DE OLIVEIRA WITH ASSISTANCE FROM JUDE
COMFORT

CHAPTER 14

A Journey through Post-Independence Timor-Leste: A Personal Narrative

ABSTRACT

In a country which is severely under-resourced in every profession and where there is lack of infrastructure due to the post referendum violence, training is an important task in the reconstruction of Timor-Leste (Hill, 2001). Education and training within the post-conflict reconstruction phase of Timor-Leste has taken many different forms. While there has been much attention given to improving the education opportunities within Timor-Leste, many Australians have also been given a unique cross-cultural education opportunity by offering their skills, expertise and a willingness to learn, through their contribution to the reconstruction effort.

An independent Timor-Leste also allowed many nationals who fled the country under the repressive Indonesian regime to return and help with the rebuilding process. This chapter draws these threads together through the personal narrative of a Timorese born man who moved to Australia from Timor-Leste in 1980, and now uses his language skills and connections with his home to help in the reconstruction of the country. His work promotes positive cultural exchange and, as his narrative shows, gives voice to some of those affected by the reconstruction process, or the lack of it.

DOMINGOS'S STORY

Return to Timor Leste

In October 1999 Timor-Leste was at last free from the Indonesian occupation and many Timorese who had sought political asylum in countries including Australia, Portugal, Mozambique, Angola and the USA made up their mind to return and work for the reconstruction of Timor-Leste. Despite my age, I wanted to contribute in whatever way I could to rebuild my country. I travelled to Dili, in January 2000, together with other East Timorese from Sydney, Melbourne, Perth and Darwin.

Unfortunately after just three and half weeks, I had to be evacuated back to Perth on medical grounds. However in late 2000 I was fit and well and headed back to Dili to work as a consultant for the United Nations Transitional Administration in Timor-Leste (UNTAET) from January to March 2001. I then tried for another job with UNTAET. However, despite being well qualified, I did not get the job because of my position as a leader of a political party. As I did not want to resign this position at such an important political crossroad for the country, I ended up doing voluntary and casual jobs for whoever needed my interpreting and translating services.

Volunteer Work

My first involvement as a volunteer guide and interpreter was with Peter, a former teacher and the Coordinator of the Christian Centre for Social Action in Perth. Peter and his family had been very supportive of the struggle for liberation of Timor-Leste from Indonesian occupation. As committed Catholics, they were deeply concerned about issues of poverty and working for the social and economic development of poor people.

On a dry and extremely hot morning in June 2001 while wandering around the dusty and busy roads of Dili, I saw Peter sitting at a restaurant. I had not seen him since our last rally in October 1999 for international forces intervention in Timor-Leste to stop the post referendum violence. Peter was on a fact-finding trip to Timor Leste and asked me to be his guide and interpreter during his stay. I gladly accepted and on the same day we headed to Baucau, three hours away.

Peter wanted to see the Bishop to discuss helping the poorest people of Baucau Diocese. However we were very disappointed to find that the Bishop had already flown to Portugal and was then traveling on to other European countries, the United States, Canada and Brazil. The Bishop's trip to Europe and the Americas was aimed at raising awareness of the depth and extension of the country's destruction in the September 1999 violence, and also raising funds for setting up of a Major Seminary and a Catholic University.

At the urging of a former student of mine, we saw the Vicar-General and the Head of the Diocesan Centre instead. I interpreted during the meeting. After listening carefully to what was said, the Vicar-General told us that he would pass on Steven's ideas and plans to the Bishop. He also explained how the country is divided into 13 districts with subdistricts, villages and settlements. He said that Laclubar, a subdistrict of Manatuto District, had one of the poorest parishes in Baucau Diocese.

Peter said that he would like to visit the parish of Laclubar and see what could be done. The Vicar General promptly arranged somebody to take us to Laclubar. So after a quick lunch we headed to Manatuto, which is 65 kilometres west, a one hour drive from Baucau and then onto Laclubar. Although this is only 34 kilometres southwest from Manatuto, the road has never been properly upgraded so it takes three to five hours to get there.

