

Sacred Cloth and Development in *Timor-Leste*

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Women in Timor-Leste hand-weave textiles that play a significant role in their culture, particularly in the wake of destructive conflicts in that society. A nascent handcraft industry primarily composed of poor rural women represents a vulnerable and marginalized section of society. For many of these women, selling their handcraft products is the only way to earn cash to pay for essential items. Assisting these women and their families to develop sustainable livelihoods in this small industry is a worthy development goal which is grounded in women's cultural and social realities. However, new exploratory research indicates that, like handcraft producers everywhere in the world, they face great obstacles in marketing their goods and retaining the cultural integrity of their products and practices while gaining a fair return for their work. A central conclusion arrived at is that a coordinated and dedicated national craft development program is needed in Timor-Leste. This should be based on the current realities of production and trade, and the distinct types and social variables of women producers, all of which requires further investigation. These projects must have the goal of empowering the participants, rather than merely seeking a simple economic return for their work.

Keywords: weaving; handcraft; women; Timor-Leste; development assistance; empowerment

A sacred queen was one day weaving the sea as an ordinary woman might weave a piece of cloth, except that in her case the thread was made up of clouds that dangled down from the sky. This sea-cloth became very long and the queen became increasingly vexed by one of her brood who kept playing around her and distracting the queen from her work. Eventually the mother was so exasperated she struck out at her child with her shuttle, missed and inadvertently cut the cloth into two parts, which is how the single sea became divided into two, the female sea to the north and male sea to the south, with the island of Timor in between. (Hicks, 2004, p. 30)

This Timorese founding myth demonstrates the profound significance of the long and cherished tradition of weaving by women in Timor-Leste (also called East Timor). These textiles, called *Tais* (pronounced "tie-ss"), are made for ritual exchange and for costumes. Due to the informal nature of cloth production in Timor today and the long war with neighbouring Indonesia (1975-1999) little documentation exists of the weavers, their craft and products. This paper attempts to bring together the knowledge that does exist, together with some new exploratory research. It will also describe how the textiles are being produced today.

Aid and development is still urgently required in East Timor due to low standards of living that disproportionately affect women and children. Developing sustainable livelihood for poor, rural women is crucial. Weavers primarily fall into this group. It is the importance of developing sustainable livelihoods for poor women (which most weavers are), combined with nurturing weaving for more profound cultural and sociological reasons, that makes a more considered approach to the development of the weaving industry so imperative in Timor-Leste. This paper attempts to work through what such an approach would be. It will do this by outlining the data gathered on women's experience as textile producers, and plotting the current status of aid and development interventions in this field in Timor. An attempt to analyse this assistance in light of other international experiences of craft development will also be made. In this context it will be argued that the realities of production and the type of development assistance required needs more careful consideration than it has received from both the government and NGOs in Timor-Leste.

DEVELOPMENT IS NECESSARY IN TIMOR-LESTE

One of the newest nations in the world, Timor-Leste is also one of the poorest, with some of the world's worst development indicators for women and their families. Since the terrible destruction of East Timorese society wrought by decades of Indonesian rule, international and local aid organisations have sought ways of assisting development. The UN administration and its agencies have spent millions in aid dollars in Timor-Leste since 1999; but 40% of the people still live below the poverty line of US 55 cents per day; nearly one in ten babies dies before its first birthday; and nearly half of all children under five are underweight (UNDP, 2006, p. 8).

Not just for these reasons is the situation for women especially difficult. Some estimate that

45% of women lost their husbands during the Indonesian occupation when sexual abuse was also endemic (Rede Feto, 2000). Women have an average of eight children but only a fifth of births are attended by a skilled health worker, so maternal mortality is high (UNDP, 2006, p. 8). There is substantial gender inequity illustrated by the fact that 2/3 of adult women are illiterate compared to half of men (UNDP, 2006, p. 15); and that women earn 1/8 the salary of men (ADB/UNIFEM 2005, p. 23).

Timor-Leste's hardwon independence was formally declared in 2002. But in 2006 the process of national reconstruction was shattered by violent internal conflict between members of the predominantly male political leadership. The crisis erupted from endemic poverty and disillusionment with independence common to post-conflict societies. The cycle of trauma, violence and conflict seems neverending. One feature of the 2006 crisis was the women did not cause the crisis; but neither did they contribute to its solution, lacking, as they did, any influence in political affairs. This only proves that development projects leading to peaceful, egalitarian community participation and prosperity are essential.

Women in Timor-Leste live in the difficult environment of a society struggling with the after effects of violence and conflict. Households headed by women are common and these families are poorer and more vulnerable than others (Alola, 2002a, p. 8). While women in Timor-Leste care for their communities despite these difficult conditions, they have nonetheless managed to build a small but strong movement for women's rights.

During the struggle for independence, it is estimated that women accounted for 60% of resistance cadres (Cristalis and Scott, 2005, p. 39) and made up roughly half of those 78.5 per cent of East Timorese who voted for independence in 1999. Women are proud of their role in the resistance, but for 24 years the struggle for women's rights was subsumed by the broader national struggle for independence.

Timor-Leste, and its women in particular, require well planned, appropriate development,

that addresses gender inequality. And this is difficult work.

