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## Developing Museum to Museum Cultural Engagement between Australian and Timor-Leste

Cecilia Assis and Robyn Sloggett

### Introduction

There is no doubt that strengthening cultural programs and building cultural infrastructure is a necessary part of nation-building, and the role of culture in economic development and national well-being is well understood and clearly articulated (Wolfensohn 2000; Throsby 2001; Sen 2004; Hutter and Frey 2010; Woolcock et al 2010). In Timor-Leste the government's *Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011 – 2030*, recognised that 'Cultural institutions play a key role in the preservation of our nation's past and the promotion of contemporary culture' as '... places of learning' and which 'attract local and international visitors who want to learn about Timorese culture' (RDTL 2010, 65).

Despite work on the role of culture in development undertaken by international organisations such as the World Bank (Woolcock et al 2010) and UNESCO (n.d. a) culture remains invisible in important documents such as those relating to the Millennium Development Goals. Indeed in strategic documents that address international engagement culture is often discussed in the context of 'problems' that need resolution, as evidenced in the OECD's *2011 Report on International Engagement in Fragile States Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste*. This recent report has only two entries for culture, the first in the context of Timorese identity where it is noted 'the Timorese are the first to admit that exactly what sort of state they want is under discussion' (36) and the second in regard to domestic violence which is identified as a 'previously tolerated' cultural norm (44). Despite this, for developing countries the engagement of cultural organisations with international partners is a necessary part of building effective government institutions.

The efficacy of national cultural organisations is important in enabling small NGO, district and volunteer initiatives through effective policy, funding and other strategic initiatives. Both during the interim government of the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET), and since independence in 2002, Timor-Leste has seen the development of a diverse range of cultural organisations in the performing arts, visual arts, heritage, museums, libraries and archives. This diversity includes private organisations, NGOs and government-sponsored authorities.

In Timor-Leste the Secretariat of State for Culture (SSC), in the Ministry for Education, coordinates and implements policies relating to culture in Timor-Leste in order to fulfill the Government's priority to use 'culture to affirm the East Timorese Nation and State' (Simith 2009). The Secretariat also has a critical role in identifying, and negotiating access to East Timorese cultural material that is no longer in Timor-Leste. In Timor-Leste cultural development cannot be delinked from considerations relating to cultural loss. Colonisation and invasion and the subsequent East Timorese fight for sovereignty disrupted cultural practice, and resulted in the destruction of important repositories of cultural material. Examples include the destruction of the collection held in Bishop Belo's residence, significant losses from the National Collection, and the systematic looting of cultural material from *uma lulik* around the country (Riley 2009). In addition, and as a result of gift, partage, purchase and exchange there are large collections of East Timorese cultural material and material about Timor-Leste held in public institutions or private hands outside the country. Further many significant cultural leaders, and the knowledge they held, were lost to the country through death or relocation as diaspora. International engagement is therefore a critical part of the work of cultural development in Timor-Leste and the SSC is working with overseas agencies to identify how best to integrate this material in contemporary institutions in Timor-Leste. The return, in 2009, of the Antoulas Collection is an indication of success of these efforts (SSC 2010).

Other international partnerships focus on training and support for infrastructure development best practice and to enable access to relevant training and development programs. This paper examines the development of such partnerships, the challenges faced in developing international partnerships for cultural development, and examines Australian-Timorese partnerships that support museum development.

### **Nation-building and cultural capital**

An important component of nation building is to assist people to understand and tell the stories of their past, strengthen their identity, and pass their culture, beliefs and values to future generations. This is an important role for the SSC. Unfortunately, many of the kinds of documents usually available for this purpose have been lost during the period of the conflict, including the books and articles that discussed the life, the history and the culture of Timorese people during the period of the Portuguese colonisation (Assis 2006).

Under the heading ‘Social Capital’ the Timor-Leste Parliament’s National Strategy proposes that by 2015,

The Museum and Cultural Centre of Timor-Leste will be developed to permanently host and interpret key cultural and heritage artefacts in Dili. The centre will hold the geological collection ... the archaeological collection ... and the ethnographic collection ... [It] will be designed and built to international standards so that sacred artefacts, paintings, books and other items in the collection will be protected from damage from high humidity, fire or other hazards ... to ensure that the many high value heritage collections being stored in international collections can be returned to Timor-Leste (RDTL 2011, 65).

The National Strategy also recognises that,

... if we neglect our cultural and historic roots ... we will be overwhelmed by the forces of globalisation and risk losing our unique cultural identity – the very thing we fought so long and hard to preserve (RDTL 2011, 63).