We had to stop several times to take photos or talk to the people living on the edges of the road. Peter was deeply shocked by the extreme poverty of a small settlement called Seur-Tulan, whose population had been forcibly displaced by the Indonesians from Fatu-Makerek village in 1987. During the September 1999 violence the village had been virtually destroyed. Most of the displaced families had already gone back to Fatu-Makerek, but it was heartbreaking seeing the ruins and living conditions of those who could not return to Fatu-Makerek because they were ill or too weak to walk the 35 kilometre distance.

We arrived at Lalcubar parish and were warmly welcomed by the locals and kindly accommodated by the parish priest. The priest did not have enough to feed his two guests from Australia and the two Portuguese teachers living with him but we shared a light meal. This was not a question of money, but of food shortage.

The parish priest, a young zealous missionary, spoke of Soibada and Laclubar as the poorest parishes in Baucau Diocese. Although he spoke very little English, everything was translated, making his conversation with Peter very warm and interesting. He described the social and economic situation of both parishes and concluded that Funar and Fatu-Makerek were the poorest villages. Steven wanted to visit these places. Fatu-Makerek, however could only be reached by horse or on foot so the priest offered to drive us to Funar, thirty minutes away.

Funar is a hilly and mountainous village, and its inhabitants are a mix of Aboriginal Timorese, Chinese, African and Portuguese heritage. The village has a total population of 1,300 people with 60 percent under 30 years of age. Most of the people in Funar are Catholics but they still believe in animism; as in many other Timorese villages, where Catholicism and Animism go hand in hand. The village has a chapel, a small clinic with no medicine or nurse, and a primary school with 270 children. When the locals spotted the priest's utility descending the hilly road, they shouted happily and stood on the verge of the road to cheer him. I received an especially warm welcome from the children, some of whom were my relations because my father was a Funar local himself.

Peter wanted to talk to the locals. So after prayers in the chapel the priest introduced Peter. I did my best to translate his message as accurately as possible and noticed the crowd was listening attentively. Peter asked them to tell him what they needed most for their village. There was a deep silence for a few minutes but before all of them said they needed help in getting drinking water to the village and especially to the primary school. Peter said that he would pass on these wishes to members of the Redemptorist Monastery in North Perth and to the Christian Centre for Social Action.

Later when Peter asked an old sick man whether he had been treated, he was told:

Nobody gives us medicine. When we get sick God is our doctor and the Virgin Mary is our nurse. Nobody cares about us now and we feel so miserable, so alone!

A young man also complained:

During the Portuguese colonial administration or the Indonesian occupation, we could at least sell our animals and products to buy clothing for us and books, pens, paper, etc, for our children. Nowadays everything is imported, our produce is rejected.

I could see tears in Peter's eyes, and I was overwhelmed and cried too.

A WATER PROJECT

Equipped with the photos he had taken and notes from interviews and conversations with the locals, Peter worked tirelessly in Perth for three years raising enough money for a water supply project under the name of 'Redemptorist Funar Water Project'. Pencils, pens, exercise books, chalk and school bags for the children of Funar were also collected.

In September 2004, Peter, his wife, two children and a Murdoch University student visited Timor-Leste. Again I was invited as their guide and interpreter. We visited the Bakita Centre at Eraulo, and the Diocese of Baucau, and we took school supplies to the students in Funar. The locals gave us a warm reception with native songs, dances, poems and speeches.

Addressing the crowd, Peter thanked them for the warm reception and apologised for the delay in getting back to them after his first visit in 2001. He then advised them that some money had been raised for the water project and a committee responsible for the expenditure of that money and the acquisition of the materials for the project needed to be set up among the locals. A meeting was held that night to democratically elect the committee.

The project started in early 2005 under the supervision of a Funar civil engineer who had obtained his master's degree in Australia. In September 2005 Peter visited Timor-Leste with a group of 10 people to follow up on the water supply project in Funar. Again I acted as their interpreter. The group also visited Eraulo, Lete-Foho in the Ermera district and the town of Baucau.

