

***Activism and Aid: Young Citizens' Experiences of Development and Democracy in Timor-Leste.* By Ann Wigglesworth. Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2016. Softcover: 146pp.**

In *Activism and Aid*, Ann Wigglesworth delivers a clear and highly readable account of young Timorese' experiences in development and democracy during the first decade of Timor-Leste's independence. The context of the book sits squarely within the domain of development literature, which seeks to question the effectiveness and relevance of international interventions that lack grounding in local realities.

Timor-Leste was pegged as the United Nation's (UN) "success story", a country that was democratically established in 1999 after twenty-four years of Indonesian occupation. In the same year, the country descended into a political crisis to the perplexity of international players. The historically-devoid approach of the UN in its mandate to establish a bureaucracy post-Indonesia until 2002 positioned Timor-Leste at "ground zero". Timor-Leste was variously described as a "clean slate" in which to import "democratic" development agendas. Timor-Leste was not, of course, a clean slate. While the capital city Dili and much of the rural infrastructure *was* burnt to the ground, its people's ways of thinking about the world and its ideas for an independent Timor-Leste were not simply swept away. Wigglesworth's book exposes the inconsistencies of these processes.

The core material of the book was drawn from the author's doctoral fieldwork in mid-2006, although she also draws on her multiple engagements with the country from 1997 onwards as a development consultant. The book sets out some ambitious aims. Firstly, to "analyse the first ten years of development through the experiences of younger citizens"; secondly, to provide a "critical assessment of the application of development knowledge and role of international agencies"; and lastly, "explores the entangled nature of development theory, national economic development, civil society, gender, development studies, youth and conflict, customary society and democracy" (p. 5). For the most part, the author delivers on her aims.

*Activism and Aid* draws on, and contributes to, understandings on the latest development agenda that emphasizes participation as being the key to effectiveness. "Active citizenship", as Wigglesworth notes, is a "relatively new contribution to the development lexicon"

and is “supposed to enable people to participate in their own development, rather than that which is thrust upon them” (p. 5). This development discourse situates locals as “agents of action” who advocate for human rights and, because of its locally-driven nature, the outcomes are assumed to be more effective.

Chapter 1 sets the scene with an account of two generations of activists who played an important role in the establishment of the nation. The Portuguese colonization and rise of activism is dealt with fleetingly, as is the Indonesian occupation. It is surprising that these two periods of Timorese history are not given more weight, particularly in consideration of how Indonesia may have informed ideas of aid or democracy of these young people through interactions with the pro-democracy front. Timorese activism did not grow in a vacuum but was influenced by multiple experiences of democracy and decolonization movements in Indonesia and Portugal. Local ideas of development have also been constructed in parallel with international interventions, not in isolation, or being diametrically opposed to one another.

The later section in Chapter 1 on “new generation” activists relies heavily on two English language accounts of two young Timorese. A number of formative studies on youth, such as by Amanda Wise and Fiona Crockford, are missing. Only fleeting mention is given to the “current” day youth, termed the “millennium generation” which has become a new development challenge, often described as the “youth bulge”. The younger generation, who have had a unique experience with aid, development and democracy, is not a key feature of the analysis, although an entire chapter is dedicated to the political crisis of 2007 in which the major players were the “millennium generation”.

Wigglesworth clearly had access to and engaged with key players within a sub-section of the *Geracão Foun* (young generation). The purpose of the book is to give credence to the diversity of views. However, at times the use of the term *Geracão Foun* comes off as a homogenous group and “generation” as the unit of analysis appears as an ideological rather than as analytic category. Young Timorese have actively constructed *Geracão Foun* as an ideological category, in order to construct an image of a unified generational identity. It also had the effect of glossing over multiple differences and obscures the specificity of those who identify with the label. At times, it seems the author has taken this ideological category — which served to enforce certain ideas this generation has about themselves — rather than questioning the category itself. For example

their “ideas about appropriate development for the country embrace an allegiance to customary practices as well as international standards of human rights” (p. 3) seems to endorse their espoused identity, rather than critically engage their ideas.

Chapter 2 provides a useful account of the pitfalls of the UN and the humanitarian response, and the ways in which local knowledge was largely ignored. The main finding is that the lack of participation from local actors had a negative impact on recovery and failed to contribute to the development of civil society. While there is no denying that international interventions in Timor-Leste largely ignored existing cultural and political resources, at times, western/Timorese appear as polar opposites. The statement that foreign agencies did not recognize that the Timorese had been planning for independence and had “clear ideas of what kind of arrangements they wanted to put in place” (p. 43) has the effect of blurring or even denying that differences existed between and *within* generations of Timorese who often held conflicting versions of Timor’s future.

Chapter 3 provides a useful account of international development institutions and how aid was viewed and measured over time as well as providing a succinct account of the relationship between Timorese vast oil reserves and aid. This account effectively tells the journey from the political leadership being bypassed to how the government itself is now leading an international movement on promoting a greater role for host countries to drive their own development agendas. Again, though, “home-grown” ideas cannot be considered in complete opposition to international agendas. For example, the wider South-South global partnership has influenced how Timorese leaders see development in their own country.

Chapter 4 is a welcome contribution to the literature on the struggle for gender equality in Timorese civil society. The author recognizes that Timorese civil society has failed to deal with gender equality within its own male-dominated organizations. We learn of the efforts of one particular women’s organization network, *Rede Feto* which advocated for a quota of women in parliament, and it did so with significant support from international organizations. The argument that gender issues are seen as a foreign concept that fails to recognize efforts of local women could have been made stronger.

Wigglesworth concludes with the observation from a young Timorese that his country is a “laboratory of democracy”, and

the book does a good job of showing how at times policies and strategies do not take into account local realities. Overall, the book makes a solid contribution to youth studies in Timor-Leste during the first decade of independence and would inform practitioners and academics interested in local experiences of international development and the ways in which an inclusive development agenda remains difficult to achieve in Timor-Leste.

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