



**Peskiza foun kona-ba**  
**Novas investigações sobre**  
**New research on**  
**Penelitian baru tentang**

**Timor-Leste**

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**Vol I**

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## Here to help: Exploring the motivational interests of international development workers in Timor-Leste

Sam Carroll-Bell<sup>48</sup>

It's another warm evening in Dili and I find myself deep in conversation with an international development volunteer who has been working with a gender advocacy organisation for a little over six months. As I pour each of us a cup of coffee, she begins to tell me about how she came to be in her current position. Over the next hour or so I learn that this is just the latest in a long line of gender orientated positions (both as a professional and a volunteer) that she has undertaken in various countries. I ask her to explain what draws her to this line of work? She tells me that:

At the top of the list it's that people matter, humankind matters to me. Within that, womankind matters a lot because I'm a woman, and for me, it's authentic to do work with women and to raise the voice of women worldwide, and young women as well... So, people matter and I have never been a dollar chaser. I'm not someone who's ever really climbed the career ladder from the perspective of making money. I probably couldn't care less about money.

A little while later the conversation circles back to the topic of motivation and my guest tells me that there was a time where she found the 'development worker' label uncomfortable as it denoted a level of selflessness and altruism that didn't quite ring true for her. She has since come to embrace the term as being somewhat representative of the many complexities and contradictions to be found in development:

Over the last 40 years or so, I have become less and less inclined to *believe* in development although I clearly still do believe that there is a need to do something positive to help certain people and countries. But I also think that me going to work in development is more about me than them... [I]t's not altruistic, it's me wanting to feel good about contributing to something meaningful, and putting my energies where they are appreciated... [Ultimately] people are helped and supported and positive changes are made but I don't kid myself that I am being altruistic.

In addition to highlighting the various challenges associated with defining just who and what an international development worker is, this conversation introduces the main subject matter of this article; that is, the motivational interests of international development workers operating in the post-conflict state of Timor-Leste. While it observes these workers to be genuinely concerned with, if not firmly committed to, improving the material well-being of individuals and communities in Timor-Leste, it also documents how these concerns frequently intersect with, and are underpinned by, a range of highly personal interests that broadly seek to establish, extend or reassert a sense of meaning to the workers' life-world.<sup>49</sup> Though this is unlikely to

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<sup>49</sup> Drawing on Cohen and Arato's conceptualization, here the term 'life-world' refers to 'the reservoir of implicitly known traditions, the background of assumptions that are embedded in language and culture and drawn upon by individuals in everyday life' (Cohen and Arato 1994, 427). The 'life-world' should therefore be seen as an analytical construct that

surprise many of those working in the field, it is in elucidating and documenting these interests that this research seeks to deepen our understanding about those who 'do development' in places like Timor-Leste. Learning more about what motivates these individuals and how these interests may be similar to, or be different from, those in the communities with whom they are working provides both the study and practice of development with the opportunity to develop a more nuanced understanding of the development *arena* along with those who operate within it. This article serves to draw attention to one aspect of the worker's being as well providing a prompt for further research.

Methodologically, this article draws upon primary research data that was collected during the period August – November 2016. Throughout this time, 30 in-depth semi-structured interviews were conducted with international development workers operating in four areas of developmental activity, namely: (i) Agriculture, Food Security and Nutrition; (ii) Education and Training; (iii) Gender Equality and Empowerment; and (iv) Water, Sanitation and Hygiene. Reflective in their approach, these interviews sought to explore the lived experience of international development workers based in Timor-Leste in order to provide ethnographic data for analysis and understanding. The interview process was acute awareness of the sensitivities involved and the need for confidentiality. As a result, most interviews were conducted outside of the participant's workplace. Where consent was provided, the interview was also recorded and later transcribed. All of the data presented in this article has been de-identified at the request of the research participants so as to preserve their anonymity. Readers should also note that this article represents one aspect of a broader PhD research agenda that examines the lived experience and epistemological assumptions of international development workers operating in Timor-Leste.

Following a brief literature review, this article will outline four of the more commonly cited areas of motivational interest: *Purposeful Employment*; *Social Justice*; *Enacting Belief*; and *Self-Exploration*. In so doing this paper observes that help, much like the practice of development itself, is a multifaceted human activity involving a wide variety of intersecting interests and motivations.

