

A library volunteer in Timor-Leste

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In mid-2004, there was an article in *inCite* asking for self-funded volunteer librarians to work in East Timor. Perhaps you saw it? Having always wanted to volunteer overseas, but not being a teacher or engineer (as usually seemed to be required), this was an opportunity too good to miss. So in February 2005 I headed off for 9 weeks in Dili at CAVR, the (Portuguese) acronym for the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation.

CAVR was established as a statutory authority in May 2001 by the Timor-Leste government to undertake truth-seeking, facilitate community reconciliation and report on its work and findings relating to human rights violations between 1974 and 1999. The Commission is housed in a former gaol, used in both the Portuguese and Indonesian colonial periods. It was destroyed during the Indonesian withdrawal in 1999. The building is now restored, with the library and archives occupying two large rooms. The library and archives team included five local staff and an archives adviser from Australia, as well as a number of volunteers, both local and international. They provide archives support for the commission, as well as supporting the writers of the commission's final report by providing library and research material on the issues of the truth commission. International volunteers such as myself came for varying lengths of time, usually two to three months, and worked on a number of library and archives related projects.

The library's small collection of 2500 items includes a range of material on subjects such as human rights, Indonesian and Timorese history, international relations and international justice. The archives include transcripts, audio and video-tapes of research interviews, recordings of community reconciliation processes, photographs and witness statements from public hearings, and a range of other material relating to CAVR's mandate. The library and archives collection consists of items in Portuguese and Tetum — the two official Timorese languages — as well as English and Indonesian.



How many OH&S rules can you find being broken?

In 2004, volunteer librarians listed the library collection onto a simple database, with local staff doing the cataloguing after some basic training. As one of the volunteers, my job was to support the local staff in their work by providing ongoing training in library procedures and practices. Staff exposure to any libraries had been minimal so they often had no idea of what could be involved with building and maintaining a library collection. At the time of the Indonesian withdrawal in 1999, qualified library staff were mainly Indonesian and most left the country then. At the beginning of 2005, there were only two or three trained librarians in the whole country.

I undertook a few short-term projects, including supervision of the moving of the library and archives, a funding application to a United Nations organisation for an archives project, and work on an archives database of interview records. So there was always something to do. I helped local staff with their English skills and, in turn, learned much from them. One of my university subjects is Indonesian, and my skills improved markedly while in Timor-Leste. They were friendly, welcoming and tolerant.

My appreciation of what we take for granted in Australia increased. Some things were difficult to get used to, such as the lack of awareness of occupational health and safety issues, both in the workplace and around the country. Knowledge of and involvement in local political issues was fairly strong compared with similar sized workplaces in Australia, and local staff would often be at meetings or demonstrations. Although CAVR local staff are reasonably well-paid at local rates, some would be supporting extended families on their salaries. I had to be aware that local staff could be malnourished compared to Westerners and that this might affect their work. The costs of medical and educational services are relatively high. After being completely destroyed in 1999, infrastructure for these services was gradually being improved. But before a colleague's wife's operation, archives staff donated blood in case she needed a blood transfusion — no blood banks in Timor.

I tried to arrive in Timor-Leste with no pre-conceived notions of what it would be like. So I was surprised at just how much I did enjoy the experience of living and working in a third-world country, although, as an Australian, the buffer of money behind me meant life for me in Timor-Leste was fairly comfortable. My own small room, with my own even smaller bathroom (unexpected luxury!), in a guesthouse cost US\$200 a month, with cleaning, washing and ironing, and security included. There was a basic kitchen, with fridge, freezer and gas stove,



Maggie's birthday cake with CAVR staff

and plenty of mosquitoes, mice and cockroaches to keep me company. The guesthouse had a generator, as did CAVR and most large organisations and businesses, so we were not unduly disrupted by the constant power cuts. But the little local shop next door, unable to afford a generator, often had candles burning as a light source.

I tried to get out and about around Timor-Leste each weekend, seeing some of the beautiful countryside and the way the country dwellers lived. Or I wandered around the markets of Dili. Shopping at the markets and street stalls was fun and fascinating, and street sellers would often approach selling bags of limes for 50c, or lobsters, or dried fish, or unknown (to me) fruit and vegetables.



The local veggie market in Dili

Undertaking this short volunteer posting gave me more than an insight into a library and workplace; it was a fascinating adventure in living for a short time in another country and I became more aware of the problems associated with third world countries. My time in Timor-Leste was a wonderful experience, not just learning about another library workplace but living and experiencing life in a third world country. I feel that I gained much more than I gave. And I was lucky enough to use three weeks of my time there to fulfil my professional placement subject for the librarianship degree I am currently studying through Charles Sturt University. If any other library workers can take advantage of such an opportunity, my recommendation is 'Go for it'.

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