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Development Alternatives in Timor-Leste

Recasting Modes of Local Engagement

*Sam Carroll-Bell**

Research Coordinator, Centre for Global Research,
RMIT University, Melbourne, Australia
sam.carroll-bell@rmit.edu.au

Abstract

Despite investing significant resources, the practice of development has struggled to secure positive, long-term outcomes for the people of Timor-Leste. More than a decade on from formal independence, much of the nation's population remains deeply impoverished and many human development challenges persist. This article attempts to answer two questions: First, why has development in Timor-Leste been unable to deliver more observable benefits and outcomes for the population at large? And second, how might development be reconfigured to be more effective? Drawing from statistical information, interviews, and case study material, this article argues that part of the 'problem' lies with development orthodoxy and its incapacity to recognize and adapt to settings where customary systems of local authority, practice, and belief remain important to social cohesion. Indeed, much may be gained by recasting the way development theory and practice views and interprets such practices, moving away from the idea of a series of cultural obstacles to acknowledging them as deeply embedded systems of meaning which continue to guide various aspects of East Timorese life.

Keywords

Timor-Leste – development practice – sustainability – social logics – ontologies

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Introduction

Life and politics in this land of magical goats is about alliances and friendship, a world away from the technical approaches outlined in the jargon-filled handbooks of the international development community. Even though that's a general rule around much of the world, it's not one that obviously guides how development bureaucrats appear to think about places like Timor-Leste and how they structure their interventions.

PEAKE 2013:55

For 14 years, Timor-Leste has been home, albeit temporarily, to thousands of international development volunteers, technical advisors, project officers, and capacity builders. Backed by over 40 bilateral and multilateral agencies, including some of the world's largest development organizations and hundreds of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), these practitioners have overseen the deployment of countless programmes with the aim of improving livelihoods, building capacity, and establishing basic services (AusAID 2009:4). Despite this sustained attention and funding, many of the desired outcomes have not materialized and a persistent series of human development challenges remain (AusAID 2009:3–4; UNDP 2011a, 2013, 2014).

While much of the development work undertaken in Timor-Leste has been informed, framed, and guided by orthodox approaches found elsewhere—being the largely systemic application of western epistemologies across a diverse range of social forms and frameworks (McGregor 2007:156; Gibson-Graham 2005:4–6)—a small number of NGOs have begun to explore alternative modes of development (McGregor 2007; Peake 2013). These organizations, to use a term that will be described in more detail shortly, take into account local 'ways of being', or the different ways in which people see, understand, and engage with the world around them. Recognizing and negotiating with locally bound forms of ritual and practice, these 'alternate modes' are a significant attempt to 're-imagine' development praxis so as to ensure greater relevance, ownership, and control for local communities. Moreover, they seek to draw together different patterns of social authority and belief in order to instruct and facilitate a meaningful process of development.

In attempting to 'reimagine' development praxis, the work undertaken by these organizations has much in common with the various actor-orientated perspectives advocated by Long (1989, 1990, 2001, 2004), Acre (1993), Acre and Long (2000, 2007), Olivier de Sardan (2005), Mosse (2005), Lewis and Mosse (2006a), and the 'anthropology of development' literature (for other important contributions, see Richards 1985, 1986, 1993; Scott 1986, 1990, 1998; Pigg 1992;

Hobart 1993; and Darre 1997). Although differences of opinion can be found across this literature, these perspectives present development as a highly contested social 'arena' involving a diverse range of world views—often referred to as social realities, rationalities, forms, or logics (Acre and Long 2007:107). Moreover, the authors argue that significant ethnographic research is needed to elucidate 'the ways in which development meanings are produced and negotiated in practice and how development processes and interactions have different significance for the various actors involved' (Lewis and Mosse 2006b:9).

In acknowledging and exploring the various meanings located within the development 'arena', these approaches also work to re-conceptualize the practice, so that 'it is seen for what it is—an ongoing, socially constructed and negotiated process, not simply the execution of an already specified plan of action with expected outcomes' (Long 1990:16).

Elaborating on these traditions, Olivier de Sardan's 'entangled social logic approach' introduces the concept of 'multiple rationalities' as a way of understanding how individuals can identify with, engage with, and be influenced by multiple world views or 'logics' (in shaping, constructing, and re-constructing their lives) (Hagmann 2007). In essence, Olivier de Sardan's argument is for an appreciation of fluidity and messiness while also acknowledging the impact of social structures. Critically, his analysis also encompasses what he terms the 'development configuration', being the ambiguous and 'cosmopolitan world of experts, bureaucrats, NGO personnel, researchers, technicians, project chiefs and field agents' together with its institutional architecture (Olivier de Sardan 2005:25). This work also offers some important methodological advances in its articulation of a 'non-normative, non-speculative'¹ (Acre and Long 2007:102) and empirically ethnographic basis for development research and activity (Olivier de Sardan 2005:11–7). To this end, a number of authors have contributed significant ethnographic studies in recent years to help propel the convergence of anthropology and development (Crewe and Harrison 1998; Crewe and Axelby 2012; Li 2007, 2014; Li, Hall and Hirsch 2011; Mosse 2005, 2011; Lansing 2006, to cite but a few). Though diverse, in terms of their location, focus, and findings, a number of themes have emerged from these works, among them that, as a practice, development is indeed a socially constructed and culturally derived process involving multiple actors possessing multiple world views or logics (although some logics may be seen as dominant). As a result, the space in which development 'occurs' is diverse, contested, ambiguous, and, at times,

1 Olivier de Sardan (2005:14) uses the phrase 'output [...] that does not propose a singular or closed theoretical system'.

contradictory (for excellent accounts of this complexity within the context of farming and land management, see Li, Hall and Hirsch 2011 and Li 2014; also see Crewe and Axelby 2012).

Another theme is that the so-called 'development configuration', with its emphasis on 'policy models' and 'programme designs', tends to overlook, ignore, or dismiss local forms of organization, practice, and belief in favour of modern² forms—often with deleterious effects (Scott 1998; Lansing 2006, 2007; Palmer 2010). Here we see links to the post-structuralist discourse analysis of Escobar (1992, 1995, 1998, 2000) and Ferguson (1994), amongst others. In describing the mindset of planners and consultants working to 'modernize' Bali's ancient network of irrigation systems, Lansing (2006:10) captures this point:

The consultants were usually delighted to make these trips [visiting sacred water temples intimately connected with local irrigation and agriculture], but they had to be scheduled so as to not conflict with the planner's real work. Gradually, I came to understand that the consultants saw their job as energizing the civil service. The views of the farmers, and indeed all the particularities of the Balinese case, were largely irrelevant to this task. When I returned the consultants to their hotels, the image that often came to mind was that of a team of specialists vigorously treating a patient for what might prove to be the wrong disease.