According to Maria Domingas Fernandes Alves (also known as Mana Micato), current Minister of Social Solidarity, it is crucial to work with and encourage further development of what already exists, such as weaving, rather than superimposing foreign constructs. “Development policies should focus on the most marginalized people in society—poor girls and women in rural communities. . . . And what are women already doing to improve life in their communities.” (Mana Micato, 2001)

International organizations in Timor-Leste have insisted on western gender policies in programs they fund, but many of these policies have come from the top, and consequently had little effect on the everyday lives of men and women. A more effective policy would be to work in partnership with local women’s groups such as those noted above (and smaller weaving co-operatives to be discussed later) to better understand how such policies might translate at the grass roots level more effectively.

In 2001, *Rede Feto Timor-Leste*, the current women’s national umbrella network was created. It has 17 member organisations, including the oldest and largest groups: the *Organização Popular Mulher Timorese/* Popular Organisation of Timorese Women (OPMT) begun in 1975; and the *Organização Mulher Timorese/* Organisation of Timorese Women (OMT) begun in 1998. Both organisations are nationally aligned to different political factions. Rede Feto’s main programs are advocacy for gender equality and women’s rights; and strengthening member’s organisational capacities, an important priority due to inherent weaknesses. Rede Feto and its’ member organisations work together with the government, and international agencies such as UNIFEM and UNFPA to advance the status of women in Timor-Leste (Cristalis and Scott, 2005; Trembath and Grenfell, 2007). Much has been done, but much work remains.

WHY CRAFT DEVELOPMENT IS IMPORTANT IN TIMOR-LESTE

In pre-industrial societies women make important and valued contributions to the economy and culture through the production of handcrafts. This is true of the women in Timor-Leste who weave textiles. How weaving intersects with the significant domains of economy, culture and society can be summarised as follows:

Economic importance

In the underdeveloped economy of Timor-Leste, any productive contribution is valued. Conducted largely in women’s homes, the weaving industry is an informal element of the economy and therefore, remains unmeasured like much craft production in the world. It has been estimated that nationally, women produce 30,000 *Tais* per year with a value of USD\$600,000 for sale in a small domestic and even smaller international market (Alola, 2007).

However, women worldwide are known to be major actors in the burgeoning informal sector of the economy, with small-scale businesses becoming major sources of income for families in post-conflict zones (Sorensen, 1998, pp. 20-34). While women are eager and capable entrepreneurs the sustainability of their enterprises is often constrained by lack of capital and marketing skills (Sorensen 1999, p. 22). Weavers in Timor-Leste have already identified this for themselves and requested specific training and assistance (Alola Foundation, 2002a, pp. 4; 23) which has been provided in an ad hoc way by many different groups.

For many village women, particularly older ones and widows, there are however few alternatives for earning cash. In Timor-Leste’s rural subsistence communities where barter economies prevail, cash is difficult to obtain. School fees, medicine and travel are often beyond the reach of many. Most women cannot afford the travel costs to get to a hospital; and so, they birth at home with no health attendant present. This has led to some of the highest infant and maternal mortality rates in the world.

Alola Foundation staff have related that many women sell off family textile stocks when school fees are due, inadvertently driving down prices of the textiles at these times. A small amount of regular income would alleviate such cycles and make a great deal of difference to the health and education choices of a family.

Cultural importance

With regard to culture in Timor-Leste, we can observe a revitalisation of customary practices tied to national independence and an assertion of “cultural identity politics” (McWilliam, 2005). Weaving is part of this revitalisation (Niner, 2006). In 2001 Cristina de Deus, in discussion with local researchers collecting stories of weavers, explained:

. . . I focus on preserving our culture through production of *tais*. We see it as an important way of preserving and developing the traditions of our forebears and of fulfilling our obligations as Timorese women. It is also an important means of demonstrating to other nations of the world that the women of Timor-Leste have the talent to create handcrafts as our unique contribution to the future of our new country (Alola, 2002b, p. 9)

Timor is acknowledged as an important site for hand-weaving and iconographic tie-resist dyeing, referred to internationally as *ikat*, and called *futus* in Timor-Leste. Originally *Tais* were made of home-grown, hand-spun cotton, which is hand-dyed and hand-woven into lengths of cloth on a back-strap loom. Motifs, design and colours are specific to the environmental areas and cultural communities they come from. They record a woven narration of the various paradigms and stories of Timor’s pre-history. Master weavers held in esteem, are often related to royal *Liurai* lineage. There is a correlation between the quality and detail of the patterns, and the rank of the weaver, as well as that of the wearer, which usually favours the elite. The skill of the weaver and their fine adjustment of threads determine the distinct images and clarity of design. Weaving skills “display a

virtuosic mastery that may be indicative of the sense of artistic and social worth “that women have of themselves (Bennett, 1998).

Tais are classified as a fundamental female element in Timorese culture and are given and exchanged during the ceremonies and rituals of indigenous social systems. The deep significance of these exchange rituals for Timorese culture means that by producing, exchanging and owning the sacred hand-woven cloth, women maintain their strength and power within the traditional clan-based societies in Timor. Thus weaving means more than just material gain for women in Timor-Leste. We must remember, however, that these practices are class-based.

During the Indonesian occupation women traded their craft products for goods the resistance needed, and women are proud of such historical associations (Rede Feto, 2000). Today national recognition of the cultural importance of weaving is expressed in different ways: the wearing of *Tais* in modern ways by national leaders; their display in the national parliament; their appearance on national stamps; and their use in government campaigns (Pide, 2002, p. 73). Thus have textiles become part of the processes of constructing a new national identity.

However if we look at the development of craft industries around the world, commercialisation has often led to the degradation of customary practices (Kaino, 1995, p. vii; Scrase, 2003, p. 451). Skills in weaving earned respect for Timorese women in the past, but such respect may be lost if weaving is geared only to the market rather than being a cultural activity. International literature supports the idea that complementary programs to support and nurture cultural production, such as exhibitions, installations, competitions, experimentation, documentation and publications, are essential to any craft development program, if the craft itself is not to be degraded.

