

The role of participatory arts in social change in Timor Leste: discussing outcomes for project stakeholders

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In communities around the world, participatory arts, those artistic practices that engage community members in the process of creation, are increasingly used to stimulate positive social change. In this article I use this term ‘social change’ in a very broad sense, to encompass change that organizations or individuals seek to make through their work. In analyzing the impacts of that work, I use a four-dimensional model (Hawkes 2001), to examine both intended and unintended change within the dimensions of *social equity*, *cultural vitality*, *economic viability* and *environmental sustainability*.

This movement towards participatory arts for change is also occurring in developing countries, through artforms including performing, visual, media and literary arts. Many positive outcomes are achieved through this work across a range of domains. These include maintenance of cultural heritage and identity (Latrell 2008), stimulation of creativity (Van Erven, 2000), health promotion (Mwansa and Bergman 2003), peace-building and trauma recovery (Swain 2009; Harris 2010), human rights promotion (Ahmed 2007), skill development, income generation and environmental awareness raising (INCD 2002; Throsby 2008). Participatory arts engagement also provides participants and audiences with valued experiences of enjoyment, self-expression and meaning-making (Şişmanyazici-Navaie and Etili-Serter 2008).

This practice is also emerging in Timor-Leste, a small half-island nation that lies north of Australia and east of Indonesia. One of the world’s poorest countries (AusAID 2011), Timor-Leste is facing significant challenges in the establishment of an independent nation after hundreds of years of negligent colonization by Portugal and brutal oppression by Japan and Indonesia.

The emergence of the practice of participatory arts in Timor-Leste parallels a long tradition of participatory cultural practices. Dance, music and oral narrative have long played a vital role in community life in Timor, especially in community celebrations and rituals (King 1963; Sloman 2011; Tatoli ba Kultura 2012).

New arts initiatives in Timor are increasingly supported by Timorese individuals and community groups, as well as international organizations and governments. Projects are developed around priorities that stakeholders identify as significant. These include economic development (ETWA 2009b; Alola Foundation and Oxfam 2005), education and skill development (Bexley 2008a; PLAN International 2009; Arte Moris 2009), health promotion (Union Aid Abroad, 2009a; Bryant, 2007), political activism (Suai Media Space 2009) and peace-making (Ba Futuru 2006 and 2011; Bexley 2008b; James 2008 and 2010).

This paper presents a brief overview of one aspect of the author’s research into the role of participatory arts in social change in Timor-Leste. A wider project that forms the author’s PhD, examines these issues more deeply as well as a number of other questions. These include project leaders’ theories of change about their work, how those theories relate to what actually occurs and impacts of the programs. This article introduces case studies of five arts programs and the responses to these programs from a range of stakeholders. It concludes with a summary of the findings about outcomes of the activities, as well as a brief comment on issues of concern arising from the research.

Collecting information

This article is based on data collected through fieldwork in various locations across Timor-Leste between 2009 and 2011. 75 semi-structured interviews, four focus groups and participant observation of a range of arts activities were undertaken by this author. Research participants included a wide range of stakeholders: project participants; artistic leaders; host organisation staff; community leaders; professionals; funding

organisation representatives, audience members and wider communities impacted by the projects. An interpreter assisted with interviews that involved Timorese respondents.

Case studies

Five initiatives will be discussed in this paper: two each involving theatre and visual arts and one involving community music. Two were based in the capital city Dili, and the other three in the regional towns of Ainaro, Baucau and Lospalos.

- The *Scared Cool* physical theatre project, Dili

This project took place in early 2010, hosted by *Ba Futuru*, a non-government organisation that promotes human rights, peace-building and sustainable development through its work with young people. The organisation, established in 2004, has a strong focus on the arts as a vehicle for positive change. *Scared Cool* was directed by young Australian actor, Kallista Kaval, who worked with a group of ten young Timorese men and women over three months to develop the theatre performance. The show's themes included peace building and anti-violence.

