

Perceptions of development in Timorese communities

Sophia Close¹

This paper is a summary of my PhD field research, and is in two parts: first, I will explain my research problem; then, outline the emerging themes of my fieldwork in Timor-Leste.

Development-related conflict

Timorese people experience conflict in multiple ways; at national and community levels and among (or between) individuals and in complex institutional, gendered and structural ways. These conflicts are triggered by a broad range of factors, but they can also be related to conflict that is exacerbated or triggered by poor development taking place where Timorese people live, or to land or resources which they own and are responsible for.

Key research problem

My research specifically examines post-1999 experiences of development and development-related conflict in Timor-Leste. I argue that the modern international aid and development system may create further conflict in communities because it often overlooks or does not appropriately value or empower Timorese perspectives of development.² I argue that Timorese perspectives often encompass local Indigenous knowledge.

IK [Indigenous Knowledge] is stored in peoples' memories and activities and is expressed in stories, songs, folklore, proverbs, dances, myths, cultural values, beliefs, rituals, community laws, local language and taxonomy, agricultural practice, equipment, materials, plant species and animal breeds. IK is shared and communicated orally, by specific example, and through culture (Grenier 1998, 6).

The modern development system positions Western knowledge as primary. This hierarchy leads to the disempowerment and de-legitimation of non-Western knowledge, resulting in Indigenous knowledge being defined as inferior and unscientific (Shiva 2000, vii). However, Western knowledge is facing difficulties in effectively resolving or managing the complex and dynamic development challenges of these communities (UNPFII 2010). In comparison, Table 1 indicates that Indigenous knowledge systems can be helpful in dealing with these complex systems. It is important that the current hierarchy of knowledge within the development system is debunked, in order to better understand each community's local-level decision-making processes, which are key to achieving peace and development in communities.

¹ PhD Candidate, National Centre for Indigenous Studies, Australian National University. This paper is a summary of my PhD field research undertaken through the National Centre for Indigenous Studies at ANU. Thanks in particular to my Supervisor Dr Janet Hunt from the Australian National University and Dr Antero Da Silva from the Peace and Conflict Studies Centre at the National University of Timor-Leste for their ongoing support for this research.

² I use the term 'modern development system' to describe the complex set of elements (i.e. institutions, actors, and rules) and relationships that governs structures and behaviors within the current dominant international aid and development system.

Table 1 - Differences between Indigenous and Western Knowledge (Mazzocchi 2006, 464).

Indigenous Knowledge	Western Knowledge
Intuitive	Analytical
Holistic	Reductionist
Spiritual	Positivist
No distinction between empirical and sacred	Materialistic
Subjective	Objective
Qualitative	Quantitative
Passed on orally between generations	Academic and literate transmission
Depends on local context and conditions	Separates subject from object

My research includes a broad analysis of the modern development system, as currently practiced by governments, donors, multilaterals, faith-based and non-government organisations in Timor-Leste since 1999. Early findings from my field research indicate that using the modern development system as a tool to achieve change and to transform conflict in Timorese communities is risky.

Indigenous perspectives

Indigenous peoples are the most diverse and complex grouping of humanity. Worldwide, at least 370 million people are considered to be Indigenous (IWGIA 2013). Represented across approximately 5,000 different nation groups, speaking at least 4-5000 of the approximately 6000 languages existing today, they are geographically located across all States and territories (Martinez Cobo 1987; Ibid). Worldwide, Indigenous peoples are seeking to transform their community challenges through self-determined development. They are engaging with the modern development system to assist them to attain their goals.

Due to the complexity and potential for exclusion when defining Indigenous peoples, the United Nations (UN) and other international bodies have not adopted a formal definition of Indigeneity. Instead, the UN looks to identify Indigenous peoples according to the following criteria, not all of which must be fulfilled (UN Permanent Forum for Indigenous Issues 2013):

- Self- identification as Indigenous peoples at the individual level and accepted by their community as their member.
- Historical continuity with pre-colonial and/or pre-settler societies.
- Strong link to territories and surrounding natural resources.
- Distinct social, economic or political systems.
- Distinct language, culture and beliefs.
- Form non-dominant groups of society.
- Resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities.

Timorese people rarely identify themselves as Indigenous, however, their distinct cultural knowledge and social, economic and political systems, and their historical continuity with their pre-colonial society, and strong link to land and natural resources indicate that there are many similarities of experience and history that connect Timorese people with the distinct characteristics of Indigenous peoples as identified by the United Nations (Trindade 2011; Hohe 2002).

It is therefore relevant to explore how Timorese (Indigenous) knowledge, governance, and cultural practices affect development practice in Timor-Leste. The use of an Indigenous critical theory lens enables a new analysis of the modern development system and provides a greater understanding of how development affects relationships, power and culture in Timor-Leste.