How best to align support from overseas agencies with objectives that are culturally specific and support that fundamental concern of what it means to be East Timorese requires strategic management. Aligning Timor-Leste’s strategic aims with the aims of overseas partner organisation is useful, but building strong inter-personal relationships is also critical in order to develop a framework that engenders flexibility and opportunity within more stringent government requirements.

### **Museum development in Timor-Leste**

Museum development is not new to Timor-Leste. It is thought that in 1973 there was a museum installed in what is now the European Commission building, *Casa Europa*; but it is not clear what these museums held or how they were managed. In Indonesian times the East Timor Provincial Museum was built at Comoro (Assis 2006) and staffed by both Indonesian and Timorese staff, a number of who now work in the SSC (Riley 2009). Immediately after the Popular Consultation of 30 August 1999 this museum was sacked. Although over 60% of the collection was lost, over 700 cultural objects were rescued. These items form the basis for the National Museum Collection (Assis 2006).

In 1999 the World Bank’s *Community Empowerment Program* (CEP) prioritised cultural development in Timor-Leste, providing USD\$2M for an oral history and historical memory program, a cultural centre, a small grants program, and for a local radio network. These activities were ‘to give voice to East Timor’s cultural traditions and experiences’. The CEP 2006 Performance Assessment Report labelled sustainability of the cultural program as ‘unlikely’ (World Bank 2006). In contradiction to this the Division of Culture (now the SSC) staff continued to build cultural programs with UNESCO and other partners for

sustainable museum development, developing successful exhibitions in both Timor-Leste and overseas, ongoing staff training programs and a range of other activities. (SSC 2009a)

Matthew Totilo (2009, 81) identifies the CEP framework as important for the recognition it gave to Timorese cultural practice.

The CEP framework provided for preservation of oral history, creation of a national cultural center and block grants for small-scale history and cultural centers in the villages. This insight showed ... that legitimacy can be achieved by linking new ideas from the outside to the sacred inner circle of *uma lulik*. No other development project in Timor-Leste had made this important connection. This was the same thinking that gave the Church its first bit of legitimacy in Timor and the same thinking that prevented acceptance of the Indonesian administration.

Thomas Davis, on the other hand, is critical of the World Bank claiming that,

[T]he Bank and official donors share foundational, and mutually reinforcing, assumptions over the benefits of controlling community-based input into reconstruction and development decision-making in post-crisis situations (Davis 2010, 196).

International partnerships for cultural preservation were developed almost immediately after the Popular Consultation when INTERFET forces and Museums and Art Galleries of the Northern Territory (MAGNT) staff worked with Sr. Virgilio Simith (now Secretary of State for Culture) to assist in the rescue of objects from the Museum precinct, and relocate them to what had been the Kopassus headquarters in Dili (later Uma Fukun, now Casa Europa). Since then a range of bilateral programs have continued to support the development of cultural institutions in Timor-Leste

culturally-focussed international partnerships

International engagement is developed and supported by Timor-Leste's Secretariat of State for Culture in a number of ways including through Government programs; utilising philanthropic support; developing institution to institution programs; and accepting support from individual donors and international agencies. How best to align support and resources that are available from overseas agencies with objectives that are culturally specific and support that fundamental concern of what it means to be East Timorese is not a simple task. Each partnership brings particular benefits while having specific requirements for engagement. Following the conference presentation of this paper there was lively debate, in Tetun, about the extent to which international engagement could compromise the development of East Timorese cultural institutions (TLSA 2011). Some East Timorese members of the audience argued that programs that involved working with institutions in Australia, Japan and Indonesia had the potential to acculturate the way in which East Timorese culture would be studied and represented in the museum. This is a legitimate concern and best addressed by ensuring the alignment of partner programs with the strategic needs of the SSC. (A more nuanced and complete answer that addresses issues of representation and agency would, however, require another paper.) This paper focuses on Australian-Timor-Leste programs but the question of international program relevance is appropriate to all internationally-partnered programs.

#### *Government programs*

Major support for bilateral programs comes from government. In 2003 The Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) supported training programs in Osaka. In 2007 and 2008 the AusAid Australian Leadership Award Fellowship Program (ALAF), supported training under UNESCO's Museum to Museum program for three staff from the Directorate of Culture at MAGNT, an outcome of which was the exhibition *From the Hands of Our Ancestors* (SSC 2010) and training at the University of Melbourne, Artlab Australia, National Gallery of Victoria, Powerhouse Museum and Australia Museum.

AusAid is the major funder of bilateral international programs in Australia. The ALAF Program lists the following priority areas,

... disability and development, economic growth, education, environment, food security, gender, governance, health, human rights, infrastructure, regional stability, rural development and water and sanitation. (AusAID 2011a)

AusAid also supports the VIDA (Volunteering for International Development from Australia) program and the AYAD (Australian Youth Ambassadors for Development). Neither has culture in their main objectives and both are guided by AusAID priorities that make no mention of culture, and support 'the Millennium Development Goals', which also do not mention culture.