Two good examples of such successful complementary cultural programs are the women’s weaving co-operative *Senhor Jolobil* from Mexico (Morris, 1996, pp. 40-45) and the NGO Threads of Life (TOL) in Bali. TOL works with

weaving communities mostly in Eastern Indonesia to revive techniques of weaving and natural dyeing. Among other things they have instigated a bi-annual weaving festival in Indonesia (Threads of Life, 2009). I observed firsthand in West Timor how TOL has revived not just dyeing techniques but also the weaving culture. One local community now experiments with new colours. These projects are good examples of commercially viable programs as well.

Social importance and well-being

In the trauma-laden, post-conflict environment of Timor-Leste, cultural pride such as that displayed in textile production make it a significant activity. This was apparent in many of the interviews and discussions I had with weavers. There is evidence in East Timor that these practices have been part of the efforts of women to overcome the tragedies of the past (Alola, 2002, p. 15; Delaney, 2003; Niner, 2003). There is evidence likewise from Australia that the practice of craft increases a sense of well-being in many women (Gandolfo and Grace, 2009). In Timor these complex crafts provide a familiar and meaningful structure around which communities of women renew themselves, providing a sense of continuity with the past' and fostering pride in customary practices (Alola, 2002b, p. 2; Delaney, 2003, p. 5). Amidst political violence and crisis in 2006, women fled to camps for internally displaced people with their looms and continued to weave (Alola, 2006). This demonstrates not only the economic importance of these practices, but also their central cultural and social significance.

NEW RESEARCH: PRODUCERS AND CRAFT DEVELOPMENT IN TIMOR-LESTE

I carried out exploratory fieldwork with weavers and associates in Melbourne (Australia), West Timor (Indonesia) and Timor-Leste in late 2007 and early 2008. Among my observations of and less formal discussions with 6 associated

development workers, I undertook formal interviews with 12 weavers in Timor-Leste, 3 weavers in a 'refugee camp' across the border in Indonesian West Timor and other 3 weavers I have met in the Australian diaspora

Many of the interviews in Timor and Indonesia were facilitated with the assistance of the Alola Foundation, a local women's NGO in Dili. I served on the Alola Board of Directors (2001-4) and instigated and continued to advise them on their handcrafts program for many years; and therefore have a particular insight into the challenges and opportunities of craft development there (see Alola, 2009, p. 10 for details). In collaboration with the Alola Foundation I have also purchased cloth and mounted many exhibitions (2001-2008) of East Timorese textiles in Australia; so I also have some expertise in buying and researching the textiles themselves (see Suai Media Space, 2009).

I also continued my survey of retail outlets and prices in Dili in 2008 and observed some of the more purely commercial activities associated with weaving products. I visited some successful weaving groups in Indonesian West Timor to identify what would be possible in Timor-Leste. This research was part of a part-time post-doctoral fellowship at Monash University and is not exhaustive. It does not cover the whole spectrum of experience of weavers; for instance, the practice of piece workers to supply finished pieces by order, as well as other practices not assisted by NGO programs. However, when this research is combined with secondary data and observations I have made since 2001, a reasonable assessment of the industry can be made.

Producers

While producers in Timor-Leste may require development assistance, they are enthusiastic to utilise their handcraft skills and to pass this knowledge on to future generations. As evidence of this, since 1999, weaving and craft co-operatives have spontaneously formed and re-formed all over the country, often representing the poorest sections of society (Niner, 2003). In 2001, 21 representative groups were consulted as part of

the Alola (2002a) survey; and approximately 50 groups responded to a generally circulated invitation to attend the 2007 Christmas Fair (a welcome continuation of the successful *Rede Feto* fairs); and Alola foundation staff anecdotally reported that the 2008 Fair was even bigger. From this we could estimate that up to 100 producer groups exist, representing over 1000 women (although another estimate is of 6000 women who weave nationally—Alola 2005). If NGOs could pool their information on a national level, this would better facilitate an understanding of the nature of co-operatives and of the best ways to assist their development in an even-handed manner. It may also lead to the formation of a collaborative network or even of a craft guild to represent the interests of weavers and producers more directly.

Although no thorough survey has established if common structures exist, producer groups in Timor-Leste often take the form of co-operatives which draw on indigenous social organisation along with more modern forms of organising than groups such as OMPT represent. Other groups have emerged in response to the loss and suffering of women in 1999, such as *Nove Nove* ('99) in Maliana and the Lautem Widows Centre in the very east (Delaney, 2003).

However many of these groups reflect divisions in Timorese society along traditional and colonially inherited class lines, further complicated by more modern political cleavages.

There is also often a confusing overlap between the senior women or group coordinators' role and their private business activity as wholesalers of craft. I observed a woman from one Dili group complaining to an NGO that she had not received money due to her, from her co-ordinator who had already been paid by the NGO for her cloth. Anecdotes like this abound. and it must be concluded that producer groups and cooperatives are not always run in an ideal way, namely, jointly owned and operated by members or workers who share profits equally.

Most women I interviewed in these groups were illiterate and kept few records; so operations are rarely transparent or properly accounted for to

their members. These organisational weaknesses of cooperatives, indeed many organisations in Timor-Leste, need strengthening. How groups serve and support their members with regard to income, social welfare, work and fair-trade practices is key to how they will provide livelihood and hopefully empower women. Strengthening of these groups is crucial to the well-being of producers and to any improvement in women producer's lives.