- *Nafó Fila* community theatre company, Ainaro

Nafó Fila was established in 2005 to provide young people in Ainaro district opportunities for positive engagement through theatre. It currently has 18 members aged from 15 to mid-30s. The group is led by Ainaro local, Maria da Silva Barros, and operates out of her home, which also serves as living quarters for several company members. Some of these young people have no other family, while others come from districts far from Ainaro. While it is an ongoing struggle, *Nafó Fila* provides some members with their main income source. The company has a strong focus on community change through drama, and their plays address issues of local concern.

- *Arte Moris* visual art school, Dili

Arte Moris (Living Art) was established in 2002 by Swiss-German couple Gabi and Luka Gansser to 'use art as a building block in the psychological and social reconstruction of a country devastated by violence, with special emphasis on helping its young citizens' (*Arte Moris*, 2009). Timorese artist and former student Iliwatu Danubere became Director in 2009. The centre holds classes for resident artists, mostly young men from across Timor, and local children. It also has a large gallery open to the public. Students undertake community projects and commissions all around Timor and travel overseas to study and exhibit their work. Cultural exchange also occurs in reverse, with artists from around the world volunteering at *Arte Moris*.

- *Afalyca* art school, Baucau

Afalyca (Wild People) was established in 2007 by Baucau artists Marqy da Costa and Pepe do Ceo. These young men sought to promote peace and cooperation in their troubled neighbourhood by providing a positive outlet for the many young people who experienced unemployment and lack of opportunity. Marqy and Pepe were influenced by *Arte Moris*, and for some years the two organisations were close collaborators. *Afalyca* is now developing its own momentum, with two gallery-studios in Baucau. Workshops and classes are attended by young adults, mostly men, and also children and foreigners. Artists from Australia and elsewhere visit and assist with programs and tourists buy artworks and other artistic products. *Afalyca* artists also undertake community projects and commissions and hold exhibitions, in Timor and overseas.

- *Gillian Howell's* community music residency, Lospalos

Australian musician Gillian Howell led this project over four months in 2010. She was supported by an Asialink residency and fellow Australian musicians Tony Hicks, Lina Andonovska, Doug Coghill and Rachel Cashmore. The project was hosted by Many Hands International, a non-government organisation that focusses on cultural assets-based community development (Many Hands 2011). Gillian and colleagues sought to offer participants creative learning experiences through music – opportunities that they perceived

as being rare in the districts of Timor. Activities included small and large scale music jams and performances; instrument, music-making and song-writing workshops.

Having introduced the five case studies, the next section summarises outcomes of the initiatives, as extrapolated from the data.

Outcomes of the initiatives

Outcomes of the programs are framed using a four dimensional model, drawn from Hawkes' conception of the four pillars of sustainability (2001). This approach propounds the view that any community initiative should be considered in terms of its contribution or cost to the four interrelated dimensions of *cultural vitality*, *social equity*, *economic viability* and *environmental sustainability*.

The arts programs studied were overwhelmingly perceived as positive. The most significant benefits were reported by those directly involved; participants and artistic leaders. These outcomes can be considered primarily within the *cultural* and *social* dimensions, but there were also some perceived *economic* outcomes. The *environmental* dimension was not discussed by any of the respondents, so while projects would have had an environmental impact, especially those that involved foreigners flying in from overseas, this issue does not appear in the data. Other stakeholders, including relevant professionals, audience members and families, also perceived positive outcomes, as discussed below.

Certainties: the definite pluses

Program participants reported very favourable responses. The activities provided opportunities for pleasurable creative engagement, which participants reported as being valuable particularly because they were uncommon in their everyday life. The mother of one music-maker in Gillian Howell's project commented on the pleasure that she and her son gained through his involvement: 'Life is a struggle - survival is difficult. Through this event we can get some happiness because children are learning and we can see smiles in their faces.'

In the cultural dimension; the activities provided valued opportunities for creative expression. An audience member at the *Scared Cool* performance shared his view that; 'this show was very important, [...] for human beings to express their feelings'.

