

Creative peacebuilding for Timor-Leste's youth, women and children

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Imagine a post-conflict country where all people, from young people to local elders and government officials (regardless of their gender), have the skills to de-escalate conflict situations, engage effectively in violence prevention and inform the process of peacebuilding at the national level. That is our vision for Timor-Leste.

Conflicts inevitably arise between people, within and between communities, as well as at the national and international level, and these conflicts tend to interrelate and easily escalate, particularly in a post-conflict environment. Issues that arise at one level trigger problems at the other levels. Thus, inclusive peacebuilding, meaningfully involving stakeholders at all levels, is imperative to sustaining peace. Involving national government in peacebuilding is not enough; all people, especially those living in post-conflict or fragile states, should have the opportunity to develop peacebuilding skills that allow them to effectively understand and engage in creating a positive, productive and peaceful future for their country.

Ba Futuru photography class students.





In a country such as Timor-Leste, where violence has become entrenched due to a history of repeated cycles of conflict, inclusive peacebuilding is essential. The violence perpetrated on individuals and communities during the Indonesian occupation by the Indonesian military and the local militia, which the military forcibly built up over the 24-year occupation, divided not only the society but also families, and left scars on people's psyches. Violence was effectively normalised. After independence, internal conflict re-emerged in 2006, resulting in further instability, mass displacement, and a breakdown of law and order. Since that time, many young people have become directly involved in violence in their communities.

Today, violence is still readily used in homes, schools and communities to resolve simple disputes as they arise. Violence is also applied as a disciplinary tool against women and children. The propensity for violence at these levels, if unaddressed, indicates vulnerability to relapse into larger-scale conflict in the country, particularly in response to triggers like elections or an increase in the disenfranchisement of young people due to lack of employment and other opportunities.

After coming to Timor-Leste in 2004, and seeing people of all ages and in all walks of life readily resorting to the use of violence to solve problems, I helped to found Ba Futuru (meaning *for the future*). My aim was to work with local colleagues to develop people's interpersonal conflict prevention skills with a vision of creating a Timor-Leste free of violence, where all citizens (especially women, children and young people) can engage meaningfully in the country's development. Ba Futuru is a national civil society organisation that uses innovative approaches and programming tailored to local needs to engage in peacebuilding across the whole of society, with the goal of reducing violence, empowering women and youth, and inspiring young learners.

Using innovative approaches to peacebuilding

Participatory training in arts, film and sport

Ba Futuru has utilised creative approaches, including art, photography, film, community theatre and sport to engage people in peacebuilding, to spread essential conflict prevention knowledge, to help people overcome their experiences of violence and to bring about behavioural change.

In the Timorese cultural context, creative therapeutic techniques are a more accessible and less threatening means of exploring issues than verbal mediums. Artistic expression is a useful tool for those who have difficulty putting words on their feelings and experiences. Self-expression through drawing, painting, music and movement help to provide emotional catharsis and also impart skills that can guide people who are living in difficult circumstances with positive models of behaviour. Creative techniques provide an avenue for people to vent and express negative emotions, allowing for personal transformation, and taking a crucial step towards building lasting peace. Moreover, artistic festivals, small community arts events, photography exhibitions, and film festivals are all great ways to get women, children and youth focused on the issues.

Art, film, theatre and music can also be effectively utilised to transmit conflict-prevention messages. One approach that we have seen work very well in Timor-Leste is the creation of an innovative film series called *Feto Fantástiku ba Dame* (Fantastic Female Peacebuilder), which follows a female super hero who works to spread peace. *Feto Fantástiku* shows up in situations of escalating conflict and teaches basic conflict-resolution skills to help the involved parties solve problems together. This film series is shown on national television, as well as on YouTube, and thus reaches a large segment of the population. So far, we have made six short films as part of this series, focusing on issues such as youth conflict and domestic violence.