As the currency in Timor-Leste is US dollars, local prices are inflated, especially when compared to neighbouring Indonesian West Timor. Local business suffers from the high cost of inputs, especially imported goods such as threads for weaving. Due to barter, cross-border smuggling, the informal nature of the handcrafts industry and the lack of research, it is unclear if weavers and producers in Timor-Leste are making a viable income from their work. Levels of poverty indicate that they make little profit.

Out of the twenty interviews I conducted in East Timor with weavers from October to November 2007, I have chosen the following as examples of the four main categories of producers that I discovered. I have changed names to protect their identity. These four types of producers are: 1) individual weavers; 2) family or clan-based networks; 3) social welfare community co-operatives; and, 4) business enterprises. However, it must be noted that these groups do overlap. I believe each type requires specialised development assistance (Niner, 2008) and I have also attempted to indicate this below. In the past, many of the weavers experienced some type of development assistance for their work; but they wanted more from both NGOs and government.

An Individual Weaver

Tia (Aunty) Rosa is part of a royal *Liurai* family. She learned spinning of cotton, mud dyeing (black *Kemak* style) and *futus* weaving from her mother at 15 years of age. She remembers a small market of tourists during Portuguese colonial times; but her family wove mainly for their own use, and for trade and ritual exchange with other kinfolk and clans.

During the period 1995-1999 she was employed as a weaver in an Indonesian factory in Dili called ‘*Tenun Jaya*’ which supplied the local market and traded with other markets, such as Bali. Although there was now a larger local market of Indonesian soldiers, public servants and migrants, the factory workers received low payments and wove low quality cloth. After 1999 Tia Rosa was part of establishing a community weaving co-operative in Dili which purchased thread collectively and paid members around \$2 per scarf or *selendang* and \$5 per *Tais*. As the co-ordinator of the group she participated in the Alola-Oxfam 2001-2 Survey, and later in product development workshops. The group sold cloth to Alola for resale and use in the making of other products.

During the 2006 crisis the co-operative ceased to function. Rosa’s house was burned and she has resided in an IDP camp since then. She now takes part in an Alola livelihoods program for camp residents and is once again supplying cloth to Alola, which is now her only source of income. As an individual weaver in a rural IDP camp, Rosa’s situation is extremely vulnerable to exploitation by traders, as she has no access to her own materials or to a market. Her craft development needs are much greater than when she was part of a group. She also requires basic humanitarian assistance.

A Family Supplier

The members of the Barbosa family from a large western town are well-known producers with a long-standing practice of weaving. They weave for their own use; but weaving also effectively functions as a family business. They produce and sell hand-woven textiles to the domestic market through their family and clan networks. Other Timorese buy textiles from them for wearing and for exchange at ritual ceremonies and functions. The family possesses a stock of their own hand-woven *Tais* plus a separate store of cloth given to them in ritual exchange; and will trade *Tais* from both stocks.

Little locally grown cotton is available, so they use commercial thread imported from Indonesia. Because the family has used imported thread since

Portuguese times, much local dyeing knowledge has been lost. They make *futus* by dyeing threads of locally grown cotton in black mud ponds. These “local” threads appear in small sections between the more brightly coloured stripes of imported industrial cotton.

A skill particular to this district and family is embroidery called *lita*, sewn on the wide bottom bands of *Tais*. The Barbosa’s standard rate for a hand-woven *feto* (female) *Tais* with *lita* is \$65. This is a standard price, although average quality pure black *kemak*-style *Tais* are priced for as low as \$30 to \$40 in local markets. These prices do not seem to be based on a calculation of the amount of inputs and labour, but rather on a local perception of the quality and intrinsic value of the cloths. How textiles are priced in Timor-Leste is a key issue for the development of the industry and requires further investigation. Workshops and agreement on pricing structures are essential.

If the family want to increase their income, they would benefit from a stimulation of the domestic market, for which many strategies have already been proposed. They may also be interested in a cultural program that revives old and all but lost dyeing techniques, similar to the TOL programs in West Timor. The specialised mud dyeing techniques of this area are a point of interest because they are rare. The ‘traditional’ organic dyeing techniques and the plain black and muted natural colours are attractive to the international alternative trade markets; to assist families like the Barbosas, this could also be explored by local NGOs.

A Community Co-operative

‘By-the-Sea’ is a community weaving cooperative in an eastern coastal town begun in 2002 to increase incomes of local women. As a community organisation the co-op also engages in other social welfare activities (e.g. setting up a crèche). They produce a variety of woven goods: both *feto* and *mane Tais*, and *selendangs*. They use industrial thread, but also source natural cotton from a local grower and spinner. The natural cotton is sold for approximately \$2 a ball, thus matching the cost of industrial thread. This local cotton is

treated by the weavers with natural dyes and made into simple striped *selendangs* in muted but attractive colours.

The women did not estimate their labour time nor arrive at a price according to the cost of their inputs. For a large locally-grown, hand-dyed cotton *feto Tais* they charge on the average \$150, and \$200 for a *mane*; for a *selendang* from \$5 to \$20. These higher prices are common in the east. One explanation given is that the high cultural value attributed to textiles within ritual exchange in their area makes for an equivalent monetary value.

Co-op leaders travel to Dili and make sales on behalf of the whole group. They have no accounting procedures and all transactions are done relying on trust and memory. Other members only make voluntary contributions to transport expenses if they can afford it. The leaders undertake to give to the weaver exact remuneration per piece as sold, with no deductions. As there are no records, let alone transparency, these systems are vulnerable to internal disputes.