Exploring and sharing of Timorese heritage was also identified as significant. Both visual art schools, *Arte Moris* and *Afalyca*, emphasised the development of an artistic style that reflects traditional culture, while also broadening into new art forms and themes. Australian musician Gillian Howell prioritised the use of traditional materials and instruments, even when she was engaging people in music that was new for them. Participants and observers expressed pleasure at the affirmation of Timorese culture through this focus. One young man appreciated a music event because he felt that it connected with Timorese practice of ceremonies, which would help Timorese people remember their own culture. He also felt that foreigners' interest in traditional instruments would encourage the same from local people. As he described: 'When foreigners come to our country and play our instruments, it is a sharing experience for the youth, so that they cannot forget their instruments.'

There were also significant learning experiences. These included artistic skill development and most importantly, creative and analytic thinking. Project participants obtained new insights into issues in their lives and those of the wider community, that they identified as ongoing challenges. As *Scared Cool* participant Marta commented, participants, including herself, had learned new and creative ways to work through previous difficulties; 'we can [...] change our bad thinking [...] and experience from the past'. Marta felt that this was particularly important because almost all young Timorese have had significant experiences of conflict in their lives.

In the social dimension; participants in the arts programs experienced significant opportunities for personal growth, development of confidence and self-esteem. These positive experiences occurring in the course of participation were reinforced in many instances by outcomes of the programs. Young artists from *Afalyca*, for example, had numerous opportunities that were extraordinary among their hometown peers.

These included national and international recognition through public showing of their work and awards. Some had opportunities to travel overseas to present their work and undertake training.

There was a strong sense of positive connection with others through these activities. This was especially important for those who do not have direct support from families. In Timor, many young people must live long distances from home in order to study or work and there are high incidences of bereavement because of the country's traumatic history. Maria, *Nafo Fila's* leader, originally set up the group to cater for such young people, as she explained.

I think drama is good for young people, especially those who don't have any parents. Otherwise they would sit by themselves and think about everything. If we have drama and performance, everyone can come and enjoy and then they will forget these problems.

One of the group's participants confirmed the function of the group as a replacement for his absent family: 'When we are involved together in this group, we are now like family to each other'.

In the economic dimension; participants and artistic leaders reported definite economic advantages, especially those involved in longer term programs. None of the activities required any financial contribution from participants, yet most provided indirect and some, direct, economic benefits. These included skill development and English language learning that participants believed would improve their future opportunities. Direct benefits included employment, sales and commissions of artwork.

Impacts on leaders, visitors and tourists

As well as their impact on participants, these projects provided benefits for others involved. Artistic leaders reported deeply felt personal and professional responses. Young theatre worker, Kallista Kaval, for example, described how much she gained from the *Scared Cool* project.

Leading this project was..... by far the most extraordinary experience of my life. The performance night was a highlight - to see the audience's response..... It really changed the way I view theatre as a form.....

Visitors and tourists also reported deeply moving experiences. One development worker who was new to the country, described how her empathy and understanding of the Timorese narrative increased significantly after a visit to *Arte Moris'* gallery. One particular painting was, 'the most powerful political artwork I have ever seen. It helped me feel what Timorese have been through.....'

A tourist who attended a *Nafo Fila* performance commented on his great enjoyment of the event and the positive feeling about Timor that it engendered: 'The show, the dinner and the journey home on truck under the full moon; the kids so happy and excited, was the best part of my trip here'.

Community change

For the wider Timorese community too, there were several benefits identified. One was the pleasure in being an audience member for arts productions. One young man from a village in which *Nafo Fila* performed, responded that he and his peers looked forward to the show all year. They loved the music, the performance and the cast of lively characters sharing new ideas. In that instance, the show explored the issue of forced marriage that audience members confirmed was a continuing concern in their area.

Community leaders and professionals reported that these events were of benefit to communities in their capacity for awareness raising. A child protection worker from Ainaro, for example, commented that she received more referrals about family violence after *Nafo Fila's* performance on this topic.