This film series challenges the general public to become agents of peace and helps equip Timorese people with the practical knowledge and skills to solve problems non-violently, using creative and peaceful solutions. It also provides them with important information on where they can get assistance if they or their loved ones are victims of violence or abuse. As a female super-hero, *Feto Fantástiku* encourages and inspires women to take an empowered role in their families and communities, which is important in a country dominated by a patriarchal structure.

Super-hero
Feto Fantástiku



Peacebuilding with at-risk youth

Young people under 24 years old comprise 62 per cent of the population of Timor-Leste¹ and play a critical role in shaping the country's future. Young people are key to ensuring stability and have the potential to contribute positively to their communities, but they are also often perpetrators of violence and the ones that can and do destabilise society.

The fallout of the 2006 civil and political crisis in Timor-Leste left a security gap with a disbanded police force. Youth gangs increased in number and young people became the main perpetrators of violence at the community level. In 2010, it was estimated that Timor-Leste's 15 main gangs had an estimated membership of around 90,000, out of a population of just 1.2 million². Between 2006 and 2015, Ba Futuru worked with more than 17,000 young people, providing conflict resolution and peacebuilding skills through various youth empowerment and education initiatives. Ba Futuru's youth empowerment projects use participatory training workshops to teach young people about conflict resolution, conflict analysis, and peacebuilding in their communities. In recent years civic education and gender-based violence prevention have been added to this training programme in order to increase understanding and to further empower youth to engage more comprehensively in conflict prevention.

After their initial training, some young people became so passionate about peacebuilding that they wanted to join the Ba Futuru team. In 2009, in order to reach youth embedded in gang life, we began engaging these youth, who themselves had gang backgrounds, as outreach officers. They were grouped into Community Response Teams for their respective communities and assisted in getting the most violence-prone young people to participate in our training programmes. This method worked extremely well and helped empower youth to transform gang members into peace advocates.

Innovative approaches such as this have meant that Ba Futuru has been remarkably successful in shifting the thinking and behaviour of many at-risk young people. After participating in one of Ba Futuru's trainings, an elected youth leader reported:

The training... has totally changed my behaviour. Before, I was a person who was always involved in fighting and nobody could stop me. I am very social and like making friends, so I often invite youth around to my house to drink palm wine. When we got drunk, people often tried to fight each other and in the past I would have fought anyone and made the problem worse. Now I understand that this kind of behaviour is not good and I tell people who are fighting that it is better for them to go home and sleep.

From gang member to peacebuilder – Atoy's story

Atoy has overcome a violent and insecure past and is now working to promote peace.

Atoy faced difficulties growing up in Dili, the capital city of Timor-Leste, during the Indonesian occupation and the blood-stained struggle for independence that followed. Like many youth at the time, he faced constant insecurity due to the violence carried out in his community by the Indonesian military and the militia. He was first put in jail at age 15, but eventually managed to finish high school.

When he was 22 years old, Atoy was recognised by local leaders as an influential young person in his community and they recommended that he participate in a training on conflict resolution, child protection and human rights with Ba Futuru.



Inspired by Ba Futuru's facilitators, Atoy suggested that they bring their training to his community. It was not hard for Atoy to convince his friends to attend Ba Futuru's training. 'Like them, I had been involved in gangs and violence in the past. They saw how I had moved on from that and adapted to a new environment, and underneath they knew they wanted to escape from the violence as well.'

'Everything suddenly became clear during the training,' he says smiling. 'The training helped us to understand many things that had happened in the past.'

Eventually, Atoy was employed as a member of Ba Futuru's Community Response Team, and moved into the role of facilitator for conflict-resolution training and art education. Now he also acts as the lead male role model in the *Feto Fantsatiku* film series.



Play during a peace festival about women's right to vote.

In 2012, following the prior peacebuilding success with at-risk youth, Ba Futuru took the Peace Promotion Project a step further. In addition to lessons in peace advocacy, youth were provided with training in art, photography, reporting, drama and job-finding skills over a five-month period. They then became members of peace promotion teams. This more intensive long-term youth engagement programme was an opportunity to ensure a more thorough transformation of individuals' mindsets and behaviours.

