

# **The Right to Play: A children's composition project in Timor-Leste (East Timor)**

## **Abstract**

This paper describes a children's community music project in Timor-Leste (East Timor) that explored aspects of children's rights through composition and songwriting. It considers some of the challenges and rewards that can arise in post-colonial, post-conflict, developing countries, and describes the creative processes used to develop the music with the child participants. Written within the autoethnographic domain, the author-practitioner both reports on and interprets the project in its context and considers the potential of cultural projects to encourage new understanding of wider civil and political issues among participants and observers. 'The Right to Play' music project took place as part of the author's 4-month artist residency in Timor-Leste and was part of the town of Baucau's celebrations to mark International Human Rights Day in December 2010.

## **Key words**

Composition, Songwriting, Timor-Leste (East Timor), Music workshops, Community music, Children's rights

## **Introduction - Timor-Leste in context**

Timor-Leste (East Timor) is one of the world's newest nations. For several centuries it was a far-flung Portuguese colony, prized for its sandalwood. Indonesia invaded the country in 1975, and remained in occupation for the next 24 years, ruling in an atmosphere of fear and

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resistance. The people of Timor-Leste voted for their independence in a 1999 referendum, but the Indonesian forces retreated with tremendous violence, causing a wave of bloodshed and terror to sweep the country, and leaving the small half-island of Timor-Leste with 70% of its economic and physical infrastructure destroyed (Chomsky, 2003; East Timor Government, 2008). Roads, powerlines, and buildings were torn apart and burned, three-quarters of the population was displaced, and a UN peacekeeping presence, and transitional administration came in as a result.

Twelve years on, Timor-Leste is slowly rebuilding itself; however, many challenges remain. The country is ranked 120 out of 169 countries in the U.N. Human Development Index – a comparative measure of life expectancy, literacy, education and standards of living – and it is estimated that 41 percent of the million-strong population live below the poverty line (UNHR, 2011). Health standards are very low, with more than 50% of the population without access to safe drinking water, 60% without adequate sanitation, and high rates of infant mortality. Education opportunities are limited, with only 25% of the population completing primary school education (UNDP, 2006).

### **Human Rights in Timor-Leste**

During the years of Indonesian occupation, more than a quarter of the population was killed or died as a direct result of the occupation. An estimated 10,000 civilians were imprisoned and often tortured during the period. That brutal era has a “uniformly appalling human rights record” (Kingsbury & Leach, 2007, p. 1). Today, Timor-Leste’s formal justice system remains fragile and severely limited in its capacity to serve the population. (International

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Crisis Group, 2011; UNMIT, 2010a). There is a strong lack of trust and confidence in local security forces and justice systems among the general population.

Human rights education in East Timor is greatly needed, but has a long way to go before awareness and understanding translates into actions and upholding of justice across the general population. The UN Human Rights and Transitional Justice Section documents alleged human rights violations in East Timor, but also has a strong education agenda, running outreach activities and capacity-building workshops to raise awareness about human rights. Every year it supports activities around International Human Rights Day (UNMIT, 2010b). Also working towards greater understanding of human rights in East Timor is the non-government organisation Ba Futuru, which has developed a comprehensive human rights education training manual for use with young people (James, 2006).

### **The Right to Play – aims and intentions**

‘The Right To Play’ was a songwriting and composition project that took place in Baucau, Timor-Leste in December 2010 to mark International Human Rights Day and engage local children and adults in a creative, collaborative music process. It was the result of a partnership between an Australian composer/musician and a local community arts centre and employed a small team of Timorese and Australian artists. Twenty-three children aged 9 to 13 years took part in the four-day project, and together composed three songs, celebrating and describing children’s rights. The Right to Play took its name from Article 31 of the United Nations Convention of the Rights of the Child [UNCRC]<sup>1</sup>.

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The project's aims were both educational and social. Firstly, the project aimed to engage a group of local children and artists in participatory and creative music processes. Music in Timorese schools aligns with a transmission-based approach dominated by teacher-talk and little student input (Quinn, 2009), while music-making in communities is frequently the domain of older youth and beyond. The Right to Play project would model an alternative approach to music-making for children.

Similarly, the Right To Play project aimed to offer a professional learning opportunity to the Timorese artists involved. The arts centre had a well-established program of visual arts and dance workshops, but its musical offerings were limited. They were keen to develop new skills in music workshop leadership.

The decision to focus the songwriting and composing on human rights and children's rights responded to an interest expressed by community members, and the local UN Human Rights office. Linking to International Human Rights Day events was also seen as a way of giving The Right To Play project additional status and interest in the community.

Lastly, the Right To Play aimed to be an opportunity for cultural exchange between the Timorese and Australian artists. In particular, the Australian artists were keen to incorporate local music traditions into the composition work.

## **Methodology**

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This paper is a descriptive, interpretative account of The Right To Play project, written within the autoethnographic domain. It draws upon the field notes of the project leader (the author), video, audio and photographic footage.