Finally, sustainable modes of development practice are more likely to emerge when reflexive 'actors' and intermediaries are provided with the space and time to explore, negotiate, and rework the various tensions found within the development 'arena'. Put another way, this is a space in which development actors, operating in due recognition of dissimilar 'worlds' and 'logics', are able to broker and then translate new project realities (for multiple accounts of development brokerage and translation, see Lewis and Mosse 2006). Here, then, this article will seek to add an East Timorese perspective to this growing body of literature.

Following a brief overview and analysis of development's impact in Timor-Leste, I outline three ontological categories, or 'ways of being', as a way of

2 Here the use of the term 'modern' refers to 'the practices, processes, languages and knowledges' as 'modelled' by Western traditions (McGregor 2007:156). This understanding is distinct from the ways in which different societies and cultures shape different modernities (amongst many others, see Pigg 1992 and Robins 2003). To a lesser extent, this definition also differs from the phrase 'modern ways of being', which will be presented later in this article.

conceptualizing social complexity and difference across Timor-Leste. Using this schema as a background, I then draw from primary research conducted between 2012 and 2014³ to present a three-part case study that describes how one agency is attempting to refashion development practice to reflect local 'ways of being'. In so doing, I demonstrate how the previously incongruous notions of development and customary practice, ritual, and authority are being brought together to form new and meaningful frameworks for sustainable engagement and activity.

Looking Beyond the Headlines: Development Outcomes in Post-Independent Timor-Leste

The size and complexity of the task that confronted the newly liberated East Timorese nation in 1999 was immense. After 24 years of Indonesian occupation, many of Timor-Leste's new citizens had been left malnourished, displaced, and dislocated. Moreover, the widespread violence and destruction that coincided with the withdrawal of the Tentara Nasional Indonesia (TNI, Indonesian National Armed Forces) resulted in the death of thousands, the loss of physical infrastructure, and myriad social schisms between those aligned with previous regimes (and associated power bases and structures), and those seeking independence. This all followed centuries of Portuguese colonialism that on the one hand had left little of material benefit for the local population, and on the other had been marked by repression and violence, as well as the exploitation of both human and natural resources (Gunn 1999:158–65, 2011:7–9; Nixon

3 For this study I conducted 38 in-depth interviews with key personnel from the RDTL government, development agencies (local, national, and international), civil society organizations, representative bodies, community groups and members. These interviews were conducted in June and July 2012 and June and July 2014 in Dili, Lolotoe, and Ainaro and focused on development initiatives based in the districts of Ainaro, Dili, Ermera, Lautem, Lolotoe, and Oecussi. Reflective in their approach, the interviews revolved around the research questions found in this article in order to provide ethnographic data for analysis and understanding. These interviews were conducted with acute awareness of the sensitive nature of the subject matter and the need for confidentiality. The interviews were generally conducted at the participants' place of employment, but occasionally elsewhere at their request. They involved both individual face-to-face interviews and group interviews. Where participants provided their consent, the interview was recorded and, later, transcribed and analysed. This article is also informed by an analysis of the many informal or opportunistic interviews and conversations (with community members, development workers, government officials, and households) as well as extensive field notes, observations, and case study material.

2012:20–49). The sum effect of Portuguese colonialism and Indonesian occupation was one of substantial challenge for the development of Timor-Leste in the post-independence period.

Although slow to react to the post-ballot violence and destruction, the international response—led by the United Nations in the form of the Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET)—was significant, with humanitarian aid, personnel, and other resources deployed from October 1999 onwards. Over the next 14 years, a plethora of multilateral agencies and international organizations would set up operational outposts across Timor-Leste to help transition the nation from a ‘post-conflict state’ to a ‘liberal democracy’, often assuming the latter to be the appropriate social template without thinking of localized social formations (Chopra 1999, 2000). Now, as a host of international agencies, including those attached to the United Nations, scale back their activities in Timor-Leste, it’s appropriate to reflect on what has been achieved over this period of sustained engagement. In so doing a number of mainstream development measures and indices will be presented, not in an attempt to legitimize their use in development practice, or otherwise, but as a way of looking beyond the anecdotal evidence to assess development’s capacity to meet the targets it has set itself as measured by its own means. It’s also worth noting that while development has regularly deployed the use of such measures, the release of information stemming from their use (for instance, reports) is rare in Timor-Leste.

Superficially, at least, it would not be unreasonable for many to assume that a solid foundation for the nation’s future has been laid. For instance, relatively peaceful elections—presidential and parliamentary—were held throughout 2012; the nation’s per capita income, underpinned by increasing oil receipts, has continued to rise (and now stands at around US\$9680); and there have been some significant advancements in measures of life expectancy, child mortality, and primary education (UNDP 2014:162–223; DFAT 2014:1). Though encouraging and welcome, these ‘headlines’ do tend to obscure or ‘mask’ the lived experience for the vast majority of those in Timor-Leste. The reality is that ‘Timor-Leste has some of the worst poverty and development indicators in the world’ (DFAT 2014:1).

For instance, 41% of the country’s population is estimated to be living in absolute poverty, with 73% on less than US\$2 a day (DFAT 2014:2). Scarce opportunities for employment and a largely subsistence-based agricultural sector also mean that many people continue to be vulnerable in the areas of income, food security, and nutrition (DFAT 2014:2). Social services, together with their delivery capabilities, appear weak and dislocated, while access to healthcare remains low (DFAT 2014:15–6; UNDP 2014:202). Most pointed is the disparity

between urban and rural settings, where each of the above-mentioned challenges is amplified. Indeed, the Australian Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) stated in its Aid Program Performance Report 2012–2013 that '[e]conomic growth from Timor-Leste's natural resources is not yet reaching the rural poor, which is most of the country's population' (DFAT 2014:2).

In seeking to describe the scale of the challenge, they added (DFAT 2014:2):

These [rural] communities are poor for a range of reasons. A poorly educated workforce is a constraint to productivity and economic development. Formal private job creation is low with many more new jobseekers entering the workforce than there are jobs. Subsistence farming is the main form of livelihood outside of Dili but agricultural productivity is low with challenges in storing and transporting produce to market. Infrastructure is either missing or in poor repair.