The By-the-Sea traders desperately wanted assistance with marketing and trading infrastructure both in the capital of Dili and in their hometown; they wanted to build a local facility where they could meet, weave and sell their products to visitors. They wanted this space to be a meeting place for other community activities and more social welfare activities. The women were proud of and knowledgeable about their weaving culture, both meanings and use of the textiles and methods of weaving and they wanted documentation completed on their ancient collection of *Tais*. All these development programs and more to strengthen co-operative structures would be of great assistance to these weavers.

A Business Enterprise

Local Dili businesswoman, *Tia* Fatima, displays innovation in her products and is also an experienced trader. Fatima and her older sister learned to weave at 12 and dye with the local organic colours, from their mother, grandmother and great-grandmother. She said the Portuguese only bought mementos; but the Indonesians bought

for trade purposes. In 1982 she moved to Dili to further her business within the tough environment of the Indonesian occupation.

In 1999 she was a refugee in West Timor and continued trading textiles there. Since 2000 she has operated a rent-free stall in a UN-established *Tais* market. Here she resells textiles bought from women in the rural villages near her hometown. She also takes orders for *selendangs* with special messages and motifs woven into them. She oversees the production of these goods for these special orders, as well as other goods for her stall, in a small work shop that she runs. Approximately 30 poor female relatives, old and young, live here and work for her. They receive a percentage of the sale price for their weaving; but after Fatima deducts from this a fee for room and board, as well as transport costs to get them from their home districts, little remains.

Such patronage systems are therefore fraught with tension and exploitation.

Tia Fatima acknowledged there was no accounting made of trading or sales. In this way there could not be much transparency in matters of payment, purchasing or pricing.

Traders such as Fatima and her workers may benefit from some assistance in setting up fundamental labour and business systems. There is also no awareness of fair trade principles, child labour, or safe labour practices. Development projects working with small businesses such as these, which seek to place their products in the alternative trade and fair trade markets, must address these issues and work with business women such as *Tia* Fatima to achieve their goals.

There is informal cross-border trade in textiles with East Timorese weavers in refugee camps in West Timor, as well as importation of textiles from Indonesian producers in West Timor and Bali. These are sold as East Timorese cloths in the *Tais* market and other outlets in Dili. Staff from a cooperative in West Timor talked about East Timorese traders' "fierce" bargaining practices when they deal with poor West Timorese weavers, who do not really earn much from these transactions. The traders then smuggle the cloths

across the border where they hope to sell at higher prices in Dili. It is to the advantage of traders to buy cheap in Indonesian West Timor or Bali and sell high in the inflated US dollar economy of Dili, passing handcrafts off as indigenous to unsuspecting buyers. This problem must also be addressed and, necessarily so, by the government.

NGOs working in craft development

Since the destruction in 1999, there have been various local non-government attempts to build up the handcrafts industry by and for East Timorese women. The women's movement in East Timor has been a key supporter: OMPT and OMT have committees throughout Timor-Leste which include cooperatives that produce and sell craft: Rede Feto held annual craft and produce fairs and more generally promote local products; Fokupers and ETWAVE, women's organisations dedicated to advocating gender equity and combating gender-based violence, also promote handcrafts of rural women (Rede Feto, 2007). As mentioned earlier, Rede Feto also provides capacity-building for its members; while some other local NGOs, such as Fokupers, also provide support in the organizing of women's groups. This focus on the strengthening of local women's groups is crucial, not just to the success of craft cooperatives, but to the women's movement in general.

Impressed by the quality of its traditional textiles, and lacking alternative forms of development for rural women, international NGOs have also provided assistance to groups of weavers both in urban Dili and in rural centres and villages. This includes various micro-credit programs offered to small producer groups within broader programs of international NGOs, such as Opportunidade, Concern and AusAid, who may also provide beneficiaries with other services such as literacy, business training and humanitarian services (Alola, 2002b, p. 14). Micro-credit is also a feature of some local NGOs such as *Moris Rasik* and *Feto Kik Servisu Hamutuk* (FKSH). The German NGO, *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit* (GTZ) has a large project to promote rural development in Timor by working

with producer groups, cooperatives and manufacturer associations (GTZ, 2008). They have conducted research into the *Tais* industry in collaboration with the National University in Dili (UNTL) and Udayana University in Indonesia (personal communication, Jun 2008). The final report should add to national data that could inform a national craft development program.

However none of these programs consider the industry holistically or are tailored to craft producers solely. Considering other international studies, this may have negative impact on craft producers.

Customised training programs have been carried out most successfully by local NGOs, Asian Pacific Support Collective (APSCT-L), FKSH, Timor Aid and Alola Foundation. They respond to grass-roots needs of women, a strategy that should remain an important element of any other program in the future. Many dedicated international craft development NGOs are skilled in this type of training and much could be learned from them. But this has not yet been taken advantage of in Timor. For instance, Aid to Artisans offers training modules online in eight languages to artisans anywhere in the world, Threads of Life in Bali teaches bookkeeping and documentation of dye plant usage to weaving cooperatives in Eastern Indonesia as part of an Ausaid funded program. A review of a similar NGO program in Northern Thailand advocated the expansion of such assistance:

. . .craft-based NGOs need to take their business, marketing and design training programmes further, encouraging participants to develop new skills and build on existing ones, and where possible to take formal qualifications, so that their talents and skills may be more easily recognized. . .NGOs should make more of the scientific, technical and mathematical skills involved in crafts such as textile production, while preserving traditional arts and crafts. . .(Humphreys, 1999)

A local women's NGO, the Alola Foundation, currently runs a craft development program with

the overall aim of empowering women to achieve economic independence. Begun in 2001 with a national survey (conducted with APSC-TL and FKSH), it aims to develop the handcrafts industry, to explore markets and to support and protect cultural aspects of the industry. Funding came from Oxfam (GB), while Oxfam-CAA Trading (Australia assisted with product development and marketing, including conducting producer workshops. A retail outlet and business was opened in 2003 to buy cloths and other crafts from producers and on-selling. A sewing centre dedicated solely to sewing products transforms cloth into sewn products. It employs 30 staff members.