Autoethnography places me as both informant and investigator alongside my role as project leader. It enables me to report the events that took place and challenges me to interpret them as objectively as possible. There are strong ethical arguments for the use of autoethnography in reports of projects taking place in developing and post-colonial settings, where true ‘informed consent’ is questionable, given that research itself, and the ethics that surround it are Western constructs and not necessarily well-understood or relevant in traditional or developing societies (Cunningham & Jones, 2005; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

## **Challenges encountered**

East Timor’s current cultural context is complex — the legacies of colonialism, war, and occupation are compounded by the pressures of ongoing trauma, poverty, religion and underdevelopment. These legacies result in common characteristics or responses that are not ‘cultural’ or uniquely Timorese, but are “the consequences of what international actors have brought to Timor-Leste for 500 years and are intrinsic to ‘Timorese identity’” (La'o Hamutuk, 2011, p. 2). These factors, along with Timor’s vastly inadequate infrastructure and the level of financial poverty that the majority of local people experience, combine to make Timor a particularly challenging place for outsiders to work.

Differences in communication style were a factor in many of the challenging situations I encountered. My Australian preference for a direct approach was in contrast with the

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Timorese preference for ‘face-saving’ indirect styles and meant that misunderstandings could persist without being brought to my attention. I did not always know what was going wrong until long after the event in question had passed.

I will share three challenges that arose in The Right To Play project in response to the complex cultural context of Timor-Leste; however, I can only offer *my* interpretations of these events, derived from informal conversations, my online journal, and autoethnographic recollection. Others present – Timorese and Australian – would have drawn different conclusions, based on their different points of view and cultural knowledge.

## **Language**

Language can be a symbol or expression of power. During colonial times, or times of occupation, the language of the occupying power takes on greater status than the local vernacular, and is the language of decision-making and access (Drummond, 2005). In Timor-Leste, since the time of the UN administration and presence of a sizeable contingent of foreign ‘development specialists’, English has taken on some of this status.

In The Right To Play workshops, I undertook to speak Tetun, the national language of Timor-Leste in which I had rudimentary but progressing skills, with the knowledge that a senior member of the local creative team was a strong English speaker, able to take on a role as translator as required. This had been part of the initial planning and I assumed that it would be acceptable.

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My assumption proved incorrect. While initially happy to work in tandem with me and translate ideas when necessary for the group, I later learned my skilled colleague was unhappy to be cast in a role of translator and felt it to be demeaning, especially during stressful moments in the workshops, and undermined his role as a project leader. I later learned that many multilingual Timorese professionals refuse to act as translators for their foreign colleagues, due to the perceived lesser status of the role. A more acceptable solution would have been for me to hire someone to act in the translator role on my behalf.

### **Gender and participation**

Timor-Leste is still a very traditional society, and opportunities to participate in education, youth organisations, workplaces and social activities are dramatically different for girls and boys, especially outside of the capital Dili. Girls' movements are closely regulated by their family members, and they are often expected to attend to domestic duties while their male siblings are free to engage in a range of activities (Wigglesworth, 2007).

With this in mind, the arts centre coordinator and I determined to recruit equal numbers of male and female participants for The Right To Play. We invited three primary schools in the town to nominate ten students each (five boys, five girls) to take part, and for this reason girls were well-represented among the project participants. In some of my more informal workshops in other parts of Timor-Leste, female participants were much fewer in number, so the decision to specify gender parity at the outset in Baucau was important.

### **Leadership, partnership and capacity**

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The decision for the arts centre team and I to work together had been mutual, proposed first over email and then confirmed when I arrived in Baucau. However, did we feel a mutual sense of ownership and leadership? I approached the partnership with the arts centre much as I would approach any project with a cultural organisations in Australia – I, as the visiting artist, was there to lead the project, to contribute my talents and experiences, and to work collaboratively with the group in the realisation of the project. The arts centre coordinator, an experienced project leader in visual arts, would work alongside me in similarly collaborative way. We would learn from each other, but this was an opportunity for the arts centre team to get some professional expertise and input from an outsider into directing creative music activities.

However, in a developing country context like Timor-Leste, where the emphasis for more than a decade has been on capacity-building of local people and organisations, ‘partnership’ may be interpreted as meaning the visiting artist is there to help the local people realise a project, taking on a supportive, scaffolding role rather than one of artistic direction and leadership. This difference in how the project intentions and roles were understood created confusion and doubt for me. Was I imposing a project on the local creative team that they didn’t really want to do, but were unwilling to admit this directly? Was I undermining the local people by taking a leadership role, even though this was a music workshop and I was the only musician in the group?

Later, I learned from the arts centre coordinator was that he did not feel equal in the partnership and that his arts centre’s profile was too low in the project. For personal reasons he was absent for different periods of the workshop days, which further lessened his role and

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input. In hindsight, a more explicit unpacking of the roles and intentions of the partnership was required.