After the first few months of intensive courses, the youth were ready for implementation and created Peace Festivals where they could showcase some of their new skills in their home

communities, as well as share important information on a range of conflict-prevention and human rights issues. As part of this initiative, 20 Peace Festivals were held over a one-year period. Each included an exhibition with anti-violence art and multimedia work, as well as drama, dance and music performances by the peace promotion team members.

Santiago, one of the youth involved in the Peace Promotion Project, reported that the training helped him to change his life: 'Before I came to study at Ba Futuru Peace Center, I did not know anything, because I was a troublemaker and I liked throwing rocks at people's houses and provoking people.'

While growing up in Dili, Santiago faced a number of disadvantages. Threatened by martial arts groups operating in his community, he had to drop out of formal education during his first year of secondary school. Without having completed his schooling, he remained unemployed until 2014.

Santiago believes that Ba Futuru's programme has changed his life in many ways, including by helping him to build his confidence and to develop a more positive attitude. Despite his disadvantaged background, Santiago now has a stable job. 'I have a job because of the specific training I did at Ba Futuru Peace Center. Since attending the training, I have helped to solve a conflict in my family and I also try to encourage other youth to stay away from violence because it has no value for our lives and it will destroy our future.'

The combination of intensive training and practical experience greatly changed the lives of these youth. They acquired the confidence and skills to create a positive future for themselves and their communities, despite their at-risk backgrounds. In follow-up surveys, more than half of the youth reported that they are now either enrolled at university or have a job.

Ba Futuru found this model of engagement to be extremely successful and is confident it could be effectively replicated in other post-conflict contexts.

Empowering women for peacebuilding and protection

Successful peacebuilding also requires the social and economic empowerment of women. Ba Futuru has worked to promote female leaders as agents of protection and conflict prevention by building their skills in conflict resolution, leadership and decision-making so they are able to make a meaningful contribution to the nation's development.

Timorese women and girls are disproportionately affected by widespread poverty and many live under constant risk of domestic violence – indeed 29 per cent have experienced physical violence in the past 12 months³. Traditionally, men wield the power and expect women to obey. Exacerbating these disempowering circumstances are an extremely high fertility rate (5.32 children)⁴ and limited access to basic services such as clean water, healthcare, education and transportation, which increases the burden on women.

Although each village council includes three women, they typically lack the skills to participate effectively in local governance and decision-making⁵. While 38 per cent of parliamentarians are women, they are inadequately linked to their constituencies and need support to better understand the priorities of women and girls⁶.

In 2015, Ba Futuru worked with the Asia Foundation to conduct four conflict-mitigation training courses for women leaders. This followed a three-year Empowering Women and Establishing Grassroots Protection Networks project (EWP), which placed a special focus on empowering female elected leaders at the grassroots level. These women were offered training in protection, empowerment and conflict transformation and given special roles in the Protection Teams established in target areas. Drawing on their leadership roles, they address local protection issues on behalf of their communities. The case study below illustrates some of the successes of the EWP.



Bu Futuru training for the police on conflict resolution and how to stop gender-based violence.

Justina: From victim to survivor to leader

Justina⁷, a mother of six children, was attacked with a machete by her husband and very badly beaten. Yet the police who attended the scene of the crime made no attempt to arrest him. Remembering that night, she explains, ‘When my husband was beating me, I ran as fast as I could to my *chefe aldeia*’s [sub-village chief’s] house to find safety. I went to her house because I had heard from my neighbours that she also has a role in supporting vulnerable women.’

Her *chefe aldeia* is the coordinator of their community’s protection team, built by Ba Futuru’s EWP programme. She and another Protection Team Member (PTM) brought Justina to the hospital where she received life-saving medical assistance. They also explained that she had the option to press charges against her husband, supported her in filing a case with the correct police unit (the vulnerable persons unit), and helped her obtain emergency financial assistance from the government, which she later used to start a micro-business.