Progress towards Timor-Leste's health and education targets—represented by the Millennium Development Goals—is equally patchy, with each positive step seemingly undermined by a series of persistent and pervasive challenges elsewhere. For example, while there has been progress in areas such as primary enrolment, tuberculosis detection, the use of contraceptives, antenatal care attendance, and the proportion of births attended by a health professional (UNDP 2014:162–223), Timor-Leste is struggling in many other areas. These include rural access to sanitation, the average number of years in school (4.4 years) and rates of repetition, and the proportion of the population correctly understanding the transmission of HIV/AIDS (DFAT 2014:1–8; UNDP 2014:162–223). Recent figures also highlight that, despite improvement, Timor-Leste's life expectancy at birth (67.5 years) is among the worst in the region, as is the percentage of infants lacking immunization (against measles, diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis), and the mortality ratios for mothers (300 per 100,000 live births), infants (46 per 1,000 live births) and children under the age of five (57 per 1,000 live births) (UNDP 2014:162–223). Malnutrition in Timor-Leste's rural areas also ranks amongst the worst in the region (DFAT 2014:15), resulting in 58% of children suffering from moderate to severe stunting (that is, two or more standard deviations below the median height-for-age of the World Health Organization's (WHO) child growth standards for children under five years of age), 45% being underweight, and 19% suffering from wasting (UNDP 2014:186; DFAT 2014:15–6).

Taken individually or as a whole, these figures present a challenge to orthodox views of development, especially when one considers the resources and expertise that has been made available over the last 14 years. What's more, these

'figures' are often borne out in the anecdotal evidence that is 'life' and the 'lived experience' in Timor-Leste.⁴

In presenting the above, my intention is not to denigrate the commitment and passion so evident in the work of development practitioners and agencies operating in Timor-Leste, nor is it designed to deny or obscure the severity of the challenges they face. Indeed, as we shall see, some organizations have responded to different challenges, including the recognition of the importance of the customary world. Instead, it is used more generally to highlight how hard it has been for the practice of development to adapt to the complexity of East-Timorese society and build the momentum required to achieve many of the targets it has set itself. It is also used as a starting point for reflecting on ways development has been approached in Timor-Leste. Consequently, we are called on to consider two questions: First, why, with so much activity and backing, has development been unable to deliver more observable benefits and outcomes? And second, how might the practice of development be reconfigured so as to improve its delivery and outcomes in sites of significant social complexity?

Establishing 'Ways of Being' and 'Meaning'

Before answering these questions, it is important to establish what is meant by 'ways of being' and terms such as 'customary', 'traditional', and 'modern'. To do this, I draw from a framework known as 'constitutive abstraction' (James 1996, 2006; James et al. 2012) and build on a body of work that has used this framework to help conceptualize various aspects of East Timorese society over recent years (Grenfell 2008, 2012a, 2012b; Grenfell et al. 2009). As a methodological framework, constitutive abstraction subjects various patterns of social integration to increasingly abstract levels of analysis in order to identify a number of ontological categories or formations (James 1996, 2006; James et al. 2012). In this way, analysis moves beyond notions of 'culture' (though this is obviously important in its own right) to focus on the multiple subjectivities and constitutions that comprise 'life' (Hage 2012). Far from an end point, these categories are seen as a means to further analysis—heuristic devices that prompt us to think on difference and how different social realities or ways of being are constituted and then experienced across and within societies.

4 See, for instance, Michael Bachelard, 'Impoverished country with a very large bank account', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10-3-2012. www.smh.com.au/world/impoverished-country-with-a-very-large-bank-account-20120309-1upgg.html (accessed 20-1-2014).

Although ‘constitutive abstraction’ differs from a number of contemporary anthropological and sociological approaches used elsewhere, three reasons support its use here.⁵ First, it helps development ‘actors’ in Timor-Leste to identify and to begin to understand the various ‘ways in which people engage with and give meaning to the world around them’ (Acre and Long 2000:105). Examining the points at which these various ‘ways’ intersect, then, helps to orientate development activity and research towards the ‘ways in which development meanings are produced’ (Lewis and Mosse 2006b:9). From a methodological point of view this occurs, at least initially, through empirical-level analysis (detailed historiographies, first-hand observation, and so forth) and ‘lifting out’ the various ‘ways that things are done’ within a given place (James 2006:73). Exploring the intersection of ‘practice’ and ‘meaning’, a second level of abstraction seeks to isolate and examine the ‘ways people act’ across various modes of activity, including production, exchange, communication, and organization (James 2006:74). Moving across a third level of analysis, the juncture of ‘social integration’ and ‘differentiation’ is analysed in order to describe and locate the various ‘ways people relate’ (James 2006:76). Finally, the abstract categories of epistemology, spatiality, and temporality (knowledge, space, and time) are used to examine and mark out distinct ontological categories—‘ways of being’—namely: the customary, traditional, modern, and post-modern (James 2006:77). Examining the resultant points of intersection and adaptation allows us to more fully appreciate the complex space in which development occurs, but in a way that avoids the weighting of one category or formation over another (Grenfell 2012b:89).

Secondly, the use of the constitutive abstraction allows us to consider development and how it is frequently dominated, if not constituted, by modern ‘world views’. Beyond this, it helps us to consider and analyse notions such as the ‘development configuration’—complete with its various actors and interests—and the ways in which it tends to interact with different social forms. This reflexivity helps us to more readily recognize, if not deepen, our appreciation for development as a socially constructed practice involving multiple actors, patterns, and frameworks.

Finally, this framework helps us to appreciate the ‘messy’ or ‘uneven ways’ in which different social forms and patterns can be encountered, absorbed, contested, or reworked by people as ‘they go about their lives’. Here, then, we see

5 The reasons outlined are in addition to the familiarity provided by an existing body of research that utilizes this framework to define and facilitate analysis in the context of Timor-Leste and Papua New Guinea (amongst others) (see James 1996, 2006; James et al. 2012; Grenfell 2008, 2012a, 2012b; Grenfell et al. 2009).

a connection to Olivier de Sardan's notion of entanglement and the capacity of development actors to hold or, at the very least, negotiate multiple world views. Consequently this framework helps us to think about the boundaries and nexus of such forms as well as developing an appreciation for how they might be brought together to form new and potentially long-term sustainable patterns of meaningful engagement—even if only in a preliminary and generalized way.

In Timor-Leste, customary ways of being are characterized by genealogical ordering and the coexistence of multiple worlds, being the 'living, ancestral, spirit and natural' (Grenfell 2012a:211). This coexistence is closely associated with the notion of 'balance', which, in turn, is maintained and regulated by the attribution of a living soul to, and preservation of, sacred animals, objects, plants, and other natural phenomena—*lulik* (Grenfell 2012a:211). This is then supported and reinforced by a customary legal-ethical framework working in concert with the will of 'still-sentient ancestors', or *lisan* (Cummins 2010:xii; Castro and Trindade 2007:19–21).⁶ The practice of *tara bandu*, for instance—used to regulate access to, or the interaction between, people, animals, and the physical environment—is just one expression of these complex frameworks (Belun and The Asia Foundation 2013).⁷ Authority is typically ascribed to the *lia-na'in*, a spiritual leader particular to each community. The *lia-na'in* (which literally translates as 'the holder of the words') is a hereditary role, generally passed down through the male line. Social standing within customary society is determined by familial ties and networks, which are themselves connected to a sacred house known as an *uma lulik*—a physical space asserting both an ancestral and a mythical connection to the land on which it is placed. It is therefore seen as a focal point for social order, values, and relations. Beyond this, life is regulated and framed by a deep connection to an ethno-specific mythology passed on—almost exclusively—through oral means of communication, and the dominance of face-to-face relations. Finally, production is geared towards satisfying the physical requirements of life. Today, this commonly takes the form of subsistence farming and, on occasion, in rural areas, hunting for food, while bartering and other forms of reciprocity comprise modes of exchange (Grenfell 2012a:211, 2012b:90).

