

Popular Education & Peacebuilding in Timor-Leste: Theoretical Foundations

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This paper explores the connections between the theory and practice of popular education and peacebuilding, both of which are concerned with social and political transformation. It begins by reviewing the basic concepts of peacebuilding and popular education, before examining some popular education responses to the challenges of securing the peace in Timor-Leste since 1999. It concludes with some observations and questions about the future directions of popular education in Timor-Leste as it struggles to restore a sustainable peace.

Understanding Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding is a term adopted in the last decade by international security, aid and development agencies, the most prominent of which has been the United Nations. It describes the particular form that international development work takes in 'post-conflict' situations. Peacebuilding is an integrated approach to long term social, cultural, political and economic development, aimed at transforming the existing inequalities and injustices within a society in order to mitigate conflict (Knight 2004). In 1992, the then UN Secretary General Boutros Ghali defined it as:

[post-conflict] action to identify and support structures which will tend to strengthen and solidify a peace in order to avoid a relapse into conflict (cited Wameyo 2001:1)

Similarly, his successor Koffi Anan described it as:

actions undertaken at the end of a conflict to consolidate peace and prevent a recurrence of armed confrontation (cited Paris 2002: 637).

A more complete definition is provided by Fewer et al:

... measures designed to consolidate peaceful relations and strengthen viable political, socio-economic and cultural institutions capable of mediating conflict, and to strengthen other mechanisms that will either create or support the necessary conditions for sustained peace (Fewer et al 2003:5).

As the above quotes suggest, peacebuilding is a process involving the creation or maintenance of conditions in which peace can thrive. In some cases, efforts focus on rebuilding and consolidating relationships, while in others the focus may be the reconstruction of viable democratic institutions including the civil society organizations which help to make state institutions of governance work effectively. The most important outcome is the restoration of a culture of peace. This involves dealing with the underlying structural causes and consequences of conflict and rebuilding, from the bottom up, the social fabric which has been torn apart by violence. In practice this means:

- i) meeting basic needs, including security, so people can live without fear or intimidation.
- ii) creating the conditions for a strong economic base for all.
- iii) developing a system of democracy with justice and equality to emerge.

John Paul Lederach, an internationally renowned practitioner in the field of conflict transformation, suggests that the process of peacebuilding proceeds through several distinct but overlapping stages. The

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first stage, immediate action, occurs in the emergency phase, immediately after the end of a conflict. The second stage is preparation, when the affected society begins to develop its capacity to move forward. In the third stage, design, the systems begin to emerge, plans are made, and the real long-term work of rebuilding peace and prosperity begins. The final stage, the outcomes, are when real social and structural change begins to 'kick in' and the society has transformed itself (Lederach 1995, 1997). He also advocates for peacebuilding work to focus on the broader 'organic' processes of social transformation and reconciliation (Lederach 1998). Another commentator Paris (2002) makes the important point that peacebuilding is not simply a practical technique for managing violence and its aftermath, and that it is never politically neutral.

Women in Post-Conflict Peacebuilding

A significant theme in the recent peacebuilding literature is the issue of violence against women during conflict and in its aftermath (e.g. Mazurana and McKay 1999; Meintjes, Pillay and Turshen 2001a; Nakaya 2004). According to these writers, women suffer the most extreme and brutal forms of violence during armed conflicts. Even when the fighting stops, they continue to suffer violence unless steps are taken both during the conflict and its immediate aftermath to transform gender relations. There are at least two aspects to this. In the first instance, the atrocities perpetrated on women leave the women in extreme trauma, but at the same time they are held responsible for the shame that this brings on the culture, community and family. Secondly, the habit of resorting to force and violence nurtured in armed conflict, lives on after the end of war in the behaviour of men towards women. This is fundamentally about power, about the continued use of power by men and within the community as a whole, against the interests and needs of women.

Overcoming this violence is not simply a question of changing individual behaviour or of building 'social capital.' The change needs to be 'systemic', that is, it is about addressing the low status of women in society, maintained by institutions including those of culture, the economy, governance and religion. This is why building peace through the 'transformation of gender relations' is primarily a question of changing relationships of power, of helping women gain sufficient power and access to resources, both structurally and in their day-to-day lives, that they can end this oppression. Meintjes, Pillay and Turshen (2001b:12-13). point out that changing power relations means changing the way material resources are produced and distributed, because in many traditional patriarchal societies, the underlying structural violence against women is maintained through the process of 'treating women's productive and reproductive labour as commodities' to be exchanged among men. Women's empowerment therefore requires a change in these economic relations, including improved access for rural women to land, to markets, and to education. Of particular relevance to Timor-Leste is the point made by Hale (2001), who claims that during anti-colonial wars of national liberation women have historically made major gains in terms of their status and power, but these have been difficult to sustain once the conflict has ended and society moves into the nation-building phase of liberation. Meintjes (2001) argues that while constitutional and legal reforms are essential to the process of gender transformation in the post-conflict era, the ultimate change in social relationships will be dependent on continued accountability and dialogue between independent women's organizations and the post-independence government.

