

# life after a tumultuous birth

*The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste won independence from Indonesia in 1999 and nationhood in 2002 but only after a blood-bath. Cecily McNeill tells of her recent visit and of how the Timorese people are developing their communities and country.*

Maria Olivia (Meta) de Jesus Sousa's law studies were interrupted by the conflict of 2006 in Timor-Leste but now, a decade on, her brief has grown.

As the wife of the leader of the village of Samalari in Timor-Leste's Baucau subdistrict, she runs a programme for mothers and children called "The Village loves Mothers and Children" (SHIO). It is an Alola Foundation programme that helps mothers get to hospital to give birth or to take their sick children. All the vehicles in the 443-person village are on a register so that they can be available for transport to the hospital.

Education about child health is important for this village, as it is for the young nation of slightly more than one million people, whose infant mortality statistics are symptomatic of its traumatic birth. An estimated 58 per cent of under five-year-olds suffer from malnutrition, rising to 73 per cent in the Bobonaro district in the north-west.

## beginnings

East Timor is likely to have been settled by Chinese and Malay people but was first colonised by the Portuguese 450 years ago. When crisis struck Portugal in 1974 they pulled out of Timor without instituting any

systems for self-governance. Within a few months neighbouring Indonesia had invaded, killing a third of the population. For the next 25 years East Timor existed under the Indonesian repressive regime. Numbers of its young people formed a resistance force and used their knowledge of the land's rugged terrain to combat the invader's tanks.

During this time the world turned a blind eye to what was happening in Timor, no doubt aided by the secrecy imposed by Indonesia. In 1999 Indonesia's new president, Yusuf Habibie, agreed to allow the East Timorese a referendum. It resulted in an overwhelming vote for independence. In the last 15 years Timor-Leste has been getting back on its feet after Indonesia's brutal withdrawal.

## developing local governance

The present government is spending \$300 million (the country has adopted US currency) over eight years as part of a process of decentralisation to involve its 442 villages in self-governance and development.

This plan is modelled on similar schemes in Uganda, Indonesia and the Philippines. Timor-Leste is implementing it in three phases — the first 149 villages were completed

in 2013 and the remainder will be finished by 2017. Each village gets from \$40,000 to \$70,000 annually to develop systems for growing its assets. The amount is reckoned according to the village's proximity to the heart of the sub-district and the degree of poverty.

## local implementation

Meta's husband and Samalari village leader, Rui Sequera, has established a water collection and distribution plant which makes the most of the climate's six-month-long rainy season. He has planted vegetables in raised beds, which are hand-watered through a central vertical pipe stuffed with rocks.

In consultation with a representative group, Rui is working also to develop industry in the village, using the carpentry and mechanics skills of its people. Tourism is a strong possibility, given the country's rich history.

Meanwhile Meta continues her legal studies through the national university in the capital, Dili, while raising their three children and organising the SHIO.

## struggle over oil resources

The Timorese people welcome visits from the Australian friendship groups, a network of shire-based groups to which they are connected

through village or district groups. But at the diplomatic level friendship with Australia is strained by Australia's refusal to give Timor-Leste an equal share of the oil fields under the Timor sea. Australia negotiated with Indonesia to share governance of this stretch of water. When Timor gained independence it also began negotiations with Australia. The latter refused to relinquish its hold on the deep trench to the south, which critics say should be in Timor's hands. The current oil reserve is believed to have a limited life of perhaps just 10 years more.

This diplomatic sore festers through continued protests in Timor-Leste's capital and in Australia's main cities where many Timorese fled during the war with Indonesia. Numerous references to the Timorese fighting alongside Australian troops against the Japanese during World War II seem lost in Australia's determination to deny its poorer neighbour a more just share of the oil.

### grinding poverty

What Timor-Leste earns from its oil assets is clearly going into the country's development but the nation is far behind in its growth. There are examples of desperate poverty everywhere a visitor looks.

Tourism could become a vital industry but few hotels outside Dili offer a standard most visitors expect. The service in restaurants is often slow and menu offerings fail to deliver. Clean drinking water is available only in bottles.

The roading system is another difficulty for the tourist. Road-building expertise is challenged by the rugged environment and many roads are undermined in the rains. On the plus side, engineers are exploring ways to stabilise the land during the rainy season by building deep cement trenches beside major roads around Dili to direct rainwater away from the tarmac. In the limestone-rich Baucau region, the roads appear less prone to the potholes ubiquitous in other areas.



### jobs are scarce

The lack of Industry shows in high unemployment statistics. A proposal to build a cement factory to capitalise on the high quality limestone around Baucau promises to lift that region out of poverty. It will allow for training in Australia for about 500 people and eventually result in about 1,000 industry jobs. Some local concern about appropriate environmental protection could scupper a possible deal. However the Western Australian Buckeridge Group of Companies says its surveys show 95 percent of the local population are in favour.

### hospitality

One thing is clear to the visitor — this tiny nation may be materially poor but its heart is large and open. When a boat-load of asylum seekers destined for Australia washed up on Timor-Leste shores they were invited

to stay. But they moved on when they saw that they would add to the poverty. Timor-Leste is a nation of resilient people. Meta and Rui and their village represent the strength of spirit and ingenuity that hauled the nation to independence after centuries of neglect and massacre.

There is much to be done but with the best that democracy, communal vision and ingenuity can offer they may well achieve a nationhood the rest of the world can admire. ■

*Cecily McNeill visited Timor-Leste with representatives of the Melbourne Friends of Baucau, Friends of Vemasse and Friends of Ossuale — all linked to local councils. These groups fundraise but their main interest is in being good neighbours and getting to know Timorese on a personal level.*

Photos by Cecily McNeill