6 The phrase 'still-sentient ancestors' is drawn from Cummins's (2010: xii) definition of *lisan*: 'Traditional law; ethical system encompassing a worldview that recognises still-sentient ancestors. Often referred to by the Malay/Indonesian term *adat*.'

7 It should be noted that the practice of *tara bandu* varies greatly across Timor-Leste. Indeed a recent report by Belun and The Asia Foundation (2013:10) described it as being contested. Here this practice is presented in a greatly generalized form.

TABLE 1 *Ontological Formations in Timor-Leste*

	Customary	Traditional	Modern
Organization	Genealogy Coexistence of living, ancestral, natural, and spirit worlds	Institution Common cosmol- ogy/Connection to physical world	State Secular, scientific, and rational
Communication	Face-to-face Relations Exclusive oral language	Physical print and type / Codification of language	Digital printing and other electronic forms
Production	Hunter/Gatherer	Manipulation of nature / Trade routes	Formal industrial modes and markets
Exchange	Barter/Reciprocal	Physical currency	Digital transfer

ADAPTED FROM JAMES (1996, 2006), JAMES ET AL. (2012), AND GRENFELL (2008, 2012A, 2012B)

When describing traditional ways of being, I am referring to the increasingly abstract modes of social organization dominated by a common conception of the cosmos together with a connection to the physical world. Traditional forms of authority, therefore, originate via their connection to an omnipresent creator or deity. This is then extended and legitimized through the institutional forms embodying the claim. In Timor-Leste, the role of the Catholic priest or nun—operating as authorized representatives of the Catholic Church—are exemplars of this traditional mode of authority. Social life is regulated and framed by the church or parish, and then, more abstractly, by a universal community of Catholics. In this, a diverse collection of people are bound together by common acts of worship—such as the act of attending mass, baptism, or reconciliation—and belief in a common destiny. In terms of production, agricultural tools and planting techniques are used for the purposes of enhancing output and supply. Monetized systems of exchange also support trading systems. The consolidation and codification of language, moreover, is both supported and reinforced by printed forms of communication, although these are

primarily geared towards the activities of the church (for instance, the production of religious texts) (Grenfell 2012a:211, 2012b:90).

Finally, modern ways of being are understood as highly abstract systems of social relations comprised of largely disembodied modes of activity (Grenfell 2012a:211). Here, then, the nation-state is normalized as the dominate form of social organization, which itself is supported by the bureaucratic dispersion of power and the abstract notion of citizenship. Authority is understood as something that is 'achieved', while decision-making processes are based on the objective and secular 'logics' of science and rationality. Disembodied modes of communication are also present, including digital radio, television, and online publications. *The Dili Weekly* newspaper, *RRTL* television and radio stations, and use of national mobile-phone networks are just a few examples of the modern modes of communication in Timor-Leste. Production is organized through formal or industrial channels, and is further promulgated by access to local and international markets (Grenfell 2012a:211, 2012b:98). This is underpinned by digital modes of currency exchange. The export of commodities, such as coffee and oil, are two examples of modern production in Timor-Leste.

Having sketched out these three categories, it is worth reiterating a few points made in the paragraphs that immediately preceded them. First, these three categories should not be seen as fixed or incompatible, but rather as a series of semi-porous layers that are lived, encountered, and negotiated on a daily basis. Nor should they be seen as complete or absolute in their definition (or application); instead, they are starting points for an analysis of social complexity and difference. Moreover, these categories should be understood as possessing the capacity to operate in recognition of one another, albeit in uneven and complex ways. Consequently, the nation of Timor-Leste, replete with all of its development actors, can be seen as multifarious or possessing several integrated layers of socio-cultural difference. This stands in stark contrast to the way it is often portrayed: as an 'under-developed' or even 'undeveloped' nation with 'modern' aspirations (Grenfell 2012a:210–1). For while authors such as Babo-Soares (2004), Cummins (2010, 2011), Cummins and Leach (2012), Grenfell (2008, 2012a, 2012b), Jennaway (2008), McWilliam (2001, 2003a, 2003b), McWilliam and Traube (2011), Palmer (2010), Trinidade (2012), and Wallis (2012 and 2013) have all noted the dominance of 'customary ways' across various aspects of life, it is also clear that many in Timor-Leste engage with, as well as move across, traditional and modern formations on a regular basis (Grenfell 2012a:211). And so it is in this sense of drawing together different patterns of integration and authority, even when in tension, that a number of organizations are now working to reimagine development practice in Timor-Leste—a point we shall return to shortly.

Explaining Development's Limited Impact through an Expanded Social Analysis

Coming back to the question of why development has not been able to produce more observable benefits and outcomes in Timor-Leste, it is worth noting that many approaches to this question have tended to focus on a range of technical or instrumental factors, such as poor project planning and design, poor implementation, and a failure to adequately account for 'local culture' or secure sufficient community 'buy-in' (see, for instance, AusAID 2009, 2012a, 2012b; ASPI 2011; RDTL 2010; UNDP 2011b). While not wanting to deny these factors, or their relevance to the success (or otherwise) of development activities, here, interview data—taken from the CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA⁸) 'Listening Project: Field visit report, Timor-Leste' (2008), as well as those that I conducted in Timor-Leste between June 2012 and July 2014—are used to expand this analysis and to explore a number of social aspects and tensions associated with development practice.

The first of these tensions lies in the short-term, cyclical or programmatic nature of development practice—otherwise known as the project life cycle—and the time required to build sustainable, long-term relationships. Many interviewees felt that international NGOs (INGOs) and development practitioners did not spend sufficient time with the community prior to commencing a project (CDA 2008:11–5). Moreover, they felt that the practitioners were more interested in collecting data, writing reports, and completing the tasks associated with their deployment than in getting close to the community. As a result, community engagement and investment in the development process is minimal. Indeed, one gets the sense that development is something that occurs 'around' many of the interviewees—a process involving government officials, project officers, local elites, and a few others:

They just come, do their project, go back, and there is no change. Members always ask INGOs to collaborate with them [...] INGOs must ask for ideas of the local people, NGOs implement their projects without consul-

8 CDA Collaborative Learning Projects (CDA) are a 'not-for-profit organization based in Cambridge, Massachusetts (USA) committed to improving the effectiveness of international actors who provide humanitarian assistance, engage in peace practice, and are involved in supporting sustainable development' (CDA 2013). The CDA's Listening Project 'seeks the reflections of experienced and thoughtful people who occupy a range of positions within recipient societies to assess the impact of aid efforts by various international actors' (CDA 2013:1).

tation with the leaders [...] there is no clear objective in terms of operation and maintenance [...]. Organizations get their data from the national level and just bring their stuff.