This issue is complex, and reflects the post-colonial, post-conflict legacy of conflicting relationships with foreigners. On the one hand, foreigners might represent help, protection, and the opportunity to have stability return to a community. On the other, there will be a frustration with the foreigner as the holder of power, the decision-maker and even cultural imperialist. Foreigners may unthinkingly take on the more authoritative position when working with local people, assuming that they know best.

Ultimately, any foreigner coming to undertake work – artistic or otherwise – in a developing country does so of his or her own choice. The onus must be on them to be sensitive to the cultural expectations of their host society in the context of their work. Local people may not reveal or offer these expectations at the outset, as the learned lack of agency that results from extreme poverty, civil instability, and foreign entities holding all the power often complicates their discussion.

## **Composition strategies**

The Right To Play resulted in the creation of three original songs, each exploring an aspect of human rights and children's rights. The creative strategies evolved in response to the participants' ideas, local music resources, children's music experiences in the playground, and group discussions about human rights, guided by the Transformative Arts and Human Rights Education handbook (Ba Futuru, 2004).

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The first song of the project came through awareness that children's rights begin from the moment a child is born, asking, "What does a new-born baby need from others to survive?" Lyrics emerged from the discussion, and melodic material was derived from the notion of 'first breath' – the children blew into short bamboo pieces of differing lengths, flute-style, and melodies evolved from the different pitches.

*When you are born your mother and father cuddle and care for you*

*They take you for vaccinations, and give you milk*

*Everybody loves you.*

Lyrics from 'Moris' [Birth]

The second song began with a discussion about why an education is important in a child's life. The group chanted the written responses rhythmically and a melody emerged. Each verse was bridged with percussion riffs, played on hand-drums, buckets and bamboo sticks.

*To discover your capacity, and share it with others...*

*When you learn to sing, you can give inspiration*

*You can learn languages, study arts, and study doctrine to find salvation!*

From 'Direitu atu edukasaun' [The Right to Education]

The third song explored a child's right to play and know their own culture, and was inspired by Timorese children's playground games. It was a rhythmic montage of traditional chants and patterns, nominated by the group. A blues-style finale song framed the chants.

*All children have rights*

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*The right to play, the right to education, to good health*

*The right to seek their own freedom*

From 'Direitu atu toka' [The Right to Play]

The four-day project concluded with a public performance of the songs by the children, attended by members of the local community and media. The educational and social aims of the project were realised, and despite cross-cultural challenges along the way, it was considered by the leadership team to be a very successful outcome.

### **Conclusion – considering cultural projects and social change**

How much impact can a four-day music project have on one group of children's understanding of human rights and children's rights, or on the community members who attended the concert for International Human Rights Day? At the start of the project, children's responses to initial questions about human rights suggested scant knowledge and understanding, or perhaps shyness. By the end of the project, answers to the same questions were far more confident and forthcoming. The group wrote three songs that made general assertions about children's rights without going into detail or analysis. Thus, a change in the participants' confidence to express their knowledge and understanding occurred.

The project also modelled a democratic creative learning process in which the voices and opinions of the participants were sought, valued and empowered. Despite cultural differences, the creative team of leaders worked together collaboratively (albeit in the absence of the arts centre coordinator for the latter half of the project) and demonstrated the way those

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differences could lead to new positive outcomes. The project model could be considered a manifestation of the importance and value of diverse voices within a community.

However, the sustainability of change resulting from a four-day music experience is questionable. Will these principles be reinforced or contradicted through the children's other life experiences? As the country strives toward transparent and accountable public and civil life, there are still large gaps between children's everyday experiences and the Constitutional ideal that states, "All citizens are equal before the law, shall exercise the same rights and be subject to the same duties" (Constitution of Timor-Leste, cited in UNMIT, 2010a, p. 6). The institutions of state within a democratic society that ensure citizens grow up with certain expectations of rights and responsibilities are still being built in Timor-Leste.

Aid organisations, development organisations, and individuals and governments from around the world have been providing assistance to Timor-Leste since 1999. Arts projects with a social change intention or social justice agenda are an emerging part of this assistance, with theatre projects and visual arts groups offering avenues for expression and learning for young people. However, at this stage, no data is available about the success of these projects, in particular in relation to stated intended outcomes of social or behavioural changes.

Ultimately, change starts with individuals. A good foundation for change comes with an increase in awareness and understanding, and this can be developed through engaging participatory activities that activate children's imaginations. The real, sustainable shifts in community that stem from these understandings into attitudinal changes, increased civic participation, actions and decisions require greater time to take root. Thus, this one small project *may* have played a very small part in generating dialogue or awareness among a group

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of children and their families in one part of this small emerging nation. More certain, is that the participants shared a positive, collaborative, creative endeavour that valued each person's contributions, introduced them to new music-making processes and people and worked positively within the capacities and resources of the community.

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## Endnote

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<sup>i</sup> “State Parties recognise the right of the child to rest and leisure, to engage in play and recreation activities appropriate to the age of the child, and to participate freely in cultural life and the arts.”

Article 31, United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989)

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