THE BAKHITA CENTRE IN ERAULO

We stayed two nights at Eraulo at the Bakita Centre. The centre's coordinator, a young, intelligent and very charismatic Timorese, had sought refuge in Australia since his childhood. However after 24 years in Perth, he had left everything and returned to Timor-Leste. His initial task in his war torn homeland was to distribute goods and first aid supplies to the population. But deeply shocked by the extreme poverty as well as the social problems and driven by an intense desire to serve his country fellows, he and four other young Timorese from Perth set up a humanitarian organisation which is now the Bakhita Centre. An evening meal was followed by a meeting during which we were informed how the Centre was founded, its goals, vision and mission.

The following day we visited Lete-Foho where we were welcomed by the principal of the government secondary school. The representative from the Melville City in the group held an official meeting with the Administrator of the Lete-Foho

subdistrict to discuss a water supply programme for Lete Foho. This and other programs aimed to strengthen understanding and friendship between the two sister-cities.

We then headed to Baucau town where we made an appointment to see the Bishop. He briefed us on the causes of the recent demonstrations led by the Catholic Church, on the famine at Hatu-Builiku subdistrict, on the lack of communication between the people and the government, and on the many other social and economic issues requiring urgent and adequate solutions. The Bishop also asked for help for another water project at Lautem parish.

Speaking on behalf of the group, Peter thanked the bishop for the briefing and told him about our tour. He also said that he would make approaches to Cloverdale Notre Dame Parish (whose parishioners had been working hard since October 2005) to hopefully start a water project for the people of Lautem parish. I completed a second follow-up of Funar project in September 2006. Although the project is still underway, the present crisis in Timor-Leste interrupted progress, but it will be concluded as soon as the situation gets back to normal.

TEACHING TETUM IN PERTH

In early October 2004, I got a phone call from a lady who wanted to learn Tetum. We started our Tetum course a few days later. She was a very fast learner and from conversations we held later I knew that she was a geologist, a senior lecturer at the University of Western Australia and had been to Timor-Leste three times already. Months later I had another three people from the Department of Earth and Physical Sciences of the same University wanting to learn Tetum. The course was free and I recall enjoying teaching them not only because they were all very fast learners, but good people as well.

In late May 2005, they invited me to go to Timor-Leste as their interpreter. We spent nearly two weeks in the country, carrying on their research in the District of Same, 119 kilometres south of Dili, in the Subdistrict of Maubisse and at a small village near the District of Ainaro, called Mauxiga. To me this was the most exciting experience I had in my life as interpreter. I actually learned a lot about the earth and why there will never be good roads in some areas of Timor-Leste.

The main researchers wanted to set up a Centre in the Same District which could be used by the students from the UWA and other institutions doing research, and also for social or education activities by the Timorese. I went with them as their interpreter to lobby the Administrator of Same District. Although he was very open and supported the proposal, he told them diplomatically that the project would need the Prime Minister's permission.

While the main researchers returned to Perth, I stayed in Dili to help the other two students. One was doing marine research at a small village 15 kilometres east of Dili and the other went to Manatuto for his three and half month geological research project. I returned to Perth in June to resume my Tetum tuition. The group were all deeply affected by the extreme poverty of the country and especially the lack of clean drinking water in many places. The conditions of the displaced people of Seur-Tulan were particularly hard.

Later during discussions on Timor-Leste's urgent social and economic problems, we raised concerns about the lack of drinking water in many Timorese villages where locals have to walk quite a number of kilometres to get potable water. We also expressed our feelings that if at least those people who were still stranded in Seur-Tulan could have access to drinking water, it would be a great help for them to face many of their other problems. It was just a discussion without any practical conclusion up until December 2005, when Engineers without Borders contacted us.

WORKING WITH ENGINEERS WITHOUT BORDERS

In early 2006, I had an email from my University of Western Australia (UWA) friends saying that a group of Perth-based Engineers without Borders (EWB) and voluntary engineering students were planning a tour to Timor-Leste, and they would like to take an interpreter. The group comprised two engineers, a coordinator and three students.

I met the group in late January for a briefing on Timor-Leste's culture, language and history, and we departed to Timor-Leste on the last day of January. Once in Dili we held meetings with the Rector of the National University of Timor-Leste; with the Director, lecturers and civil engineering students from the Dili Institute of Technology, and also public servants and advisers from the Dili Water and Sanitation Bureau.