Handcraft skills workshops with long-term residents of IDP camps were conducted from 2006. Workshops were offered during the December 2007 and 2008 Producers Fairs where over 100 stall holders earned up to \$10,000 in sales. A new focus is the introduction of fair trade principles within the industry. Nevertheless, the business is not yet profitable.

Timor Aid is another local NGO that has worked extensively in the field of craft development and shares many of the aims of the Alola Foundation. It has stated their motivation to shift their work: "... from immediate financial relief, to expanding Timorese weaving to a wide reaching and sustainable commercial enterprise" (Timor Aid, 2007); but unfortunately many programs never recovered after the 2006 crisis. However, joint workshops focusing on putting together a national collection and mounting a recent exhibition of *Tais* have recently been held with Alola, the National Directorate of Culture and Ministry of Tourism (Alola, 2009).

Market

All over the country, producers service the small domestic market of Timorese buying for ritual use, gifts and trade; they benefit from local culture being in a period of revitalisation (McWilliam, 2005). What needs more attention and support are good ideas from producers and from local NGOs about how to stimulate the domestic market. Regulating

the smuggling of cloth from West Timor is also needed; but national leadership is required on these issues. Traders compete in Dili to sell to international buyers, although this market has been shrinking since many UN departments closed in 2002 and peacekeeping forces were reduced. Producers compete with one another in a dwindling market, and competition drives down prices, leading to exploitation. What needs to be undertaken to combat these problems is producer awareness about market and pricing issues.

Producers try to sell products not just to the locals and foreigners living in Timor-Leste, but also to the overseas market. Many 'friendship' groups in Australia and elsewhere help market products in their own countries. These products are often slow to sell and customers buy simply to assist poor women in Timor-Leste. These products cannot compete in the mainstream market with mass-produced goods from China, Indonesia, Thailand, Vietnam and India, which are cheaper and carefully tailored to the foreign market. The market in low quality weavings and products made from them is saturated globally. Selling Timor-Leste products overseas is mostly done on a 'solidarity' basis; no official import or export channels, commercial transport or retail outlets are used. As a result none of this work could be described as commercially viable or sustainable, as producers are dependent on the goodwill and volunteerism of foreigners.

International sales need to be brokered with sympathetic retailers, such as has occurred between the Alola Foundation and Oxfam Trading. However, since all production has occurred in Timor, Oxfam Trading (Aust) has struggled to find products of appropriate quality and price to sell in their shops. Yet another alternative is the work of Timor-Leste Women Australia (ETWA). Based in Australia, this organization uses a community development philosophy to work with several producer groups in Timor-Leste to build sustainable handcrafts enterprises by assisting in the areas of management, product design, quality and

marketability (ETWA, 2008). *Tais* and sewn products are sold from their website and other outlets in Australia. They also propose other important initiatives such as conducting a health study of the industry.

No clear national marketing strategy, domestically or internationally, has emerged; although some preliminary work on this has been done by independent consultants. Timor-Leste could take advantage of the trend in the international market toward natural, organic and handmade products; and also of the large alternative fair trade movement which offers producers a higher return. New and creative products and marketing is an essential element of such a strategy and was discussed at a recent 2008 Forum (convened by the author of this paper) on East Timorese textiles held in Australia. In one presentation, Oxfam (Australia) Product Development Manager Linda Chalmers described an example of such a product that has been a huge retail success: dolls from the Batsiranai Craft Project in Zimbabwe.

The plethora of craft development projects in Timor-Leste duplicate programs and remain uncoordinated from the producer's perspective. While different craft development programs in Timor-Leste do similar things, there is little coordination or sharing of information and learning from each other. Also a sense of competition has grown among NGOs as both the market and funding diminish. A combined effort is required to deal with the fickle and competitive international handcrafts market with its various segments (e.g. everyday domestic products, inferior mass-produced items, elite artisan products and fair trade). However, access to these markets is difficult for village women. Perhaps Timor-Leste can take advantage of this trend but NGOs must be the interlocutors for local women. Such collaboration and pooling of resources, instead of competition, would reap more benefits. While there is little real impediment to cooperation, this would require some form of national leadership.

THE INTERNATIONAL EXPERIENCE

Globalisation and industrialisation have wiped out many livelihoods and artisan practices and degraded others. In India over the past 30 years, the number of artisans has declined by at least 30 %, with many joining the ranks of casual wage labourers and the informal economy (Scrase, 2003, p. 449). In recent decades, however, a return by a portion of the rich world market to natural, organic and handmade products and a large alternative fair trade movement have seen a revival of or reprieve for some handcrafts. Non-profit Alternative Trade Organisations (ATOs) have emerged to create markets for traditional craft guilds, giving producers a higher return than is available from mainstream retailers (Imhoff, 1998, p. 2). There is a lively debate about the role of the fair trade movement and also about whether the integrity of traditional crafts can be maintained in a fashion-dominated global capitalist economy (Kaino et al., 1995; Littrel and Dickson, 1999; Scrase, 2003). These are significant issues that have not been significantly considered in Timor-Leste.