Field research in Timor-Leste

I selected post-1999 Timor-Leste as my case study field site as it has a long history of colonialism, conflict, and development. It is difficult to obtain data, but La'o Hamutuk reports that between 1999-2009 approximately \$5.2 billion US dollars were directed to development programming in Timor-Leste, and that only 1/10 or \$550 million of these funds entered the Timorese economy (La'o Hamutuk 2009, 1). To date I have completed approximately 90 field interviews with Timorese community members, Government and NGO representatives; and with Indigenous peoples and international peacebuilding and development practitioners.

Initial results of field research

During my field interviews, I asked participants about their experiences of development interventions in Timor-Leste post-1999, in order to understand how the development system is playing out in the Timor-Leste context. A range of flaws in this development system were identified by interviewees. There were also many practical reflections on the changes needed to transform the development system in Timor-Leste. In this paper I highlight – relationships, power and culture – as the three most important themes that emerged from these discussions. These three themes form the basis for the Indigenous critical theory framework I propose, where I advocate that development practitioners should increase their understanding of each context through these lens' that prioritise Indigenous knowledge.

Relationships

Almost every person I spoke to referenced relationships as central to building sustainable and peaceful development outcomes. An International NGO worker who manages peacebuilding programs in Timor-Leste said: “We believe that conflict can be transformed; it is not about necessarily resolving the particular issue but about transforming the relationships. Peace is a process, it is not an event” (Field Interview 22/09/2009, Washington D.C. USA).

Timing is absolutely critical. Whose timeframe are development actors working to? Is it that of communities, or is the short time frame from a demanding government minister, or the idiosyncrasies of a senior foreign bureaucrat, or is it pushed by an arbitrary funding schedule based on a financial year? Rarely do communities determine when and at what pace development occurs which results in misaligned programming that can trigger conflict in communities. A Timorese Development Consultant noted: “Development partners are not that flexible. In order to get more participation, you actually need more time and proper relationships with the people that you actually have to work with. Few agencies do that” (Field Interview 13/09/10 Dili, Timor-Leste).

The pace of development affects all the relationship building, ownership, sustainability, and the design, implementation and monitoring and evaluation processes within the modern development cycle. An International Development worker said: “Agencies need to be here for the long haul. Almost everything requires long-term relationships. But the constant churn over of staff makes it very hard. [People] need to be here for 5 – 10 years. It takes that long before people will speak the truth” (Field Interview: 09/2010; Dili, Timor-Leste).

Many people also identified divisions within the Timorese community, and between Timorese and outsiders. A Timorese NGO worker said: “International solidarity helped us gain independence but these people came in with perceptions that helped undermine our local capacities, our local knowledge, our local experience. In many cases, people undermined this potential” (Field Interview 17/09/2010, Dili, Timor-Leste). Many participants described conflicted relationships between Timorese and non-Timorese, resulting in insider-outsider bias. Timorese participants discussed a range of cultural processes to build relationships with outsiders including inter-marriage, and ceremonies and rituals involving *lulik* and *liurai* (Field Interview 14/09/2010, Dili, Timor-Leste).

The participants had a range of solutions to build and sustain better relationships – including trust, respect, and flexibility and learning Tetum or local languages. Participants also highlighted the need to undertake culturally-appropriate processes, be that the *na-ha-bitu-bot*, the Timorese ‘rolling out the mat’ ceremony, or having coffee every Tuesday morning to build relationships that will endure the challenges of change. They emphasised that it is also possible to transform the current development systems tools and processes in order to better share cultural understandings and then putting in place checks and balances, incentives, and processes that explicitly act to value culture in decision-making.

Power

An international development specialist said:

The relationship is paramount. Until you have a reasonable relationship, then whatever agreement you get, will not be worth the paper it is printed on. The main point of the relationship is to recalibrate this huge asymmetry of power, which is absolutely inevitable (Field Interview 22/09/2009, Washington D.C. USA).

Interviewees highlighted that having the power to choose what kind of development they want is critical. They asserted that choice – or free prior and informed consent - is fundamental to Indigenous development and self-determination. Free prior and informed consent is a decision-making process that does not involve coercion, is made before interventions begin and includes understanding the full range of potential impacts. Communities are empowered to say ‘Yes’ or ‘No’ to a relationship, program or policy (Desert Knowledge Cooperative Research Centre 2010; United Nations 2007). Free prior and informed consent is a deeply contentious issue for States, private companies and development agencies. Participants suggested the need for greater understanding of traditional decision-making processes, in line with engagement with culturally appropriate leaders, as an important step toward community management of land and resources.