LOCAL GOVERNMENT OFFICIAL, BOBONARO, in CDA 2008:19

And:

Many organizations come to the community to implement projects and then leave. They come with their projects and say, do this, do this and then leave. They only serve the needs of the donors. Because of this, sometimes the community members say, we hate the NGOs.

TIMORESE AGRICULTURAL NGO REPRESENTATIVE, Dili, 7 July 2014

Similarly:

Some advisors don't want to share knowledge. They just sit in front of computers, writing reports. In many programmes, the local counterparts don't know about the budget. What's spent? What's left? Some (advisors) just do it for themselves and when their contracts are over, they never come back.

TIMORESE MINISTRY OFFICIAL, in CDA 2008:13

Furthermore, the interviewees expressed frustration at a perceived unwillingness to learn more about their needs, wants, and ways:

For planning, NGOs must go down to the village, sleep there, and then ask 'what do you want to do?' They should be there for a week asking 'what do you want?'

TIMORESE ADVISOR TO THE GOVERNMENT, in CDA 2008:14

And:

NGOs never come to us, especially international agencies, to speak with us directly. If they did, they would understand our needs [...]. We ask the international people to come to this village and see our situation [...]. Because of this, we have never had a relationship with an NGO.

VILLAGERS NEAR MAUBISSE, in CDA 2008:14

Highlighting her community's history and resilience, one villager noted:

Many of the international NGOs forget that we have been living here for centuries, we outlived the Portuguese and overcame the Indonesians. We are not empty, we are capable of many things. We know what we need [...] but the development [NGOs] do not spend enough time in our community. They do not know what we really need.

LOLOTOE, 23 June 2014

The second tension relates to pre-set 'development outcomes' and the perceived externalization of the community's 'decision-making' functions. An added complication is that the challenge of meeting the ongoing expectations of donors, technical advisors, and political actors often leads to resources being diverted away from local activities and projects (Timorese NGO representative, Dili, 3 July 2012). As one Listening Project participant noted:

Sometimes NGOs want to implement their own projects, and don't really see the problems the community confronts.

INTERNATIONAL AID WORKER, in CDA 2008:17

Another international development practitioner added:

The target groups don't care for the targets of the donors or international politics. They want to see their situations improved. The NGOs or the implementing organizations are in between the two, managing the expectations of both sides. The expectations of our target groups may differ from those who give us money. We just have to admit that there may be a gap.

INTERNATIONAL FUNDER AND IMPLEMENTER, in CDA 2008:17

Commenting on the effect of donor policies and expectations of change, one local NGO representative stated:

You have to spend all this money within three months before the project closes and this is not helpful or realistic [...]. There is pressure from the donor to implement a project, even when the community is not ready. This creates a lot of tension.

CDA 2008:17

Perhaps the most significant tension of all, however, is the regard in which customary society is frequently held by those in mainstream development. As one interviewee noted: 'Our beliefs and rituals are seen by outsiders⁹ as being

9 The interviewee used the term 'outsiders' interchangeably with the terms *malai* and 'elite'.

untrue and of holding up progress' (East Timorese NGO representative, Dili, 3 July 2012). Though greatly simplified, at its core, this statement appears to confirm a gap between the outsiders' need for progress and the insiders' need to progress while preserving local ways of being. Critically, it also highlights that development can be a point of cultural contestation—with actors engaging, resisting, or withdrawing, depending on the projects' sensitivity towards customary ways. As this same interviewee explained, while highlighting the importance of sacred water sources (due to the belief that the water has a life and will of its own): 'Believe it or not, that's our culture. You [an outsider] may not believe it, but it's true to us' (national NGO representative, Dili, 3 July 2012).

Taken individually, each of the above points of tension represents a significant challenge to the adaptive capacities of effective development practice. Taken as a whole, however, they also seem to conspire against the identification, recognition, and comprehension of other 'ways of being and doing'. Consequently, customary systems tend to be ignored, overlooked, or dismissed in ways similar to those described by Scott (1998), Lansing (2006, 2007), and Palmer (2010).

Again, in presenting the above discussion, the intention is not to provide definitive statements that cover all development-related activity in Timor-Leste, nor is it designed to obscure the diversity of approaches adopted by NGOs in responding to the challenges they encounter. Indeed, there are examples of organizations whose respect, recognition, and understanding of customary practices has seen their 'modern' work drawn into customary domains to form new and meaningful frameworks for development. However, my argument here is that these alternative forms of development (that is, those which move beyond the technical acts in order to more fully appreciate the social reality in which development operates) are often restricted to the margins of practice—they are exceptions rather than the rule. In an attempt to describe how mainstream development practice might be reconfigured (so as to be more effective), I turn to a series of case studies, drawn from the work of the Catholic agency Caritas Australia, to illustrate how one development organization is attempting to negotiate differing patterns of social integration and authority. Prior to moving on to this section it should be noted that this agency is based in Dili and is comprised of an all East-Timorese workforce drawn

Malai translates to mean foreigner, international or overseas, while the term 'elite' refers to segments of the political class within Timor-Leste. The term 'insiders' was used to refer to local people.



FIGURE 1 *Map of Ainaro Administrative District.*

SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM GOVERNMENT OF TIMOR-LESTE (2014)
 'ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISION' ('DISTRICTS' AND 'SUB-DISTRICTS')

from multiple districts. Caritas staff are fluent in Tetum, Portuguese, and, in many instances, *bahasa Indonesia*. A number of local dialects are also represented.

Clean Drinking Water in Ainaro

This first case study examines the highly contested area of water resource management in a small mountain village located outside the township of Manutaci (Manutassi) in Ainaro (for other cases examining the contestation of water, see Burghart 1993; Lansing 2006, 2007; Palmer 2010). The village is home to a population of approximately 700 people, or 100 households. Its nearest source of drinkable water is a well-spring several kilometres away from the village (Caritas Australia project officer, Dili, July 2012).

Socially, the people of Ainaro, and particularly those in its mountainous reaches, have been able to retain strong connections with customary forms of authority, practice, and ritual. Indeed, life in these areas continues to be largely framed by the past and an ongoing connection with the living, ancestral, and natural worlds. This connection is particularly strong around specific water formations where the drawing, drinking, or diverting of water is heavily regulated by community elders along with the ancestral spirit or 'owner of the water' (*bee na'ian*). Despite its sacred status, much of the water accessible around Ainaro continues to be unsafe to drink, especially if unfiltered (Caritas Australia project officer, Dili, July 2012).