### **Literature, clarifications and limitations**

In seeking to learn more about the motivational interests of international development workers in Timor-Leste, this article has much in common with the various *actor-orientated frameworks* advocated by Long (1989, 1990, 2004), Arce (1993), Olivier de Sardan (2005), Lewis and Mosse (2006), and the *anthropology of development* literature. While differences of opinion can be found across this literature, many of these frameworks present development as an inherently social activity that unfolds in local spaces and which comprises a diverse range of actors, interests and worldviews. They suggest that significant ethnographic research is needed in order 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' (Mosse and Lewis 2006:9). To that end, it has become quite common for anthropologists to produce detailed descriptions of how development works (or not), be it: the institutional shaping of policy ideas (Douglas 1986, Crewe and Harrison 1998); the reworking of local interests and manipulation of local elites (Craig and Porter 2006); the effects

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describes the ways in which various patterns of social integration and practice provide a sense of sustained coherence in terms of how a worker sees the world along with the meanings they derive (or project) from their everyday experiences (Grenfell 2017, in press).

of 'expert knowledge' (Woolcock et al 2011); or the indigenous appropriation of development agendas (Gow 2008), to name but a few areas of study (for a detailed albeit incomplete summary of this literature, see Paiement 2007 and Mosse 2013). In addition to generating a significant body of literature, this three-decade long entanglement has served to re-conceptualize development, so that it can be 'seen for what it is—an ongoing, socially constructed and negotiated process, not simply the execution of an already specified plan' (Long 1990:16).

Less common within this literature, however, are accounts that draw attention to the experiences and interests of those international workers operating at the point at which development's institutional forms both intersect and interact with local communities via the practice of development (Robins 2003; Stirrat 2008). It is only in recent years that the *everyday* activities and behaviours of development workers have been made visible by a sub-category of this literature known as *Aidland* (see Apthorpe 2005; Mosse 2011; Fecther 2012; Fecther and Hindman 2014; Autesserre 2014). While many of the authors associated with this category of research have sought to highlight both the size and importance of this 'blindspot', the relationship between the personal and the professional in development work remains somewhat of a niche area of research (Stirrat 2008; Mosse 2011; Fecther 2012; Fecther and Hindman 2014). Comparatively little time, it seems, has been spent on describing the development worker, their background or reason(s) for taking up the practice; they are portrayed as a mere transmitter or conduit through which development attempts to layer or integrate technical forms of knowledge over of a series of local understandings and practices (Hindman and Fecther 2014, 2-4). This is made all the more remarkable in light of the following statement by Robert Chambers in 1997:

The neglect of the personal dimension in development is at first sight seems bizarre. It is self-evident to the point of embarrassment that most of what happens [in the development arena] is the result of what sort of people we are, how we perceive realities, and what we do and do not do (p. 1749).

Prior to detailing the four motivational interests I outlined in the introduction, it is important for me to clarify several points relating to this discussion. First, and as a way of moving forward with the analysis, I use the term international development worker as a way of defining and categorising a range of foreign professionals who are engaged in activities that broadly seek to improve the material well-being of individuals and communities located in Timor-Leste. Starting with this broad definition is important as it allows the research to reflect and account for the breadth and scale of development in Timor-Leste as well as situate those workers who continue to make up a significant proportion of the 'industry'. It also provides a way of both conceptualising and navigating what is a complex field of actors undertaking a diverse range of activities across different points in time, location and experience.

Second, while this article focuses on the motivational interests of international development workers, it does not seek to valorise these workers or the activities they undertake. Nor does this discussion seek to question or denigrate the commitment and passion that is so clearly evident in the work of these professionals. Rather, it seeks to explore and make visible the source of this commitment so as to deepen our understanding of these workers (and thus development in Timor-Leste more generally). Third, that while this article outlines four broad areas of motivation, this should in no way be seen as a complete or exhaustive list of motivators. Instead, this article outlines just four of the more dominant themes to emerge from a long and

complex list of intersecting motivational positions<sup>50</sup>. Finally, these motivations should not be seen as being mutually exclusive, nor should they be seen as being permanent or fixed. Development workers will frequently hold a range of motivations that come together in highly complex and subjective ways. Moreover, a worker's motivations, much like their interests more generally, are subject to change over time.

