

East Timor Friendship Agreements

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Presented by Richard Aedy

Australia and East Timor are closely intertwined - we follow the fledgling country's fortunes, provide humanitarian aid, send police and soldiers in a crisis, and help rebuild damaged infrastructure.

But the relationship between the two countries runs deeper than that.

The new nation is also being supported by a growing number of 'friendship agreements' – community-to-community relationships usually involving local councils. There are now more than 40 agreements between the two countries... and they're making quite an impact.

Dr Rebecca Spence has been researching the dynamics and progress of these groups.

Guests

Dr Rebecca Spence

Centre for Peace Studies University of New England

Pat Jessen

Friends of Suai Co-ordinator Port Phillip Council

Robin Erwin

Friends of Manatuto (linked with the Kingston Council)

RA: Now you've been studying these friendship agreements. How did they begin?

RS: They have their roots back in WWII when Timorese villagers fought alongside Australian soldiers battling the Japanese and 40,000 Timorese were killed in that endeavour. So after WWII, the Australian government dropped hundreds of leaflets over East Timor saying, your friends will never forget you. But, unfortunately in the ensuing years under Indonesian occupation, successive Australian governments did forget them. So in 1999, the Victorian Local Government Association sent 40 delegates to be participants in the humanitarian ballot and in observing the ballot for independence. These participants observed the ballot and then they were also involved in witnessing the Black September, the violent aftermath, and they sent humanitarian support. Then later they decided they decided to continue that support through setting up these friendship agreements as a way of rebuilding trust and building relationship.

RA: We know, many of us, about sister-city-type arrangements. Are friendship agreements the same kind of thing?

RS: I think they're very different because they're based on the notion of building good neighbourhoods, building good international relationships, peaceful co-existence and of course they do have, in the future, economic and trade benefits but they're not premised on that at all.

RA: And the sister-city relationships are more about trade really, aren't they?

RS: Yes, they're much more about putting each other's flags up outside the council offices and exploiting trade opportunities.

RA: All right, well now let's meet Pat Jessen from the Port Phillip Council, a member of Friends of Suai, one of the longest running groups in Australia. Suai became notorious because of the terrible massacre there in 1999. Pat, explain for us where Suai is.

PJ: It's in the West, on the West Timor border in East Timor.

RA: It's actually even further than Maliana. I went to Maliana in 2002, just after independence. It took all day to get there and Suai is further. I know the needs in East Timor are almost overwhelming. What are you doing to help rebuild Suai?

PJ: Well we've had an ongoing relationship with Suai since the year 2000 so we have a 10-year agreement, which I think is a very important aspect of the friendship city agreements, because we're not just flying in and setting up a project for two years. It's an ongoing relationship.

Port Phillip Council has assisted in refurbishing a community centre and we're providing support to a very dynamic youth centre that has established itself over the years. We are funding a number of activities including a nutrition project. Nutrition's a very, very big issue in East Timor. People still are suffering from malnutrition, not enough food on the table. There have been big problems with agriculture; with drought and floods and cyclonic winds since I think about 2002, so food is a big issue. And also training; we've been involved in some computer training, some mechanics training, some women's training in sewing at the community centre. But I should add that one of the things that we see as most important is community development and the building of a committee in East Timor to form those people-to-people links.

RA: Now you're clearly very engaged and I now that you were in Suai in February. How were things then? This is before the riots in Dili.

PJ: Well I came back with a very optimistic view of East Timor. I felt that as I drove that 10 hours to Suai there was a lot of agricultural development. I was told that some of the fields had begun to be planted again. Some of them hadn't been cultivated since Indonesian times. I saw a lot of livestock, which for a cow I think it's about \$US50

per cow. I saw a lot of those running across the road and in the fields so I was feeling quite optimistic and there seemed to be a very positive attitude to the development that was happening in Suai with our committee and the people there and there were a lot of ideas; lots of ideas in the pipeline for agricultural development, education opportunities, that sort of thing.

So I came back feeling very positive but obviously there were much deeper undercurrents. I was aware that people in the districts, as I said, the issue of food and food in your stomach, is going to be the first and foremost thing and that wasn't happening and there were a lot of things that weren't rolling out from the centre.

RA: Now communications in East Timor can be, well, pretty dodgy, how do you as a group stay in touch with the people in Suai?

PJ: Well it has been a very big issue and, as I say, we're into our seventh year now of relationships with Suai. In the beginning it was quite difficult. The mobile phone system did get up and running reasonably early on but there was a transfer over from Australian Telecom to Timor Telecom and there were some hiccups there slowly but surely, and I say slowly, we had assisted with the landline installation and now we're operating with mobile phone and email, and the email over the last 12 months has really deepened our ability to be able to communicate. It's been great.