A variety of international studies that have shown that the development of handcrafts industries yield few benefits to the producers whose work is labour-intensive but poorly paid (Mies, 1982; Guillermo, 1995; Green, 1999; Scrase, 2003). When the costs of inputs and the amount of time spent on the work are computed, women handcraft workers often earn very little; and as they are drawn into commercial markets and subjected to the control of middlemen who exploit them, they also frequently lose creative autonomy and skills, as well as respect in their own local culture. Often poor women are illiterate and innumerate, and are so anxious to earn cash that they undervalue the costs involved, seldom even costing their own time. This is common in Timor.

When development assistance agencies intervene in such situations, they frequently support handcrafts projects in the hope that they will bring some of the benefits of development to women.

Microfinance projects often provide loans for handcraft businesses. Some studies (e.g. Green, 1999; Guillermo, 1995) have shown, however, that as has been already pointed out, the benefits to the producers are few, since their work remains labour-intensive but poorly paid. So unless they have other development goals, they, in effect, fail; these projects do not help women and simply increase their productive workloads.

If Timor-Leste is to develop a craft industry that can truly benefit the poor women who labour in it, then factors other than the purely economic, need to be considered. Gender and development theory points to a central concern about the impact of increases in women's productive work. The 'triple burden' faced by women must then be taken into account: if women's productive work is increased this puts stress on their other two major roles—reproduction and community support—which obviously disadvantages not only the women but also their families and communities.

The scattered studies of handcraft production tend to be ethnographic and relate to particular countries and groups of women; rather than discussing the potential of handcrafts more generally in relation to development goals (see for example: Guillermo, 1995; Green, 1999; Forshee, 2001; Stephen, 2005). There is however a small but forceful body of literature criticising the exploitation of women involved in handcraft production, an exploitation masked by rhetoric about the preservation of tradition (e.g. Mies, 1982 and Wilkinson-Weber, 2004).

In Latin America in the early 1990s, William Morris (1996) documented economic and social variation in five in-depth case studies of successful handcraft producer groups. By assessing the projects using a number of elements (income, job satisfaction and security, entrepreneurship, creativity and cultural renewal), he established the fact that a wide variety of results were possible. He found that although high incomes were most welcome, they were not the factor most significant to the beneficiaries, partly because just a small amount of money could make a huge difference in very poor communities. Overwhelmingly [ed: an

awkward modifier. What do you mean here? "Undoubtedly"? No I mean that an overwhelming number of the beneficiaries suggested in their responses that] beneficiaries suggested that satisfaction with the programs was due to their own achievements and the improvement of their own skills and abilities. Whether it was an entrepreneurial, community development, or an artistic or cultural endeavour, it was a sense of independent progress and self-determination that was most highly valued (Morris, 1996). Such outcomes would now be labelled "empowerment."

Empowerment relates to the notion of potential that people have for living the lives they want, for achieving valued ways of "being and doing" (Sen, 1999). These ideas of Amartya Sen, an economist fully aware of the non-economic aspects of development, believed such empowerment could contribute to enlarging people's freedom. Handcrafts embody the complexity of development as recognised by Sen, since they can be viewed from both economic and cultural perspectives (Mohlman, 1999). Considering the current concern of development agencies to empower women, rather than just "include them in development," there is reason to suspect that craft development may often have had negative rather than positive effects on women's lives. Additionally the goal of assisting handcraft workers should not be to maintain the production of culturally and aesthetically desirable artefacts, as some writers imply; it should equally be to empower the producers.

It is clear that detailed studies of social variables of the producers and of the realities of the production process are required, particularly when the work is gender-specific. Clare Wilkinson-Weber (2004) argues from a socialist feminist perspective that much of the craft production process, often done in wretched conditions with little security, is obscured in many studies, leaving unexamined the complex relations of production that exploit poor women. She relates that few accounts exist of social variables within "traditional" handcraft industries, along with little exploration of social differentiation among the women

themselves. Her conclusion is that new critical accounts of women's engagement with handcrafts are required. This conclusion is pertinent to Timor-Leste where such a study has not been made.

Another theoretical problem for craft development is set out clearly by Green (1999) in her book about Mayan widows.

The projects not only reinforced existing values that restricted women's roles to domestic and child-bearing activities but overlooked feminist critiques of development projects that merely reinforce women's marginal status... (Green, 1999, p. 147).

Increases in productive work for women, especially when it involves travel or meetings outside the home, have also not been welcomed in conservative families, sometimes with traumatic results. For example, women in Mexican craft co-operatives have been beaten, even murdered, for acting more independently than their families thought proper (Stephen, 2005, pp. 255-256). Yet out of these situations have come new possibilities for "more egalitarian gender relations at home and in the community" and increased political participation. too (Stephen, 2005, pp. 257, 270-271).

A craft project in West Timor, where a similar culture of complementary gender roles to Timor-Leste exists, initially caused problems in families; but once the economic benefits were felt, changes in roles and women's status occurred. With the increase in women's productive work men refused to help with duties normally seen as women's work, to compensate for women's extra duties but began to take up other duties not strictly set by gender (Asche, 1998, pp. 160-161). More extensive changes were also noted among Lao weaving communities, with variable increases in women's overall status (Kusakabem, 2004, pp. 587-588). Gender analysis and planning for positive outcomes in this regard, and other cultural and social challenges inherent in much handcraft development, are often overlooked in

straightforward livelihoods or economic development approaches.