Corruption within development programs was highlighted as pervasive, with possible links to future conflict between elites and ordinary Timorese. An International development worker noted, “Single source tenders, corruption is getting out of control. And of course that is not getting to the people in the countryside. It isn’t even going to all the people in Dili, it is going to small elites” (Field Interview 29/09/10, Dili, Timor-Leste).

For many communities relationship-building and mutual accountability that occurs during the process of reaching an agreement is more important than the outcome. This is challenging, as even with good intentions and evolving policies, much of the current development system is focused on the outcome, not on the process. A Timorese NGO worker said: “For example, a donor has already been given money, which they have to spend. They go out to a community to do an activity, but it has already been done (by another organisation), so they go ahead and duplicate” (Field Interview 09/2010, Dili, Timor-Leste). The absence of power to consent can lead to lack of community involvement in decision-making, which can contribute to development-related conflict.

Culture

Overall, there was limited incorporation of Timorese culture, language and identity into development interventions. People particularly commented on the challenges of multiple official languages and the lack of Tetum language use by both international development workers and Timorese elites. One Timorese observer noted: [The elite group] manipulates this idea of national identity, the idea of Portuguese language as Timorese identity in order to gain access to power, and by claiming this they discriminate against the Timorese who do not speak Portuguese. It is because they do not value Timorese ideas that much. Because they think it is backward” (Field Interview 19/09/13, Dili, Timor-Leste). Language policy and use was seen as both symbolic of creating a bridge between cultures, a valuing of something that was uniquely Timorese and a sign that those non-Timorese who spoke Tetum were committed to supporting the long-term future of Timor. Some participants saw a lack of shared language as a conflict trigger in communities. A Timorese

NGO worker noted: “They [rural communities] do not have access to anything and they cannot understand. Nobody tells them. This is why I say it is a time bomb, if the elite continue with this, it will create problems” (Field Interview 6/10/10, Dili, Timor-Leste).

Gender remained a key issue in inclusive decision-making and participative governance. A senior female Timorese Development worker said: “There is a cultural bias against participation of women, most power and decision making goes to men. We are a young country, with an old cultural system. You have to try to get [women’s] ideas about what they want, and you have to dig down” (Field Interview 09/09/2010, Dili, Timor-Leste).

Tensions and the power dynamics between traditional and modern knowledge systems were highlighted. A Timorese academic stated: “Development agencies are within the western cultures and they misunderstand [our] cultures and that leads to conflict. There is an assumption that somehow indigenous peoples are inferior, less advanced, less knowledgeable, and less capable, less worthy” (Field Interview 09/2010, Dili, Timor-Leste).

Misunderstanding of Timorese culture leads to a misunderstanding of the problems and triggers for conflict, and a system-wide undervaluing of these cultures. Existing conflict in communities was not seen to be understood well. A Timorese development specialist said: “We have already had conflict resolution methods here for 1000s of years but then people come here to teach conflict resolution. These outside processes are not working because people don’t believe in it” (Field Interview 09/2010, Dili, Timor-Leste).

The capacity of Indigenous communities is critical to achieving and sustaining change (Hunt 2005). The majority of development actors said the capacity, or power of the Timorese communities to enact change was limited. This response contradicted the strengths and resilience that Timorese people proudly referred to. A Timorese NGO worker said: “We are driven by models which do not apply here. When people do it themselves they do it better” (Field Interview 09/2010, Dili, Timor-Leste). To complement this insight, an International NGO worker said: “Partner agencies need to realise by pushing they create more harm than good. They need Timorese to drive the process of change. Otherwise they destroy the social network and it is just another form of colonialism” (Field Interview 09/2010, Dili, Timor-Leste).

Many participants made suggestions to better understand the contexts they worked in to bring about more effective development. An International development worker said: “We need independent analyses and the freedom to say it like it is. Aid workers need to have humility in order to not make it worse. We should be brave and radical in order to create the shifts that are necessary” (Field Interview 23/09/2010, Dili, Timor-Leste).

Comment

In line with these initial findings of my fieldwork, I argue, that the current development practice in Timor-Leste has significant flaws resulting in a range of challenges concerning relationships, power and culture. Therefore, it is risky to anticipate that development in its current form will transform conflict in Timorese communities. Indeed, the current development system may create further conflict in these communities because it often overlooks or does not appropriately value or empower Timorese worldviews, culture or governance processes.

While development practitioners understand that they should be taking a particular context into ‘account’ we do not have an effective framework or tools to do this. By using an Indigenous critical theory framework that analyses relationships, power and culture, my research can provide a more specific analysis for development practitioners to understand and work within the ‘context’ of any given development challenge. Using this framework, development practitioners could more effectively understand how community’s local knowledge should be driving decision-making and resource allocation resulting in more effective conflict transformation and development outcomes.

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