#### Four motivations

One of the more frequently identified areas of motivational interest centred on the worker's need to secure work with intrinsic value and purpose. For some, this stemmed from a lack of job satisfaction coupled with the perceived banalities that they had come to associate with their 'nine-to-five office routine'. The practice of development therefore provided the worker with a chance to ground themselves in something they saw as being 'real' and of material consequence. In this they saw themselves as contributing toward a greater cause and 'creating positive impact rather than just working for someone else for a lot of hours and earning them money.' In some cases, workers spoke about how they had moved away from highly paid careers and professions in order to 'get back in touch with their humanity' and to 'build genuine relationships with genuine people'. Exploring these statements further, some workers were quite critical of the sectors and industries in which they had previously been engaged, due in no small part to a perceived lack of meaning and purpose:

As someone who worked in the finance sector, you could argue, and I have argued this in the past, that financial institutions exist to help people... But the reality is these institutions exist to generate money and profits for a relatively small number of shareholders. So, when you are working in that environment, it either ends up defining everything about your existence or it defines nothing at all. For me, I was lost, floundering, the work had no point, no real purpose to it. I needed to do more. I needed to find a way of *really* helping people. So, I retrained and changed career. That led me to development and to Timor.

Here the practice of development offered the worker a way of circumventing, or responding to, the highly abstracted social relations and activities that had come to define their work. Moreover, it provided them with the opportunity to pursue what they saw as more embodied, and thus more meaningful, relationships and undertakings. Put another way, the practice of development enabled them to physically and emotionally engage with the product of their labour.

For others, working in development was less a career change and more following a path that had been established years earlier. Working in the service of others was seen as an inherently positive activity that provided structure and purpose to the worker and their being:

...on my dad's side of the family there has always been a strong commitment to development and service and needing to work with people [who are] in need... So for me, the seeds were planted early on. I saw it modelled by my aunt, my father, my grandfather, they've always been in this area and they've always felt the need to do something. I think it stems from the notion of having a purpose and making yourself useful.

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<sup>50</sup> Other less recurrent themes included: women's equality and empowerment, cross-cultural interests, and 'seeing the world' (travel).



Here then the practice of development offered the worker the chance to fulfil what they saw as their primary responsibility or duty, being to facilitate or extend opportunity and well-being to others. Development was less about *finding* a sense of purpose than *enacting* the lessons, values and meanings that had been instilled decades earlier.

Social justice was also frequently identified as motivating both the workers' journey to development and to Timor-Leste. Indeed, it tended to be articulated in one of two ways. In the more straightforward sense, workers spoke of a strong desire to address the various inequities that exist both within and between nations. This was typified by the following from an Australian worker:

As you know, Timor-Leste is one of our closest neighbours and yet it is also one of the most poverty-stricken countries in the Asia-Pacific Region. I find that really difficult and it really upsets me. It is just so unfair and so unjust. How is it that I can live a very comfortable existence in Australia, want for nothing, yet 40 minutes from Darwin we have some of the most malnourished kids in the world... After thinking on that for a while I realised that I can't just be angry, I have to direct that emotion into something positive. That's when I decided to go to Timor and to offer what I had.

Thus, the practice of development provided the worker with a positive outlet, a way of responding to the various inequities they had observed by participating in activities that assist people to: meet their basic needs; access essential services; and lead comparatively similar lives. Beyond comparability, additional meaning was found in the workers' positioning of themselves: being both experts in, and implementers of the various systems and processes that are implemented in places like Timor-Leste. In this way, development enabled workers to project the values and meanings that they themselves had come to associate with their own 'comfortable existence'.

Another set of workers however saw their work as moving beyond inequity—although this was important in its own right—to address the ways in which various nation states, be it through direct or indirect means, had contributed to the many challenges Timor-Leste now faced. While workers from a wide range of countries, such as Japan, New Zealand, United Kingdom and the United States acknowledged this motivation, it was workers from Australia who expressed the need to 'address the past' most directly:

I always had this sense that we [Australia] had just never done the right thing [in regards to Timor-Leste]. Then, after going and spending time there, I was just horrified... [T]he other thing that always struck me is how little the general Australian population knows and understands, not only about Timor, but about our role in Timor. There's a narrative there that's just never been told... I just felt like if I could do anything...

This need to address—or perhaps more accurately to redress—both the actions and inactions of the past was borne out of a belief that the international community had failed to live up to its own moral standards and obligations. As individuals, and in the absence of what they considered appropriate recognition or action by their own government, they saw themselves as 'standing in' and accepting responsibility for the various human rights abuses and other violations committed over the last forty years. Thus, the practice of development provided the worker with a way of addressing the moral outrage felt towards their own government, all while

upholding and projecting the *universal* meanings and values they had come to associate with human, economic, social and cultural rights.