Transformative peacebuilding can be summarized as having three key aspects: mobilizing the population to determine their future development pathways; addressing issues of social inequality, especially gender; and re-engaging community leaders to lead the process of social and political transformation at the local level in the new post conflict era.

In order for peacebuilding to succeed in Timor-Leste it is necessary to focus efforts on the 80% of the population who live in the Districts. These people are predominately engaged in subsistence farming and fishing and the informal economy. They are typically illiterate or semi-literate and live in extreme poverty with a life expectancy rate of 55 years and a fertility rate at 7.8 births per woman. Their traditional patriarchal culture continues to dominate daily life with women including young girls being the most seriously affected by these socioeconomic conditions (WB/ADB 2007). Furthermore the impact of the 24 year war has left a legacy of distrust and division but at the same a great sense of the possibility of a better life.

Understanding Popular Education

The popular education movement of Timor-Leste has worked to assist the rural poor, women and farmers in particular, to learn both how and why to actively participate in the work of national development. Their work helps rural communities to see themselves as equals with the educated and privileged class of Timorese society, who mainly live in Dili from where people have historically exercised political power.

The theory of popular education is about empowering the excluded to have an informed voice in decisions about their own future. In post-conflict societies such as in Timor-Leste, this includes working out how to heal the pain, anger and despair associated with a brutal and violent history of military occupation. Popular education in Timor-Leste is education for the people, the masses who have largely been excluded from the formal education system and therefore from the development process.

Popular educators work inside mass social movements advocating for a more equal, democratic and just society, using a particular theory and methodology which has been informed by the work of renowned Brazilian adult educator Freire (1972; 1978) and adult transformative learning theory (Allman 1999; Mayo 1997). The methodology aims to assist the marginalised to learn from their experiences and to ask questions about the root causes of social, political, economic and cultural problems – to develop ‘critical consciousness’. The goal is to help people to become active agents in their own ‘emancipation’ ie to plan and act on strategies which improve existing conditions to overcome inequality and poverty (Kane 2001). This process of working with people to solve their own problems is slow, requiring the popular educator to work alongside the people over the long term. Thompson describes this methodology, sometimes also called ‘emancipatory learning’ or ‘transformative learning’ as follows:

Its purpose is to develop understanding and knowledge about the nature and root causes of unsatisfactory circumstances in order to develop real strategies to change them. The kinds of knowledge, pedagogy and educational relationships encouraged by emancipatory learning are those which are formed in solidarity with the interests of the least powerful in society. The reason for collaboration is to work with the least powerful to gain more autonomy and independence, more control over their own lives, and to bring about change in the interests of greater equality and social justice (Thompson n.d.:1).

Popular education sets out to change the society which has produced the disadvantage of the masses in the first place:

Popular education is overtly political education which is critical of the status quo and is committed to progressive social and political change. It has nothing to do with ‘helping the disadvantaged’ or ‘the management of poverty’, and everything to do with assisting in the struggle for a more democratic, just and egalitarian society (Martin et al 1999 cited Thompson nd: 3).

It is a political project, whose goal is a new social order. This equates with the ultimate goal of peacebuilding, which is to transform societies so that peace can thrive.

Dai Popular Network and Peacebuilding in Timor-Leste

The contemporary Timorese popular education movement emerged in the late 1990s and traces its roots and inspiration back to the 1970s movement for national independence, in particular to the popular educators Vincente Sahe Reis and Rosa Muki Bonaparte (Durnan 2005a). In 2002 the Dai Popular Network was officially formed bringing together over 20 local NGOs and community-based organizations which were using popular education in their community organising work Popular education, according to Dai Popular, is

.. more than simple methods of teaching and learning – it depends on a political analysis of power and a commitment to equality and democratic process. (It is) ... a collective process that seeks to give voice to those who have been silenced, to empower those who have been disempowered, and to bring about liberation, on both personal and societal

levels. Liberation grows out of social awareness, community organizing, creative action, self-reliance, the use of local resources and culture, and a persistent commitment to human dignity (La'o Hamutuk 2002).

Most members of the Dai Popular Network had been student activists during the Resistance era and viewed their role in the new independence era as a continuation of their struggle for sovereignty, independence and self determination know in Tetum as Ukun Rasik A'an. (Pers. Com. Rodrigues March 2004)

There are many examples where the work of the popular education movement has been essential to the process of building a durable peace in Timor-Leste. Perhaps the most extraordinary example is the national mass socialisation and mobilisation campaign undertaken by the courageous student activist movement when they traveled the country to prepare the people for the vote on independence prior to the 30 August, 1999 ballot in spite of the threat of violence by the Indonesian military or pro-Indonesia militias. (Pers. Com. da Silva Nov 2008). Another example is the work of the women's movement. Women trained in popular education at Fokupers, a local NGO set up to advocate for the rights of women especially in relation violence in the aftermath of the war, led a national campaign in 2001 to ensure rural women's voices were part of the writing of the new RDTL Constitution. They secured 9 of their 10 demands (Durnan 2006). Today Fokupers continues its community education work with a focus on domestic violence and reproductive rights.