Previously, three separate attempts to install a safe drinking-water facility in the village (between 2002 and 2010) by outside organizations (national and

international) each failed, as the projects were rejected by the local community. At times this rejection was quite overt. On one occasion the water piping was deliberately damaged by villagers operating in fear of ancestral reprisal; on another, the piping was removed and hidden from the contractors. On a third occasion, NGO workers were threatened with physical harm. According to the interviewee there were two main problems with these development interventions. First, the location of the proposed water source and piping trails was considered *lulik* (sacred), and disturbing its natural flow and formation without proper recognition and sacrifice was anathema. Second, the time spent within the community by the agencies and NGOs overseeing the project was judged insufficient by the local villagers (Caritas Australia project officer, Dili, July 2012).

Working with local leaders and the population at large, Caritas Australia opened a 12-month consultation process with the community in early 2011. The local leaders included those embodying customary forms of authority, such as the *lia-na'in* and those representing the *bee na'in*; representatives of traditional institutions, such as the Catholic priest; and modern officials including the *xefe aldeia* (hamlet chief), *xefe de suku* (village chief), district administrator and the Policia Nacional de Timor-Leste (PNTL, National Police Force) (Caritas Australia project officer, Dili, July 2012).

The consultation process involved multiple visits by project staff from Dili, who would often stay in the community for days or weeks at a time; community-based meetings; and ceremonial acts. Guided walks or 'surveys' were also undertaken by project staff with customary leaders to identify potential water sources and 'safe' corridors for piping and filtration. Discussions around the community's financial and physical 'contributions' towards the upkeep and maintenance of the system also took place. Disagreement and conflict was also mediated via a number of 'community forums', with discussions often running long into the night. Ultimately, the project was 'given permission' by the community and marked by a ceremony involving community elders, the sacrifice of a buffalo, and the signing of a contract. In recognition of the project's ongoing connection with both the natural and ancestral domains another ceremony was held upon completion of the building stage of the project. Besides recognition, the ceremony also called for the continued favour of the water spirits and of the ancestors:

Yeah, to get permission, like the ceremony and then we start a project. But when we finish we also invite again the leader to make a ceremony, that hopefully the water will run properly, will run to follow the pipe.

PROJECT OFFICER, Dili, July 2012

Finally, a number of community members were trained to maintain the system. A community contribution scheme was also established to cover the running costs. Several months on from the project's completion, the water system is used and maintained by the community, with little to no outside assistance.

Strong parallels can be drawn between this case and the water management studies of Lisa Palmer in the district of Baucau (Palmer 2010). Indeed, Palmer's work articulates 'a vibrant customary sector built on richly complicated processes of exchange, which are also enmeshed in complicated relationships with the state and market sectors'. Again, part of this exchange involves local elders and those representing the *bee ni'an*, government officials, private-sector water officials, and the wider community all coming together in annual ceremonies of invocation and sacrifice before deciding on where the forthcoming year's water flows will be directed and at what levels. Underground channels and 'modern' pipelines are then accessed to deliver water to nominated areas while local springs on conduits are managed in accordance with local tradition. Significantly, those representing the *bee ni'an*, and operating in recognition of ancestral instruction, may deny a request to divert spring water even if this request is made by modern agencies. While this practice continues to regulate access and control to water resources in a way that gives locals a sense of continuum with the past, it has been modified in recent years in order to recognize modern claims.

In thinking about how development orthodoxy might be able to learn from these experiences, perhaps the single most important factor behind the project was that the process and practices underpinning it held intrinsic value and meaning for the people of the community—they arose largely from the dominant customary ways of being. Moreover, these practices drew upon, and integrated with, prevailing social values and beliefs, recognizing multiple authorities and ways of knowing the world, including those in which water has a spirit and a life of its own, or where the process of water filtration is something that operates across physical, ancestral, and environmental domains. Such approaches contrast strongly with what often appears to be an un-reflexive modernity on the part of the development industry, which frequently attempts to introduce and operationalize external practices through a myriad of integrative means. Put another way, rather than seeking to overlay customary practices and beliefs with a modern technological approach to safe drinking water, project staff allowed for their work to be discussed, contested, reinterpreted, and reworked in ways that maintained meaning for the local community.

Another factor underlying the apparent success of these programmes lay in their capacity to relocate development's decision-making functions from those

located outside the community to those already operating within. The NGOs' ceding of control of elements of the development process allowed the community to interpret the proceedings with differing levels of adherence, recognition, and legitimacy which, in turn, ensured the community's capacity to mediate change and maintain social cohesion. In the case of the water filtration system in Ainaro, this included long-running community-led forums in which ideas or 'logics' could be debated and contested—a space for disagreement. This was ultimately reinforced through the establishment of an internally regulated maintenance regime and contribution scheme.

It is also worth highlighting the time taken to consult, design, and implement each step of the projects presented here. As already noted, a prolonged and intimate engagement (of the type seen in these cases) is all too often the exception rather than the rule, due to the demands of the 'project life cycle'. However, the lengthy periods of engagement appear to have been critical to facilitating discussion, debate, and the contestation of new ideas. In this sense, Caritas seems to have helped create localized spaces in which different patterns of integration and authority could be negotiated and adapted to suit local ways.

Peace-Building and Prisoner Reintegration in Becora and Ermera

The second case study is Caritas Australia's work in peace-building and prisoner reintegration. Operating out of the Becora and Emera prisons, and working across both modern and customary systems of authority and justice, the programme seeks to address a number of social tensions associated with the release and reintegration of a prisoner (from the state justice sector) back into their 'home' community. The first of these tensions relates the 'lack of meaning' and 'imbalance' commonly associated with modern or outsider judicial processes. For instance, a person who has served a prison term is deemed by state institutions to have 'repaid their debt to society'. However, balance is yet to be restored to the community and additional processes—prescribed by customary law—may therefore be required. The second aspect of the programme seeks to minimize social isolation, dislocation, and the threat of ongoing conflict. This is equally relevant to the returning prisoner, the victim, and their families. The third concern relates to the way prison life is perceived by those within the community. Indeed, for those victims of crime (and their families) who are struggling to secure basic needs, the notion that one is 'punished' by being placed into a state facility—where accommodation, clothing, and meals are provided—can be deeply troubling. Finally, the programme seeks to min-



FIGURE 2 *Map of Dili (including Becora) and Ermera Administrative Districts.*
 SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM GOVERNMENT OF TIMOR-LESTE (2014)
 'ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISION' ('DISTRICTS' AND 'SUB-DISTRICTS')

imize impact on social cohesion and security more broadly (Caritas Australia team leader, Dili, July 2012).