Another motivation frequently identified by workers was religious conviction and the need to enact belief through their everyday occupational activities. This was particularly strong for those with a Christian background. It should be noted however that these workers were quick to distinguish these motivations, along with many of their day-to-day activities, from that of the Christian missionaries of centuries past. Indeed, a number of workers described a compartmentalisation of their values and motivations so as to ensure that their activities were contained or restricted to providing material assistance to those who were in need: to acting as Good Samaritans rather than proselytizing to, or converting the recipients of, aid and development. As one senior worker noted:

The bible calls on us to have compassion for the poor. In fact, the story of the Good Samaritan calls on us to show mercy as well as render assistance to all those who have fallen on hard times, regardless of who they are where they are from... It's why I am working with the poor, it's why I say I have a passion for the poor... so when I say that I follow Jesus in my work, I am following his lead, following his model of helping the stranger. For me it is inspiration and motivation.

Interestingly, while several workers spoke to an evolution in their religious beliefs, each viewed the lessons embedded in parables like the *Good Samaritan* as highly instrumental in their coming to development. In the following quote a participant speaks of their journey to development via a Catholic framework known as *See, Judge, Act* along with their subsequent evolution:

[I]t started with *See, Judge, Act*... It meant that I was thinking about more than just me. It meant that I was thinking about the world that I was in... It was about seeing the stories of the Bible and [reflecting on] how Jesus responded [to the things he saw] and [suggesting] how should we respond [to the things we see]. I'm no longer Catholic and I don't believe in all that [religious] stuff anymore but that [framework] was important at the time... *See, Judge, Act*, it was about not being insular and actually looking at the world around you, to see what's happening and to take action where you can.

Unpacking the teachings associated with the *Good Samaritan*, we see several connections to the *social justice* motivation. Both appeal to a universal set of values that frame the ways in which interpersonal relationships are conducted; both stipulate a moral obligation to respond in circumstances where such values have been violated.

The final area identified by participants centres on self-exploration and self-fulfilment. Interestingly it was also an area that tended to be identified by those who were in Timor as part of a volunteer placement. Indeed, volunteer workers frequently described how they were drawn to the idea of learning more about themselves while working and helping others. Timor-Leste provided them with a place to 'disconnect' and 'reflect' all while contributing towards something they found to be genuinely important. It also enabled them to strip away the layers associated with their 'western' identity, to 'focus on what really matters' and to 'see the world from a different perspective.' As one volunteer noted:

I think anybody who takes on a [development] position in another country is doing it obviously to help... But also, yes, I needed to see the world through a different lens for myself as well. I felt like I needed to live in another country for a while and just go out on a limb and do it by myself... I thought, well, I need to go somewhere where I'm actually needed and where I'm actually going to offer something that a local person can't yet offer.

Similarly, a number of workers spoke about how they had been transformed by their experience in development. Moreover, they spoke of how these experiences had freed and motivated them to pursue additional work in the 'industry':

When I first started, I met this woman and we were flying into our first deployment together... and she wrote this fantastic short story, she said 'all the friends gathered their couches and their bottles of wine and they all went to the edge of the cliff'... it makes me really emotional actually because it's *sooo* perfect. And then... she said 'and I stepped over the cliff'. And that was what it was like... of what a radical thing it was to be a volunteer and to step over that cliff. And it is. Because you become a different person.

Within this area of motivation workers tended to see themselves as being 'out of place' or needing to explore 'who and what they are'. The development arena—an environment that existed largely beyond their own society—provided them with the opportunity to look inward and 'find their true selves' all while 'extending a helping hand to others'. Here we see some connections with the earlier *purposeful employment* motivation, with the interlocutory nature of the worker's position helping to structure and provide the necessary challenges needed to fulfil the worker's sense of exploration. In this way, the practice of development facilitated the workers need to explore various aspects of their identity all while providing stability, meaning and purpose.

## Conclusion

The practice of development is a multifaceted human activity involving a wide variety of actors and approaches. Underlying these activities is an equally complex and diverse collection of intersecting motivational interests. This article has drawn attention to one relatively under researched group of development actors: international development workers operating in Timor-Leste. In so doing, it has identified how a workers' concern for human well-being frequently intersects with and is buttressed by a range of highly personalised motivational interests. Though diverse, these interests are broadly connected by the need to establish, extend or reassert a sense of meaning within a worker's life world. Therefore, the practice of development can be seen as activity in which various frameworks of meaning are brought together in order to satisfy the needs and interests of the individual worker and the communities with whom they are working. While further research is needed, learning more about what motivates these individuals together with how these motivations may be similar to, or differ from, those held by the various communities with whom they work, may well prove useful in terms of developing more reflective, more effective and more sustainable modes of practice.

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