RA: Now let's meet a member of a different friendship group. Robin Erwin's a member of the Kingston Council Group. Robin, welcome.

RE: Thank you.

RA: Which town are you supporting?

RE: We're supporting Manatuto. It's located about 50kms from Dili to the East of Dili, on the North coast, about halfway between Dili and the next major town of Bacaw.

RA: Right. I believe one the first projects you supported was very modest, about the cost of a music CD, but it made a huge difference.

RE: Yes, we had a request. There was a US peacecorp worker there who had a good rapport with the local people and he'd been involved with a local pottery co-op. They had approached him and said that they needed some pottery cones, these cones you put in a kiln and when they melt the kiln's hot enough to fire their pottery. They couldn't get them and they requested that we supplied them and they did, they only cost about \$30 for a couple of dozen, and we were able to get someone else who was going to Timor to hand deliver them to the group and, yeah, they've made a big difference to the group.

The group, they're a co-operative so it's supporting them to earn an income, a small group, and the things that they were making were things like water filters - they have very poor water in Timor, a lot of pollution, so it's helping the community there, and also pottery stoves which use low fuel. There's a lack of fuel there and a lot of trees being cut down so people can cook. So we felt that that was a small cost to provide a lot of benefit.

RA: You've become more ambitious since then. There's a water project, isn't there?

RE: Yes, we've completed two water projects since then. We knew we wanted to do something about water. We weren't sure how to go about it. I was able to contact someone through Oxfam who was working on water projects, Mathew Bond, I think he spoke on your program...

RA: Yes, we've had Mathew on the program.

RE: He was implementing this water project throughout rural Timor but not in Manatuto and the project involved getting a community to all come on board. Everyone in the community has to sign up and commit to being involved in planning the project, what sort of water system they want or can be implemented there, to actually installing it and to maintaining it in the long-term. So we were able to connect firstly one village, which was adjacent to the main town of Manatuto. Manatuto does have a water supply so we were just able to get the people there actually, not us, to dig the trenches, lay the pipes and connect the homes in the other village to the Manatuto town supply.

RA: That sounds really impressive. On Life Matters this morning our guests are Robin Erwin, who's a community member of the Friends of Manatuto which is based at the Kingston Council. Manatuto's about 50km from Dili to the East, it's along the coast. Also Pat Jessen, who's Co-ordinator of the Friends of Suai and that's a Port Phillip Council initiative. We also have with us Dr Rebecca Spence from the Centre for Peace Studies at the University of New England.

Rebecca, if I could come back to you, you've been listening to Robin and Pat talk about their groups in East Timor, but you've also talked to people in the friendship groups in East Timor too. Is it a one-way street in these relationships?

RS: No, definitely not. We just finished interviewing 17 different committees, we finished that in April, and all spoke of the incredible joy they got out of being connected with communities and individuals in Australia. They saw the benefits flowing both ways in that Australia was providing them with much-needed, for example, birthing kits, playground equipment, skills and training, tertiary and secondary scholarships, but the Timorese were also teaching the Australians about celebrating different cultures, learning different languages, the

importance of community and how to plan and work with people who are less fortunate than yourself in the process of development.

- RA: Actually, Pat, can I ask you about that. What do you get out of doing this?
- PJ: What do I get out of it? I think the whole issue of international relations is very rich and I think trying to learn to understand the depths of the relationships, the complexities in the communities and the relationships that are running between people, for me I find that very rewarding, especially when you feel that you're building issues of trust and that's what happens when you're involved in a relationship for such a long time of course.
- RA: Rebecca, I want to come back to you for this last one. What's your evaluation? Are these agreements actually measurably improving the lives of people in East Timor?
- RS: Definitely. Everyone we talked to viewed the agreement, not just as a 10-year process, but as an ongoing process of rebuilding trust. Trust to the Timorese is very important and they see this re-establishment of international relations at a community level as a key indicator that Australians are interested in keeping Timor secure, in contributing to Timorese development. And I think that the projects are in various stages of evolution and communication is a difficult challenge, but there are very many innovative and creative responses to communication problems and on both sides of the agreement everybody is incredibly committed and enthusiastic about the progress. I think one key indicator is the fact that, even after this latest crisis, all the agreements are up and running and people are travelling regularly backwards and forwards.
- RA: Part of the strength of it, it seems to me, is that though sometimes things can be testy between the two governments, this is empowering ordinary people and making connections between those ordinary people.
- RS: Yes, definitely. Building up a broad ground source for peace from the bottom up. Absolutely.
- RA: Thank you very much for that, Rebecca, and also Pat and Robin, thanks for joining us this morning.