Justina says that the support from the PTMs was critical in helping her to understand how the formal justice system works and to gain the courage needed to pursue her case. She felt inspired to start attending monthly Protection Team meetings, and then asked to receive training to become a PTM herself. She said that the EWP training programmes have made a huge difference in her life and household, which is now much more peaceful. ‘I used to hit my kids when I was angry with them, and also yell at them with curses. I don’t do that any more because of what I learned from the training.’ Justina also says that she keeps an eye out for women in her neighbourhood and in her extended family who show signs of experiencing violence or abuse, and then goes to talk with them privately. ‘Sometimes they just need someone to talk to,’ she says, ‘but we Protection Team Members truly believe in taking cases of domestic violence to the courts. Violence is wrong. There is punishment for it, and it’s against the law.’

Today, Justina’s micro-business provides a steady income that allows her to pay for her children’s schooling and to be more independent. Her husband was eventually found guilty by the court, which not only helped Justina find closure, because she feels justice has been done, but has also helped to decrease impunity for abusers and change the attitudes of both women and men. Justina is now an outspoken advocate for women, girls and boys in her local community.

Over the course of the EWP program, a total of 65 women and girls were supported by their protection teams to file charges against their abusers and to access the support they need to rebuild their lives, in the form of referrals to service providers for free legal assistance, safe houses, psychological care and financial support⁸.

In addition to empowering local female leaders to become key agents of peace and protection, the EWP also improved the government's awareness of grassroots protection needs by delivering policy recommendations based on the gaps identified by PTMs in the protection and violence response systems at the local level. The meaningful involvement of women in both peace promotion and systems strengthening will help to create stability in the country in the longer term.

Involving children in peacebuilding initiatives

Ba Futuru's approach to inclusive peacebuilding involves equipping children with knowledge and skills to protect themselves from violence and abuse. The organisation works with children to educate others on the importance of violence prevention and child rights. Moreover, it recognises that it is essential to create long-term stability by working with those who have an impact on the lives of children – including educators, parents, police, civil society actors, traditional leaders and elected community leaders – and providing them with the knowledge and skills to implement community-based protection, to access the formal justice system and to understand the negative impacts of violence and physical punishment.

Around international Children's Day in 2008, Ba Futuru ran a campaign to get children to trade in their toy weapons in exchange for educational materials. The photo on the next page shows Domingus, one of the kids from our Peace Centre, handing over his homemade sling, together with Ba Futuru's Peace Building project coordinator, Vidal Campos Magno, and the prime minister of Timor-Leste at that time, 'Xanana' Kay Rala Gusmão.

Since the heated conflict in the streets has now for the most part abated, Ba Futuru's work with children has shifted to become more focused on violence prevention in homes and schools. This assists in breaking the cycle of violence, thereby decreasing the likelihood of young people turning to violence and hence preventing wider-scale national conflict in the long run.

Children at a peace festival.





Domingus, Vidal and
President Xanana at
Children's Day.

Reducing violence by working with key local and national actors

Ba Futuru works to prevent violence against children, women and vulnerable people through outreach and education. We undertake advocacy and encourage dialogue among key players at local, municipal and national levels. Our work contributes to strengthening laws, networks and protection systems (including government policies and procedures regarding law enforcement, judicial systems and protection response mechanisms). We help to ensure that when violations of human or child rights occur, responses are effective and justice ensues. In the short and long run, this will help to mitigate conflict escalation and guard against the outbreak of larger-scale conflict in the country.

Ba Futuru is undertaking a three-year project called the Consolidating Peace and Democracy Initiative, which enhances conflict mitigation skills among those tasked by the government with conflict prevention at national, regional and village levels. The project includes 30 training courses over a three-year period in high-risk areas as identified by our partner in the project, the National Directorate for Prevention of Community Conflict (DNPCK) under the Ministry of the Interior. DNPCK staff representatives are gaining skills as peacebuilding trainers through participating in a training of trainers (ToT) programme and working alongside experienced Ba Futuru facilitators over a period of three years. In this way the project will build a cohort of government conflict prevention and civic education facilitators that can continue to transfer skills in these areas to others across the country over the long run. Thus, the project is helping to close the governance gap by bringing skills, knowledge and high-quality publications to key national, regional and local actors to use in performing their government-mandated conflict prevention roles.