However, like the studies of Morris and Stephen, the international literature offers hope through various case-studies and recommendations. A general recommendation is that women especially need to appreciate the gender, class and power relations of the production process if they are to truly benefit from craft development (Mies, 1982, pp. 178-179; Peiris, 1997 pp. 2-13; Guillermo, 1995, p. 54; Soejatni Agusni and Sulikanti, 1995, pp. 95; Green, 1999: pp. 147). It is not enough just to help women improve the efficiency of their work or increase their work loads and hopefully, their incomes, if the profit goes into the pocket of traders, middlemen or more powerful kin. Most often this type of knowledge and understanding has been shared communally within cooperatives and producer groups. In fact Lyn Stephen documents how weaving co-operatives in Mexico have "pioneered a new era in gender relations" (Stephen, 2005, p. 253). Lynne Milgram also discusses the benefits of cooperatives and the empowerment of members in the Philippines (Milgram, 2000, pp. 108-112). In these ways, strengthening cooperatives appears to be the most direct and appropriate way to assist producers in Timor-Leste. too.

CONCLUSION: LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

Hand weaving by women has always been important in Timorese society, economically, culturally and socially; and the outstanding quality of Timor's best textiles attests to the skill and creativity of its weavers. Only in recent decades, however, have these textiles become marketable commodities. This exploratory research in Timor-Leste indicates that at present, few weavers manage to make a reasonable living. Often illiterate and living in remote areas, they have difficulty in accessing markets that will give them a fair return for their work. As it is, crude forms of exploitation already exists.

Little has been documented about changes in the production process, and there are doubts regarding such issues as poor work-place health, child labour, even child trafficking for these purposes. All these must be better understood in Timor-Leste as craft development is an obvious program for poor women who have few options to earn much-needed cash. Detailed studies of the social variables of producers and the value chain or journey of the craft product are essential to understand where profit or value is being made and by whom; and to ensure that benefits go to the producer. Wider studies of handicrafts and development strongly recommend that the compilation of this information is essential.

What is already clear from this exploratory research is that there are different types of markets, as well as producers who require different and targeted assistance according to their particular social realities. More vulnerable individuals and groups require programs on literacy, numeracy, basic business training and health education. Their humanitarian aid requirements can neither be ignored. More established family and commercial businesses and cooperatives require financial, trading, market and infrastructure development if they are to grow. Women who own small businesses also require this development of skills and systems to benefit not just themselves but also their piece workers and small contractors (who require different assistance yet again). Cooperatives need organisational strengthening, along with support for any social welfare initiatives they pursue. Select examples in the international literature demonstrates that working with co-ops may be the best way to benefit the most women in the most sustainable and effective way. If the fair trade market is to be accessed, then those principles, including the protection of child labourers and work place health and safety, need to be addressed across all these different groups.

The international literature in the field of craft development also shows that it is clearly not enough to help women improve the efficiency of their work and of their organisations, or to increase their workloads and incomes, if, in the end, the profit

goes elsewhere. Improving women's awareness of exploitation and of their negotiating skills (initially with literacy and numeracy) may be very beneficial indirect interventions. Much of the literature advocates the need for producers to understand gender, class and power relations inherent in the production and marketing processes, if they are to truly benefit from these; and that such work is often also best done through local women's organisations and craft cooperatives. Planning and monitoring of craft development should be made in terms of empowerment rather than simple livelihoods, if such projects are to effectively benefit their producers and artisans.

Moreover, straightforward livelihoods and economic approaches overlook the social and cultural importance of much handcraft and could be damaging in these domains. How the associated customary practices are also changing in the transition to a commercial economy is little considered. An awareness of the cultural impact and cultural nurturing must be seen as important elements of craft development, to ensure that the culture is not devalued nor the producers deskilled. Yet we must also be on guard for what passes for cultural rhetoric on the preservation of tradition that often obscures exploitation.

It would be difficult for one development project to address all of these factors directly. A number of NGOs are involved in assisting Timorese women producers, including the established national women's network, along with other local and international NGOs. However, there is little coordination among them, nor an overview of this craft development. Assistance has been ad hoc and opportunistic, carried out with little research or wider strategy. More coordination of efforts between NGOs and government is essential. A variety of international programs and models could be consulted, such as, SEWA (Self-Employed Women's Association) or Dastkar in India, or the 'Homenet' network in Southeast Asia. There are also international organizations which could assist, such as The World Crafts Council International, The Craft Centre at CHF, Aid to Artisans and UNESCO (particularly the Award for Excellence

program). It is essential to have this kind of support when entering the insecure and fickle international market.

If Timor-Leste is to develop a craft industry that can truly benefit the poor women who constitute it, then factors other than the purely economic need to be taken into account. The question that remains both here and in other parts of the world is:

Can weaving be adapted to the commercial world in ways which contribute to women's empowerment rather than to their exploitation? This paper argues that a new, national program of craft development directed by stakeholders is needed in Timor-Leste before this question can be answered. It is hoped that the foundation for future research into this question of craft development in Timor-Leste has also been laid out in this paper. Internationally it has been shown that women play an influential role through their entrepreneurship and their work in grassroots organizations (such as the craft cooperatives discussed here), to build a new culture of peace and prosperity in post-conflict societies. Considering recent upheavals, Timor-Leste should make this type of grassroots peace and prosperity-building a greater priority than it currently is.

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