Like the clean-water initiatives in Manutaci, the peace-building and reintegration programme actively draws together customary leaders such as the *lia-na'in* (spiritual leader) and *liurai* (political leader), and modern officials and authorities. Locally, this includes the *xefe aldeia* and *xefe de suku*; at the state level, prison officials and guards, representatives of the Ministry of Social Solidarity, PNTL, and the NGO itself. Newly released prisoners are delivered into the hands of Caritas and the Ministry of Social Solidarity, who notify the *xefe aldeia* and *xefe de suku* of the individual's impending return to the community. The *xefe aldeia* and *xefe de suku* then arrange with the customary elders of the village 'to do the traditional custom to receive them back into the community' (Caritas Australia team leader, Dili, July 2012).

From an operational perspective the local 'custom' has much in common with the ancient practice of *nahe biti*.¹⁰ Structured around an unfurled woven mat, *nahe biti* brings together aggrieved parties to discuss and debate issues, resolve conflict, and, ultimately, mend relationships. The significance of the mat is that once unfurled, it is not rolled up again until a resolution has been

10 *Nahe biti* literally translates as 'stretching, lying, or rolling the mat'. According to Babo-Soares (2004) the concept of *nahe biti* 'can be found in almost all ethno-linguist groups in East-Timor'. While its application varies across the nation, the philosophy underpinning its use is commonly understood to be 'the healing of past mistakes' and 'the restoration of harmony': the balance of *hun* and *rohan*. Also see Tilman's (2012) comments on *nahe biti* in connection with the customary authority of the *liurai*.

found or consensus reached (Lambourne 2010). The ceremonial procedures associated with *nahe biti* include the reception of perpetrators and victims; the facilitation of testimony, admissions, and questions; encouraging humility and expressions of remorse; establishing community consensus; and proscribing symbolic acts of contrition and restitution (Grenfell 2005–2006:32–3). Unlike modern judicial processes, which focus almost exclusively on the establishment of guilt and punishment, *nahe biti* also concerns itself with the restoration of ‘balance’ and social cohesion. Interestingly, while *nahe biti* had traditionally been the preserve of familial and social domains, its application expanded during the civil war of 1974 to include political divisions and acts of violence (Babo-Soares 2004:15–23). As a result, representatives of modern forms, such as the prison officials seen here, are able to testify and explain to the community what punishments have already been administered and what hardships have already been endured. Similarly, family members and social service providers are able to explain what impact the act or acts have had on the victim, the family, and the wider community (Caritas Australia team leader, Dili, July 2012).

Ultimately, the *lia-na'in*, in consultation with the ancestors and other customary elders, prescribes a series of restorative actions, which serve to restore balance to the community and facilitate reintegration. At the completion of these acts, customary structures once again support and, where necessary, reinforce the *lia-na'in*'s prescription through a variety of ceremonial events and community-based sanctions. According to Caritas, of the one hundred former prisoners to have undergone this process almost all have been successfully reintegrated back into their community, with few instances of conflict or reprisal. Moreover, many of the victims and their families felt satisfied with the process, which afforded them the opportunity to explain how the perpetrator's actions continued to affect them, their family, and the community—something which they felt the state system did not readily permit (Caritas Australia team leader, Dili, July 2012).

Intriguingly, while this approach to peace-building and development appears to be almost unique in the Timorese context, it is not without precedent. Indeed, the Community Reconciliation Process (CRP) undertaken by the Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação de Timor Leste (CAVR, Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation) between 2002 and 2004 followed a very similar pattern (Kent 2004:8–11; Schlicher 2005:20–30). Working across both customary and modern forms of law, the CRP was a unique attempt at resolving thousands of so-called ‘less serious’ crimes¹¹ and reinte-

11 These crimes included acts such as assault, arson, or theft (Grenfell 2005–06:33).

grating victims and perpetrators¹² back into their communities (Kent 2004:8–11; CAVR 2005:19–22; Schlicher 2005:20–30). At its conclusion, the CRP had successfully completed 1,371 cases and attracted the participation of some 40,000 people from across Timor-Leste (Kent 2004:8–11; CAVR 2005:19–22; Schlicher 2005:20–30; Grenfell 2005–2006:33).

Returning to the question of what factors may have assisted the design, delivery, and outcomes of these programmes, it is clear that the underlying knowledge and respect for customary ‘ways of being’ was again critical. Indeed, the key aspects of each programme were not found in newly constructed and predominately imported institutions, but in a deeply ingrained customary practice which, through evolution and adaptation, has remained relevant to the East Timorese ‘ways of being and doing’ for centuries (Babo-Soares 2004:30). Constituting ‘reconciliation’, ‘reintegration’, and ‘development’ across customary and modern forms meant that much of the disjuncture and dysfunction associated with drawing from one form (typically the modern) in the place of, or with a disregard to, customary ‘ways of being and doing’ was reduced. Here, then, modern institutions appear to have been most relevant to local people when interpreted through the prism of customary practice. It is also apparent that the community’s capacity to interpret, control, and mediate key aspects of each programme—even if only in a small and momentary way—was critical to sustaining support and relevance.

Gender Programming in Lautem and Oecussi

The third case study involves an alternative approach to gender programming and women’s empowerment that is framed and underpinned by modern institutional processes and customary frameworks. Operating out of several villages in the districts of Lautem and Oecussi, the Women in Traditional Justice Program offers women the opportunity to learn about the state-based legal processes and then translate that learning back into the local context. On one level, the programme seeks to use this learning to create local spaces in which women can negotiate access and input into male-dominated decision-making processes and domains. On another, it also seeks to help the community to identify social transformations occurring at the national level (such as the changing ‘roles’ of women), then develop ways in which these changes can be sustainably incorporated into local structures and norms (Caritas Aus-

¹² Also known as ‘deponents’ (Kent 2004:8–11).



FIGURE 3 *Map of Oecusse and Lautem Administrative Districts.*

SOURCE: ADAPTED FROM GOVERNMENT OF TIMOR-LESTE (2014)
 'ADMINISTRATIVE DIVISION' ('DISTRICTS' AND 'SUB-DISTRICTS')

tralia project officer, Dili, July 2012; Woon 2012:47–8). As one programme officer noted:

They [the male elders] recognize the situation that we are in now, that we are not like before. They are the ones holding culture now. It's not like what they knew from their grandparents or their ancestors. They realize they need to change but they said they will only change if it does not completely destroy their culture—where their culture is from, where the culture is held. That's how they've asked us to balance it. They're willing to do that but don't change it to the point where it's not recognizable or they feel that the culture's dead.