A third example is the work of Oxfam GB, who between 2002-2005 worked with local community based groups including GFFTL, a local NGO formed by young student activists to teach literacy to village women using the popular education Action-Reflect model. These classes combined the acquisition of literacy skills with livelihood skills and an analysis of their situation, including telling stories associated with trauma and hardship from the conflict (Rosa 2002). GFFTL and others trained by MST from Brazil continue this work today.

However, I want to focus on two examples which very clearly illustrate the synergies between popular education and peacebuilding.

In 2004 the Sahe Institute (now known as the Institute for Popular Education) with support from INSIST, an Indonesian Transformative Learning Institute, piloted the Eskola Ukun Rasik A'an (the activist school). This School taught the theory and practice of transformative learning to prepare community organizers to work with villagers to engage them in the processes of reclaiming their lives and to recover from a fractured history of conflict. However, the real strength of this 18 month school was transforming activists of the Resistance into activists for community development and participatory democracy. Its curriculum validated and built upon their Resistance experiences, while developing the new knowledge and practices needed to rebuild Timor-Leste at the base. This involved a major shift from working under a tight top-down command structure to using critical thinking to resolve problems collectively. While it proved unsustainable at that time, the school marked an innovative and critical response to the challenges of a post-independent Timor-Leste (Durnan 2005b).

The second example is the national adult literacy campaign launched in March, 2007 with currently over 486 classes and 26,000 graduates. The Dai Popular movement provided the impetus for the campaign in 2004, when their resolution at the first National Literacy Conference, for a government led and co-ordinated national literacy campaign was strongly supported by the Prime Minister Alkatiri, leading to negotiations with Cuba for assistance (Gutteres 2004; Boughton 2008). Popular educators staffed the first Campaign Secretariat, which mobilised over 70 students from the national university to return to their villages as literacy monitors to work along side other local men and women who had been engaged by the Secretariat to teach literacy.

This national literacy campaign I argue is an essential component in the strategy to rebuild a sustainable peace in Timor-Leste. It has the potential to mobilise many thousands of people as agents of their own development, not just in an economic sense, but also in a political and a cultural sense. Moreover, by bringing people into this process across the country, in every single district, sub-district and suco, it creates a form of national unity, a common experience from which everyone can begin to see themselves as 'an imagined community' with a shared future. Already, the campaign has proved its ability to mobilise women, who form the majority joining the classes. In becoming literate, women will be more able to participate in the political life of their community and the nation, and carry through on the implementation of the rights which they have won in the new independence Constitution.

In summary, then, the national adult literacy campaign is an essential component in the strategy to rebuild peace in Timor-Leste, for at least four reasons:

- 1) Education is a basic human right and literacy is the first step in every educational pathway. As a basic human right it is part of what must be achieved to overcome inequality. It is also the means to achieving other rights;
- 2) Literacy allows the mass of the population to join the development debate on a more equal basis;
- 3) The campaign model is a campaign for national unity as it brings the whole population together over a shared goal and connects each other, across regional and political divides and with the State, the government, the President and the Parliament all share a part;
- 4) It directly addresses the status of women, especially in the rural districts.

Future challenges for the Timorese popular education movement

By the end of 2006 the Dai Popular Network had collapsed and has been unable to revive itself as a co-ordinated social movement. However there are signs that a re-awakening could be on the horizon. For example, in response to the violent political crisis of 2006-07, individual popular educators worked to resolve conflicts and restore a sense of unity in a number of ways eg youth peace camps, community dialogues between opposing groups, mass socialisation using popular media including the production of an independent weekly newspaper *Kla'ak*, and the formation of the Peace and Conflict Studies Centre at the national university and through supporting the national literacy campaign as described above.

Our critical reflection on the role of popular education and its continuing contribution to peace in Timor-Leste at this Conference needs to consider why the Dai Popular movement was unable to transcend internal contradictions. For now, it seems that the demobilisation of the movement has left policy makers and donors free to ignore popular education as a credible and vital part of the overall adult education strategy to combat poverty, de-colonise society and restore a culture of peace. Despite recent writings in the field of transformative education making the link between adult learning and the practices of peacebuilding (McCaffery 2005; Mojab & Dobson 2008) few decision-makers in Timor-Leste today associate popular education with the building of peace. On the contrary, many argue that popular education belongs to the pre-independence Resistance era because of its links with FALANTIL and FRETILIN in the 1970s-1980s, and therefore they argue popular education does not have a place in building a viable democratic nation relevant in today's modern globalised world.

The examples provided in this paper help challenge this, demonstrating the connectedness between the fields of popular education and peacebuilding. In its ideology and its pedagogy, popular education is not only consistent with the underlying principles of the transformative theories of post-conflict peacebuilding; it provides a comprehensive approach to achieving the goals which the social transformation model has set for the peacebuilding process. Popular education has developed a practice for working with adults, particularly the marginalised and disempowered, enabling them to move into active roles in constructing a more equal and just society. It is a practice which supports the development of a participatory democracy, mobilizing people in a process of social transformation to address and overcome the inequalities of class and gender associated with many conflicts and which continue to haunt Timor-Leste today.

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