

## ***ACTIVISM AND AID: YOUNG CITIZENS' EXPERIENCES OF DEVELOPMENT AND DEMOCRACY IN TIMOR-LESTE***

### **Review by Paul Hainsworth**

Ann Wigglesworth (2016) *Activism and Aid: Young Citizens' Experiences of Development and Democracy in Timor-Leste*, Monash, Australia: Monash University Publishing.

Ann Wigglesworth's book is quite accessible to the reader. In only 146 pages, she manages to say a lot about the contemporary development of Timor-Leste, the 21<sup>st</sup> century's newest nation-state. An opening chapter provides a useful scene-setting context, taking the reader through a historical odyssey, in which the territory underwent Portuguese colonisation dating back to the early 16<sup>th</sup> century and a much more brutal Indonesian re-colonisation from 1974-1999. Thereafter, the book's focus is upon aid, activism, development and democracy in the post-conflict years. As such, then, the book is a modern study as the author becomes engaged with the territory having been in the right place at the right time to ground her research and observations. Subsequent chapters cover a range of key issues, tracing how the country develops and engages with its new-found self-determination. In particular, the emphases are upon some of the challenges that the emergent nation-state has faced: humanitarian aid; civil society emergence and growth; nation-state building; custom and tradition; youth conflict and urbanisation; gender; language identity; and participation in local development.

The book is a case study of Timor-Leste, but it has a wider, comparative appeal in that the themes explored have a resonance beyond the territory – themes such as the nature of international intervention and development, the role of active and participatory citizenship, the influence of donors, and the balance and imbalance between local and global non-governmental organisations (NGOs). According to the author, 'The experiences of Timor-Leste are not unique but, as a newly emerging nation in

the twenty-first century, Timor-Leste is a unique case study' (7). Wigglesworth is critical of the way in which – in post-conflict Timor-Leste - humanitarian aid has impacted upon the growth of civil society in the territory, depicting this process as a new invasion. In this respect, she points to the constraints of top-down donor requirements that served to undermine the role of grassroots activism – in effect turning local organisations into *de facto* service delivery partners. Thus, there was a 'lack of participation of East Timorese in the early overall humanitarian aid response' (38). As a result, the author notes a marginalisation of local NGOs and, for instance, the setting of unrealistic goals in the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), a process that might have been avoided via a more participatory community engagement and bottom-up approach. Again here, the book lambasts incorrect assumptions on high and 'donor-designed projects based on their own organisational priorities rather than those of the local organisations they aim to support' (40).

Moreover, the elected government is accused of going along with this scenario from the start of post-conflict, nation-state rebuilding and therefore contributing to an unhelpful gap between itself and civil society. Thereafter, the weak engagement between national policy making and the Timorese population is deemed to have continued to constrain development in the subsequent years. Without doubt too, development in the territory was seriously derailed in the 2006-08 years, when violence broke out in the capital, Dili, with resentments, poverty, unemployment, frustrations, and internal rivalries to the fore, as thousands of internally displaced persons retreated from the capital to nearby camps. Nonetheless, as Wigglesworth explains, Timor-Leste moved on somewhat from this crisis and some positives could be noted such as, for example, increasing oil revenues, addressing of veterans' pensions, conflict management as regards 2006-08 problems, better life expectancy, some infrastructural building progress, closure of IDP (Internally Displaced Persons) camps, better female representation in local government, enhanced national self-reliance (as donors retreated) and greater stability in the territory.

However, a key narrative throughout the book is the author's insistence that the Timorese people deserved better participation and say in their country's development. For instance, in Chapter 5 ['Participation in governance and local development'], she contends that 'every citizen has the right to participate in developments that affect them' (112). But, she argues, 'members of the population have little access to decision-making structures and the large poverty in rural areas is largely unchanged' (112). Again, the accusation is that decisions too often have been made about development in the country by people and institutions who/that do not really understand the nature of Timor-Leste. In short, top down Western models of development call the shots and in effect limit participation, meaningful consultation and the growth of civil society agency.

The book is skilfully written by an author combining NGO experiences, activist leanings and academic research skills. As a result, Wigglesworth has a lot to bring to the table: it's a well-rounded piece of work from someone who clearly has a grasp of (and sympathy for) the problems facing Timor-Leste in a post-conflict setting. Moreover, a bonus is the well-chosen, black and white, photographic input. There are photos of individuals, activists and individuals – i.e. Timorese featured in the book, and who are working on the ground on development issues in Timor-Leste. A potted summary comes with each photo, outlining their role and providing a personal touch to the narrative.

Overall, whilst pointing to the problems facing contemporary Timor-Leste, the author avoids any simplistic portrayal of the country as a failed state. Rather, the complexity of an emergent, post-conflict, post-colonial, nation-state is explored – an entity that has had to juggle with tradition and modernisation, ruralism and Dili-centred urbanisation, localism and globalism.

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