

Changing the narrative

Cheryl-Anne Stephens on voluntourism in Timor



Every Australian school holiday they come, not for the beautiful beaches, rugged mountainscapes or abundant marine life. They come, like me 18 years ago, intent on doing something to make the world a better place. They arrive in Timor-Leste with matching t-shirts identifying where they are from and what they intend to do. They are bright young people with enormous generosity of spirit.

Most groups, after a quick visit to the Resistance Museum and Cristo Rei in Dili, undertake a long, arduous journey to a rural school intent on contributing to their school's project. When I come across these school groups, I welcome them warmly to Timor, give them my business card and invite them to visit our school, Dili International School, explaining that our English-speaking students would be delighted to provide them with

an insight into Timorese culture, history and current challenges.

Dili International School is a social enterprise established in 2002 in the front room of our director's Dili home. At the time Timor-Leste was governed by UNTAET having just become the world newest nation, voting for its independence from Indonesia in 1999. An independence that came at enormous cost to this tiny country with thousands of Timorese killed or forcibly relocated to West Timor, infrastructure destroyed and human capital decimated as Indonesian public servants, and business people returned to their homeland. Dili International School currently has 320 students, substantially more than its zero enrolments in 2006 when after a small period of peace civil unrest once again erupted in Timor-Leste. A K-12 school delivering, in a Timorese context the Australian Curriculum through the pedagogical framework of the International Baccalaureate Primary and Middle Years Program and, courtesy of Haileybury College, the Victorian Certificate of Education, providing our students with an ATAR.

The majority of Dili International students identify as Timorese. All speak the lingua franca Tetum, most also speak the national language Portuguese and the language of the most recent coloniser Indonesian. They are with us as their parents recognise the enormous economic benefits of being able to speak English and are fortunate enough to be able to provide their children with the opportunity to do so. Moreover, in a country where the education system is in its infancy and operating with limited funding, Dili International School has a well-resourced and established curriculum, well-trained teachers and importantly provides the opportunity of entrance into an Australian University. Dili International School now has Timorese alumni studying in all major Australian universities.

Amongst these Timorese students are a smattering of Expat children whose parents are here capacity building. There is the Nepalese student whose ophthalmologist father removes cataracts, those children whose Australian Defence Force parents support the training of the Timorese military or those whose parents are executives in non-government organisations such as Oxfam or the World Bank. Without Dili International School's existence, the ability for these groups to capacity build would be severely restricted as without their family nearby those that build capacity would be likely to undertake shorter and subsequently less effective stays.

In most cases, my invite to immersion groups is met with a polite refusal; a tight and inflexible schedule given as the excuse. I became perplexed and saddened by these constant refusals. I had led similar immersion trips before and knew that in general, the schedules were flexible, particularly in Timor. I was confused as to why you would not prioritise the opportunity to visit a

success story like Dili International School in a country when so many other projects struggle to flourish. Why wouldn't you want to speak to young Timorese people who by virtue of speaking the same language as you could effectively share their perspectives of the issues that surround them, problems about which they are passionate? I then realised that it was not only that we did not fit into their timetables; it was also because we did not fit their narrative.

There are many papers written on the negative impacts of voluntourism; my view is as long as it is done correctly, it can be mutually beneficial to both parties. For many young Australians, these trips are life-changing experiences that transform them into more empathetic and confident individuals. However, for the Timorese, these trips run the risk of proliferating learned helplessness through the completion of projects that could be done by local people and there is also the possibility of undermining the local economy by importing goods tax-free that could be purchased in-country. However, for me, the most significant concern about voluntourism is that in order to fulfil the narrative that provides the trip's purpose, people are only exposed to one perspective of the country.

Timor-Leste is an emerging nation. While the quality of life here is improving, it is still considered to be one of the poorest countries in the world. There is though



a vast chasm between the quality of life in rural and urban areas, the rich and poor and men and women. If immersion school groups avoid visiting one of the many fancy restaurants, hotels, shopping centres or private schools in Dili, then these chasms are not made evident and are unlikely to be closed. It is quite possible that students from Australia could visit Timor-Leste and never really grasp the complexity of the problem of wealth distribution,

assuming that everyone here lives below the poverty line and needs rescuing. Engendering this one-dimensional perspective of a country does not allow informed decision making for future Australian leaders; it perpetuates the white saviour complex. So, if you find yourself in the fortunate position of facilitating a voluntourism, immersion trip I challenge you to change the narrative by journeying to the other side of the chasm.

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