The initial plan of the engineers was to work either at Seur-Tulan or at any other remote village of the country. However, the policy of Timor-Leste's government is to supply water to the suburbs of Dili first, before moving to remote villages. At the suggestion of the officials from Dili Water and Sanitation Bureau, we decided to supply drinking water to the village of Tangkae. The small settlement has no more than 1,700 people, and is situated about 20 kilometres south of Dili and three kilometres east of President Xanana Gusmao's residence.

Six civil engineering students were appointed to help our group. My task during those 21 days was interpreting during the meetings and field research, or translating documents provided either by the Timorese Water and Sanitation Bureau or by Engineers without Borders. The days were long but very rewarding. During our free time in Dili, they mingled with the children for language tuition (Tetum and English) and I caught up with my old friends. We talked about many issues, but focused our concern on the discontentment in the army due to some discrimination. The conclusion I drew from my conversations with friends and family members was that there was an intensive tension building up in Timor-Leste.

We returned to Perth on February 2006. Once in Perth and knowing that they planned to return to Timor-Leste in July, they asked me to teach Tetum to them. I taught them for nearly 10 months. My vision now is to provide these young students with further knowledge of Tetum, and train them to become interpreters and translators in the near future.

Unfortunately we were forced to cancel our second trip to Timor-Leste in July 2006 due to the deterioration of the situation in the country. The implementation of this valuable project at Tangkey village has been postponed indefinitely, but

I hope that the political situation in Timor-Leste may improve and the people of Tangkey may at last have clean drinking water in their households for their own benefit and for a healthier life of their children. That was in short my modest contribution to rebuild my war torn country for the last six years. Obrigadu barak!

THE CYCLE OF LEARNING IN POST-RECONSTRUCTION

The education and learning described above is not part of the formal education system and hence is not easily quantified or evaluated. It is the result in large part of the international goodwill that Timor-Leste has attracted at many levels (Tanter, Selden, and Shalom, 2000). While some Australians have completed professional placements in Timor-Leste as part of their university studies, this is usually self-initiated or resulting from the leadership of a concerned lecturer. Regardless of how people came to visit and possibly work in Timor-Leste, it has usually resulted in a profound impact on those individuals. Learning took place at many levels in both Timor-Leste and Australia on these exchanges. It did not stop on returning to Australia, rather another phase of cross-cultural learning often commenced, with participants often continuing with Tetum language classes as described above. Informing others of the needs of the newly independent country, raising funds, inspiring new projects and continuing student placements means that such visits, although often only of a short duration, have some level of sustained impact. Input at this informal education and cross-cultural level has an important, although under-researched, role to play in the post-reconstruction phase.

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CHAPTER 15

Voices of the People and My Personal Perspective: A Case Study from Ermera District

ABSTRACT

Despite the best efforts undertaken by the government of Timor-Leste and the international community since the crisis of 1999, it appears most sectors of the country are still facing major challenges. Yet without good health and education, individuals, families, and communities cannot hope to achieve their social and economic goals. To ensure that these goals are achieved, there is an overwhelming need to develop sound health and education policies to rebuild this tiny post-conflict transitional nation. A quality education system that can be accessed by all citizens will ensure that the Timorese are sufficiently equipped with the literacy, numeracy and trade/technical skills that are required for the future development of the country.

In this chapter, the author explores the matrix of education and health issues in relation to the needs of development by examining a case study of the Bakhita Health Centre, and the village of Eraulo in the Ermera district. Through the voices of the community, he uncovers how issues of health and education cannot be separated from economic development to generate a better quality of life for the people of Timor Leste.

INTRODUCTION

Four years after independence, Timor-Leste is one of the poorest countries in the world, with 42% of the population living in poverty, and the vast majority of these people living in rural villages. As the majority of rural Timorese remains reliant on subsistence farming and thus without adequate food consumption, twelve out of every 100 children born will die before the age of five. Timor-Leste currently has one of the highest child mortality rates in the world (Oxfam Community Aid Abroad, 2004).