The project works to create important linkages between national government, local youth, women and elected leaders, promoting ownership of peace processes in their communities. It provides tools for people at the local level to resolve their own conflicts and to mitigate conflict escalation and violence that has the potential to lead to larger conflict and engagement in civil unrest.

One of the components of the project is a youth forum that will bring together youth from various parts of the country and allow them to engage in a two-day PeaceJam conference, a platform through which they will be able to synthesise and share ideas on issues related to creating a more sustainable peace in the country. Nobel Laureate and former President of Timor-Leste, Jose Ramos-Horta, will be present at the conference, and other national leaders will be presented with the outcomes of the conference through the media. This will help provide an opportunity to explore the synergy and possible disconnect between national-level peacebuilding priorities and those at the local level.



A young student in Ba Futuru's after school program.

Conclusion

Providing opportunities for involvement in peacebuilding, and gaining knowledge about practical conflict resolution skills that can be applied at the personal and community levels can go a long way towards increasing ownership in the peacebuilding process. Moreover, utilising innovative approaches to engage youth, women and children can encourage their meaningful participation in conflict-prevention initiatives, which in turn helps them to support and inform national-level processes for peacebuilding.

Projects that make linkages from the local level to the national level, like Ba Futuru's Empowering Women and Establishing Grassroots Protection Networks, are critical for inclusive peacebuilding. Bringing the voices of local players to parliament and policy debates, and allowing them to share their concerns and information about gaps in systems that are being developed, is extremely beneficial. These types of initiatives can help high-level government officials, who are often the ones who have the most say in national peacebuilding processes, to be adequately informed about the needs and opinions of those who are most impacted by their decisions – and thus make sustainable peace more viable.

We have also found that in Timor-Leste, the capacity development of local actors, who are essential in maintaining stability, is at times not sufficiently prioritised. When addressing peacebuilding needs it is important not just to help build systems and structures that strengthen stability and peace, but also to build the human resources for these to function adequately. This is especially the case in a country like Timor-Leste where education levels and the capacity of local actors tasked with conflict prevention is fairly minimal. Building the conflict prevention skills and knowledge of local leaders, youth, women and children is imperative to enable local ownership in the peacebuilding process. These efforts catalyse the transformation that is required to mitigate future violent conflict and to sustain peace.

¹ 'Timor-Leste Demographics Profile 2014', Index Mundi, accessed 16 September 2015, www.indexmundi.com/timor-leste/demographics_profile.html.

² Rory Collinan, 'Mean Streets', *The Australian*, 19 April 2010.

³ 2009-2010 National Demographic and Health Survey (NDHS) of Timor-Leste.

⁴ 'Fertility Rate; Total Births per Woman in Timor-Leste (2012)', accessed 4 April 2013, www.tradingeconomics.com/timor-leste/fertility-rate-total-births-per-woman-wb-data.html.

⁵ 'Policy Recommendations to Strengthen Protection for Women and Children in Timor-Leste' Vols. 2 & 3 [October 2013; October 2014], Ba Futuru.

⁶ Based on Ba Futuru's work with the *Grupo Mulheres de Parlamentár Nacional do Timor-Leste* (Group of Women Parliamentarians), 2012-2014.

⁷ Name has been changed for confidentiality purposes.

⁸ Emily Stallman, 'Her Story', excerpt from Ba Futuru 2014 Annual Report.

Notes



Youth navigation as part of Ba Futuru's International Youth Award program.



Sierra James, originally from Seattle, began her career in the United States and has worked in think tanks and non-profit organisations in Seattle, Washington DC, New York and Melbourne, prior to settling in Timor-Leste. Sierra completed a Masters of Arts degree at the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University in 2005. Her research interests there included post-conflict education and conflict resolution, which took her to Timor-Leste where she co-founded Ba Futuru (meaning *for the future*). Sierra has lived and worked in Timor-Leste for more than 11 years. Please see www.bafuturu.org for more information.