#### *Philanthropic organisations and NGOs*

Many philanthropic organisations support cultural development as a key aim. In Australia the Gordon Darling Foundation and the Myer Foundation have supported cultural programs in Timor-Leste but these have not involved Secretariat staff. NGOs such as Many Hands International, working in Los Palos, also work with the Secretariat on joint program development.

#### *Institution to institution programs*

Institution to institution programs provide strong professional links and sustainable partnerships. In Australia a number of national and state cultural institutions have Timor-Leste as a strategic priority including: National Film and Sound Archives, National Library of Australia, Powerhouse Museum, Australian Museum, Museums and Galleries of the Northern Territory, and Artlab Australia. In 2005 over fifty local councils also had partnerships in Timor-Leste, (Kehi 2006). Partnerships also exist across the tertiary, secondary and primary education sector. Examples of partnership funded by Australian organisations include a report on conservation needs at Uma Fukun and training program undertaken by the University of Melbourne in 2001; regular training programs with staff from MAGNT; and a Museum to Museum Seminar at University of Melbourne with staff and students from UNESCO, MAGNT, the Directorate of Culture, and UNPAZ in 2006.

#### *Programs supported by individual donors*

Individual donors also support bilateral relationships. In 2003 a private donor provided funds to move the museum collection from Uma Fukun to the Ministry of Education before the wet season. In 2002 donors gave money to support the refurbishment of Uma Fukun as a cultural centre. These amounts are small compared to international aid programs, but they are direct and have immediate and highly effective outcomes, generally without major imposts such as complicated reporting or procurement procedures.

#### *Program supported by international agencies*

Australia supports international agencies primarily through its United Nation status. UNESCO, and the World Bank supported the Community Empowerment Program from 1999 until 2006. The Community Empowerment Program (CEP) aimed to reduce poverty 'supporting inclusive patterns of growth and development' including the objective: 'support cultural heritage and social reconciliation'. (World Bank 2002) 2003 museum based training programs were delivered by MAGNT and University of Melbourne in Dili (Gurung 2006).

In 2005 UNESCO Jakarta implemented the Museum to Museum program, under the 'UNESCO Programme for the Preservation of Endangered Movable Cultural Properties' to 'promote international technical cooperation for museums in Least Developed Countries (LDC), Low Income Countries (LIC) and countries in transition and in post conflict situations', and focussing on the protection, conservation and presentation of 'endangered movable cultural properties' (Gurung 2006). Under this program UNESCO supported training at the National Museum in Jakarta and a strategic planning workshop in Dili (assisted by University of Melbourne and UNESCO Jakarta) in 2005.

## Issues in the development of bilateral museum-focussed programs

In the Museum to Museum Program Strategic Planning workshop held in Dili in 2004 staff in the National Directorate of Culture identified the skill development; museum management, documentation, conservation, exhibition, negotiation for repatriation, IT, fundraising, museum design and other associated skills as critical needs (Sloggett 2005). These capacities form the basis of museum development across the globe, but in Timor-Leste they pose particular challenges.

Language remains an issue. The official languages in Timor-Leste are Tetun and Portuguese. Access to information in peer-reviewed journals and books is an important part of the development of museum staff, however most material is presently available in the three official ICOM languages, English, French and Spanish or six official UN languages, Arabic, Chinese, English, French, Russian, and Spanish. Having information available in the official languages of Timor-Leste will enable Directorate of Culture staff to support other Timorese cultural organizations that are interested in registration, museum policy and strategic planning, conservation and documentation. The Secretariat website (SSC 2009 b) has links to a number of key documents in Tetun, Portuguese and English, but making training manuals, international conference proceedings, and international museum policies and conventions available in Tetun and Portuguese is an important but expensive task. The Secretariat website also provides English, Portuguese and Tetun pages where legislation and relevant legislative frameworks, permits, and publications can be accessed. This helps international organizations ensure their support is relevant to the needs of Timor-Leste and fits within current strategies, policies and programs.

International protocols, policies and conventions are important and include various UN and UNESCO documents such as the *Convention on the Means of Prohibiting and Preventing the Illicit Import, Export and Transfer of Ownership of Cultural Property*; *United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples*; and *Universal Declaration on Cultural Diversity*. It does not appear that Timor-Leste is a party to the Convention or Declarations. Other relevant documents ICOM's *Museum Definition*; *Code of Ethics*; *Strategic Plan*, and ICOM's statements (ICOM 2010). These are important in aligning Timor-Leste National Museum development with international programs. International organizations could be encouraged to provide documents in Portuguese and Tetun.