Uncertainties and risks

While interview responses were overwhelmingly positive, this researcher did identify some areas of concern. One of these relates to the sustainability of programs, especially those largely supported by foreigners. International organisations who support these arts initiatives may not be able to offer ongoing assistance. This leaves groups like *Nafu Fila* in a precarious position, in part due to their isolated regional location. They often experience a struggle to survive, and they see few options for support of their work.

In a related concern, there is potential for leadership by foreigners to perpetuate the very issue the initiatives are often intended to address, that is, the capacity of Timorese people to manage their activities independently of foreigners. It is important that leadership capacity is transferred to local stakeholders in processes that are effective and empowering. In all of the case studies discussed, the process of capacity development was identified as a goal. However, this was continually challenging to implement, as most project leaders did not have strong training in the areas in which they were working. With the exception of one foreigner who had had a full education and much experience in her professional area, most of the others were learning on the job themselves, so they were not strongly equipped to devolve skills as they led. However this difficulty can potentially be overcome by more of the same; the more experience people gain, the greater their capacity to share those skills with others.

One other concern arising for this researcher was the potential for ineffective practice or even harm, despite best intentions. Many of the initiatives addressed very serious topics, including child abuse, family violence, human rights and war trauma. Most often those issues were tackled by arts leaders who had no training in either behaviour change or therapeutic arts practice. Therefore, they were at risk of being ineffective by not providing appropriate information or not using strategies effective for eliciting change. Even worse, there was potential for harm if issues were raised inappropriately, particularly if there is no safety net of support to assist people to deal with them. This risk could be ameliorated with a stronger emphasis on accompanying social support from appropriate agencies. This will be challenging to achieve in Timor-Leste when social services are as yet so underdeveloped, but it should be a goal for organisations seeking to make change.

One final concern was the potential for unexpected harm. This might include direct damage from poor role-modelling, as well as indirect harm from unintended negative consequences. One example of the former occurred at a public event where the artists were all smoking publicly as they prepared for and presented their work in a rural village. Given the strong influence of glamorous peers and media in youth take-up of smoking (Tickle et al, 2006), there is a possibility that this event resulted in as much harm as good, despite the ostensible positive messages being delivered through the performance and the strongly positive motivations of the group. In a different kind of unintended consequence, if a truly wholistic examination of costs and benefits was undertaken, an activity that involved foreigners flying to Timor would have to generate a very significant positive change if the environmental cost of carbon emissions generated by flights were to be negated.

Both of these factors indicate the ongoing need for evaluations that examine intended and unintended outcomes of arts, and indeed any other initiatives, in vulnerable communities and a wholistic look at all impacts of the process.

Conclusion

This article has presented a brief overview of research examining the role of arts in social change in Timor Leste. Five case studies of arts programs indicate strong positive outcomes for participants and other stakeholders. These outcomes are particularly evident in the *cultural* and *social* dimensions. Respondents commented on the pleasure they gained from their involvement, especially when it strengthened their connection with Timorese traditional culture. The activities stimulated new learning and thinking, both creative and analytic. Arts participants experienced highly positive connection with others through their involvement. This seemed particularly important because so many of the participants have experienced extended traumatic social disruption. Some participants also perceived benefits in the *economic* dimension,

through skill development, improvement of employability, opportunities for paid work and income generation from art sales.

Other stakeholders including artistic group leaders, non-participating community members and visitors, also experienced a range of positive outcomes. These included enjoyment of attendance at an arts event and a deeper understanding of their own and other's life experiences as a result of the issues presented. Artistic leaders also experienced significant personal and professional growth. Most challenging to determine was wider level community change.

While the outcomes seemed overwhelmingly positive, there were some potential risks and dangers. There were significant challenges with sustainability, and the corresponding potential risk to participants from engaging in highly meaningful activities for which there is no continuity. There is the possibility of no change, or change in the wrong direction, without careful planning and collaboration between artistic leaders and professionals with expertise in assisting positive social change. There were also unconsidered negative impacts such as the carbon emissions generated through overseas travel of visiting collaborators.

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