Dili, July 2012

A key feature of the programme is a Dili-based study tour for the women, taking in the national law courts, Parliament, ministerial offices, NGOs, church groups, and other civil society organizations. In many instances, interviews are conducted with officials and comparisons are made between various systems (that is, modern, traditional, and customary). Personal experiences involving the negotiation of 'modern' and 'customary' settings are also related, then drawn out into prolonged discussion. At the conclusion of the tour, the women return to their village and are encouraged to 'tell of what they seen and heard' via a series of facilitated discussions, through existing social structures and forums, and one-on-one interactions (Caritas Australia project officer, Dili, July 2012). In this manner, the programme is sustained and facilitated by 'local engagement in the process of learning' and an 'organic form of

social transformation and development' rather than outsider delivery (Woon 2012:48).

Encouragingly, after seven years and six 'tours', Caritas has observed that spaces are beginning to open up for women to voice their concerns and opinions. Furthermore, they have noted that the roles undertaken by, as well as the attitudes towards, women are changing, albeit in an incremental fashion:

In the discussion of traditional justice they had decisions that operated by men—made by men. Women could not take part. Women would only look after the coffee and all this. They would serve the men sitting on a mat and taking the decision. That's changed. Women are coming in, they are actually sitting down, they are actually giving their opinion. Even though the men are saying 'the final decision is ours' but at least they've already come, they've not just made the coffee, they sit on the mat and they 'give their opinion'.

CARITAS AUSTRALIA PROJECT OFFICER, Dili, July 2012

Moreover:

[t]he men ask for their opinion and the women must [provide their opinion], because the decision must be made by a male, which is the structure of the patriarchal society, they can't lose this but, they need to allow the women to see. The man, the women also wanted to sit on the mat so they hold discussions and they see and they are giving their opinion. Especially on the domestic violence cases of the local community, they are, they're somehow incorporated, accepted. They don't feel that it is a threat to what they think is traditional culture—what they define as this is their culture.

CARITAS AUSTRALIA PROJECT OFFICER, Dili, July 2012

As encouraging as these changes are, it is important to recognize that they are far from comprehensive or 'mainstream'. After all, women still do not possess the requisite authority to 'make decisions' in significant customary settings nor are they in a position to move freely amongst these settings, much less forge their own (Caritas Australia project officer, Dili, July 2012). There is also the danger that issues such as domestic violence will be identified on a gendered basis, resulting in the marginalization of women's voices to particular areas of social debate (Woon 2012:48–9). Beyond this, it is unclear as to what impact, if any, this programme has had on the roles undertaken by men and women within the household, and whether those impacts have been positive or nega-

tive. This point is particularly significant as both Moser (1993) and Kabeer (1994, 2004) have identified the household to be the primary site for the construction of gender roles and power relations. Thus, we cannot truly evaluate this programme in terms of its capacity to reduce the daily gender-based disparities experienced by women until further light has been shone on the household. Despite the ambiguity of this case, the significance of the programme and the shifts that Caritas have witnessed should not be dismissed too quickly—given the dominance of customary structures in Timor-Leste, these are significant adaptations. Moreover, this case suggests that customary structures and institutions are capable of considerable adaptation, provided the pace of progress is maintained by those within the community.

Reflecting on what development might be able to learn from this case, it is worth noting that each of the key factors identified above—being meaning, mediation, and time—are also present here. In this case, the programme's consideration and fundamental respect for customary frameworks and leadership appears to have been significant in securing participation and social traction. Likewise, the programme's capacity to recognize and move between the various domains and structures without attaching values of primacy seems equally important to the programme's longevity. Allowing the community to interpret various aspects of the programme, including the pace of change, also appears to have been critical in opening up new spaces for discussion and debate, while at the same time mediating conflict and social dislocation. In this case, it resulted in progressive participation for women as monitored by local leaders.

Areas of Tension

In presenting a development framework that seeks to integrate itself across customary and modern forms of practice, it is important to acknowledge the challenges that could well emerge. For instance, the community's need to retain social harmony and cohesion may well impinge upon/override the rights and needs of an individual. There is also the potential for existing power structures to be reinforced within a community, with actors appropriating the inputs, processes, or benefits of a project to suit their own interests. Similarly, prevailing social structures and norms could be used to limit representation and participation, or worse, coerce community-based projects for individual or familial benefit. There is also the very real prospect that organizations may be perceived as valorizing customary practices, which, in turn, could jeopardize much-needed funding and political support. Indeed, those development

organizations which depend on the funding and support of national or international human rights-based agencies may well struggle to overcome some of the latter's concerns about the human rights (or wrongs) within customary social formations, and lose their support. There is also a danger in agencies and practitioners viewing and regarding customary practice and authority in operational terms only, that is, as a collection of readymade frameworks and community gatekeepers which can be 'utilized' for the purposes of furthering a particular outsider-directed development agenda. To be clear, this is not what is being argued for here. Rather, it is suggested that development must work to locate spaces in which different actors, driven by place-based concerns, are engaged to negotiate meaningful frameworks of activity (Escobar 2007). Finally, large development organizations and bilateral/multilateral agencies may be concerned about the 'scalability' of such a framework. Again, what is being argued for here is the fundamental recasting of the 'development configuration', so that it is more relevant to the 'processes by which particular social forms emerge and are consolidated or reworked in the everyday lives of people' (Acre and Long 2007:105). While such an approach does not necessarily exclude the concept of scale, it would require a significant reorientation and restructuring of these institutions in their present form.

These and many other problems could emerge from the development framework being advocated here, as each of the above-noted challenges reflect possible points of tension that lie between modern and customary practice. At first glance, the resultant intersection could be problematic: any development framework that seeks to integrate itself across customary and modern patterns of practice would almost assuredly face these very same tensions. However, it is argued that, as we have seen in these case studies, much more can be achieved by acknowledging and working through these tensions than by persisting with orthodox approaches which seek to establish one mode of being at the cost of another. Working in this fashion also seems to go some way towards generating the space for communities to genuinely determine their own future, as it allows for meaningful acts of exchange, negotiation, and mediation that would not otherwise occur.

Conclusion

With the help of three case studies, this article illustrated how notions of development and customary practice could be reinterpreted, reframed, and, most importantly, recast. The justification for considering such a framework is straightforward: the people of Timor-Leste remain deeply connected to the

customary world. Furthermore, the practices, rituals, and authority associated with these 'ways of being' continue to be observed and respected on a daily basis. What's more, such practices are, as these case studies have clearly demonstrated, remarkably robust and adaptable. For some, this reimagining may well challenge the essence of what they consider 'development' to be. It is clear however that, despite the allocation of considerable time and resources, development has struggled to significantly reduce poverty and improve human development in Timor-Leste. Clearly, the answer does not lie in promoting and perpetuating more orthodox approaches, but in exploring alternative modes embedded and mediated by local structures and meaning. Perhaps now is the time for development actors to embrace the challenge of reflecting on their processes, to learn and adapt to their 'on-the-ground' experience.

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