Accredited training presents some difficult challenges. The requirement for people to travel overseas for extended periods disrupts careers, dislocates families and often requires learning a new language (both for day to day communication, but more challenging for technical and professional discussions); accessing technical support and infrastructure in Timor-Leste for in-country training and development is difficult. Without a National Museum or Cultural Centre there remains limitations to practically expanding technical and professional training, and building skill sets. While skills development is essential, achieving levels of international best practice requires parity with infrastructure, information and program delivery capability.

Finally being in a position to articulate the value of culture within education, health, anti-corruption activities and the like is important given that culture is not a key theme in international aid programs that remain aligned to both donor country interests and to the Millennium Development Goals. There are many critical discussions about the links between education (particularly history), health, community empowerment and culture taking place in the international museum community, within donor organisations and published across a range of disciplines and in a range of countries (see for example Daogo-Guingané 2010, Hutter and Frey 2010, Leach 2006, UNESCO n.d. a, Woolcock et al 2010). Staff in the SSC are well placed to progress these discussions both within government in Timor-Leste and in international forums and to argue effectively for the importance of museum development within Timor-Leste in broader nation building agendas.

## Conclusion

Most government aid funding outside Timor-Leste is aligned to the development priorities of the United Nations and not specifically identified in many government programs. The result of this external alignment

is that support for cultural programs is often provided as part of education or governance programs rather than for cultural programs directly. UN member nations align their international aid programs to support the targets of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). In Australia the objectives of the Australia – Timor-Leste country strategy (strengthening basic health and education service delivery; increasing employment opportunities; supporting improvements in government accountability, transparency and integrity; and building the foundations of a safer community (Australian Government AusAID 2010) address the AusAid themes relating to: Health, family planning and disability; education and training; agricultural productivity; governance; anti-corruption; and, justice and anti-violence against women (Australian Government AusAID 2011b). These in turn support the MDG targets for universal education, reductions in gender inequality, and improvements in child and maternal health and HIV/AIDS treatment (United Nations, n.d. b). Culture, as an inalienable right and critical factor in the achievement of many of these goals, is not mentioned in the AusAid's themes, strategies or objectives nor in the UN's MDG targets.

The right to practice, access, enjoy and strengthen East Timorese cultural identity was, however, one of the most important motivations for East Timorese to fight so hard, and at such cost, for their sovereignty. Cultural programs have outcomes in health, economic development, and other areas identified in the MDGs. Culture, however, is not visible within these priority areas and its contribution to nation building therefore remains less visible than of other activities. Further, cultural programs suffer when they are judged according to criteria established for assessing health or economic programs.

While cultural engagement is rated highly by philanthropic organisations, local councils, and the education sector in Australia, diversifying the partnership base in Timor-Leste increases the complexity of stakeholder management for Timorese partners. As Totilo argues,

Timor-Leste is a society that is naturally receptive to outside ideas. Unfortunately, this seems to have worked to their disadvantage, making it too easy to import inappropriate ideas (Totilo 2009, 85).

From Timor-Leste's perspective partnering with international organizations is likely to remain an important part of the work of the SSC, but, as The Paris Declaration (OECD, n.d.) identified, partnerships are most effective if local organization can lead their international partners through 'effective "leadership" using strategic approaches and good planning' (AusAID 2008).

Cultural organisations are important in ensuring Timorese people can celebrate, preserve and use their history and culture in programs that improve the quality of their lives. Cultural programs provide and enrich opportunities in education, economic development, social cohesion and other areas that are essential for community and national well-being. For international agencies, individuals working in Timor-Leste, and other overseas visitors cultural organisations deliver programs that assist non-Timorese to understand East Timorese history and culture, providing critical insights into what East Timorese people value, and what choices have been made in the past that influence the present and may impact the future. As argued at the beginning of this paper, cultural programs connect communities and provide inter-generational links in ways that support goals in a range of other programs. This benefit is acknowledged within Timor-Leste and encapsulated in documents such as the Government's *Strategic Development Plan 2011 – 2030*. It forms the basis for the activity identified in this paper, and much more that has not been included. The fact that culture remains invisible in the language of the major aid organisations is a reflection of the history of these organisations, rather than of the actuality of what is happening within the countries they support. Alignment between the language in aid program documents, and the understanding of the role played by culture in good governance, social well-being and community empowerment, would, however, ensure that the outcomes and value of current partnerships in the cultural arena could be more fully and usefully assessed and supported. It serves no purpose to leave culture invisible in the aid agenda of international organisations and the aid-providing countries. The programs identified in this paper are testament to the value placed on culture by partners who continue to strengthen their work in the cultural arena, and continue to reap the rewards of their joint interests in cultural development.

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