

The *frente ekonomika* (economic front): Timorese perspectives on seasonal work in Australia

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Abstract

This paper looks at how, in Timor-Leste, the ways in which people perceive and experience the Australian Seasonal Worker Program (SWP) are contingent on a range of distinctly Timorese perspectives on life, labour and identity. Those working abroad give meaning to their hard work in Australia by framing it as part of a continuing national struggle for economic justice. Despite this, the widespread perception that patronage and family networks remain instrumental in deciding who gets access to lucrative positions in Australia remains a source of frustration for many. While the policy aims of the SWP are clear enough, in seeking to realise them there is a case for more closely engaging with the subjective experiences of those within it.

Keywords: Timor-Leste; Australia; agriculture; migration

Remittance sending from Timor-Leste—new forms of an old struggle

In their introduction to this volume, Palmer, Silver and Cunha characterise the breadth of scholarship it gathers as united by a concern with ‘unmasking community economies’. In a sense the inclusion of a chapter such as mine might seem somewhat counterintuitive. Not only is my work focused primarily on perspectives of people who have made the decision to absent themselves (geographically at least) from their birth communities, but who have done so specially to undertake alienated wage labour in an unapologetically neoliberal Australian agricultural sector. My fellow contributors have, by contrast, largely focused on modes of thought, economic activity and social organisation that can be closely linked to a geographical place. Chapters 1 (Sousa), 2 (Hicks), and 3 (Grainger) interrogate the spatiality of colonial markets and housing developments. Chapters 4 (Barnes), 5 (Fidalgo-Castro and Alonso-Población), 6 (Trindade and Oliveira), 7 (Nogueira da Silva), and 8 (Cunha and Bessa) look at issues related to ritual, authority, exchange, food and (above all) land. Chapters 9 (Crespi), 10 (Palmer and Jackson), and 11

(Barreto Soares) step back from this focus on ritual and agrarian life to focus on an altogether distinct vision of Timor-Leste, one defined by forms of capital investment and engineering, that while decidedly not of the *knua* (village) are most certainly contingent on the physical reality of the *rai* (land).

To a certain extent the final three chapters that focus on labour migration, of which mine is one, are distinct, but perhaps not as much as they might seem to be at first. Although not completely unconcerned with the reality of the Timorese house, whether that be as a literal abode (see Chapter 12, this volume) or as a ritual centre through which (and where) alliances and exchange can be mediated (see Chapter 13, this volume), my colleagues and I all seek to uncover and describe the ways in which Timorese workers, even when literally immersed in neoliberal wage labour, continue to participate in the community economies that typically continue to provide a framework for living in their home communities.

In writing on this, McWilliam, Wigglesworth and Boavida dos Santos and myself come to similar conclusions—Timorese ritual economies that revolve around geographically rooted elements, such as sacred houses (*Uma Lulik*) and holy land (*rai lulik*), remain surprisingly robust in the face of globalised wage labour. In this chapter I draw on research undertaken among young people who have returned to Timor from work in Australia under its Seasonal Worker Program to show how, for most of this cohort, leaving their homeland to work was not so much an opportunity to escape social and ritual duties to which their families hold them accountable as to acquire the wealth to service them better. Paradoxically, the increased participation of Timorese workers in work ordered by neoliberalism abroad may feed into the continued (and even expanded) importance of alternatives to neoliberalism in Timor itself.

Viewed from afar, the reasons why young Timorese might go abroad to work are not hard to see. Timor-Leste's young population is growing fast, its two-speed economy is dominated by resource extraction, and although there is plenty of work to do looking after its large families and small farms, the paying jobs school leavers dream of are vanishingly rare. The clique of leaders that led its famous 1975-99 independence struggle have maintained control ever since and mostly squandered their chance to invest the windfall from nearly depleted petroleum fields on laying the foundation for a diversified economy. With current reserves almost exhausted, the fund being depleted at an unsustainable rate (World Bank 2020), Timor-Leste is a nearly classic example of the paradox that Auty (1995) and Ross (1999) have famously described as the 'resource curse'. A nation that people both refer to as the beloved land (*rai doben*) and try to leave as they see no future there.

Fieldwork for this paper took place in the latter half of 2019 as part of my work as a research fellow at the Australian National University and involved around two months of regular, face-to-face interaction with overlapping, extended networks

of people associated with the SWP. In the end I spoke to thirty-three workers, and several times as many who aspired to be part of the program, had family participating, or just had strong opinions about the whole issue and wanted to talk about it. These networks were centred in Dili, and mostly consisted of people who had worked together abroad or studied together in Timor, but included people living as far afield as Oecussi, Same, and Aileu.

While finding people who had returned from Australia took some doing, I was overwhelmed by people who desperately wanted me to help them get there. Some had gone through the application process but never been called for an interview. Others said they would like to apply but either didn't know how or thought there was no use without a personal 'in'. Although constantly telling them otherwise, all of them believed I could make a difference.

Two elements of their experiences are of particular interest. The first is the tendency people have to envisage the SWP as part of a national struggle for development and dignity, contiguous with that carried out by the preceding generation who used their exile to fight for independence. The second is the continuing perception that, in spite of official protestations to the contrary, personal networks within Timor rather than formal, 'merit' based processes are what really matter in gaining access to overseas work in Australia.

In prefacing a discussion of these themes, a broader discussion of the current situation regarding employment in Timor-Leste is in order.

Over the next five years, the ability of Timor-Leste's politicians and policy makers to find jobs for its young may well determine its future as a sovereign state. At present, around 30,000 Timorese reach working age each year (RDTL 2017). Officially youth unemployment is only around 12% (Belun 2018), but for the majority who scrape by in precarious agriculture or commerce (sometimes clinically referred to by outsiders as 'self-employment') the line is blurry. Many of those who identify as jobless actually spend their days working hard on the family farm or at various forms of small scale commerce.

Historically, the most common aspiration for young Timorese graduates has been to find a post with the government. In past times this was not unrealistic, however in an age of mass education there are simply not enough places for everyone. The State of Timor-Leste only employs around 35,000 people (RDTL 2017). This is ominous for two reasons. Firstly, the inefficient and bloated public sector remains Timor-Leste's only major source of salaried work. Secondly, the producing oil reserves that pay for virtually all of it are almost gone and (despite official optimism) the development of new ones is not a sure thing (Cardoso 2019).

For more than a decade now foreign investment envisaged to follow 'front loading' on various infrastructure projects has been touted as a panacea for resource dependency, but little has come of it. Coffee and tourism have both, thus far, failed

to thrive, and there is reason to be sceptical of Mr Gusmão's (2017) confident assertion that "Timor-Leste offers a predictable and secure environment for investment and business."

No less an authority than the World Bank (2020) places Timor-Leste at 181 out of 190 on the ease of doing business index and the cost of a ticket from Dili to Darwin can compare to one from Australia to Europe. Although the nation's aging political leaders rarely miss an opportunity to make emotive declarations about the continuing struggle, sometimes dressing in camouflage fatigues while doing it (Leach 2015), the less glamorous question of how the nation's young are going to live has yet to be confronted.

The 2011-2030 'strategic development plan' held superficial promise in this regard but given its lack of costings and/or other details Dalton's (2014, 211) description of it as "a utopian wish list of how life will be in Timor-Leste by 2030" seems justified. Likewise, the previous government's pronouncement that it would create 300,000 new jobs by 2023 (for a population of 1.3 million) had its heart in the right place, but very little connection to reality (Gusmão 2019). Unless they manage to get some sort of job with the state, there are few opportunities for the young in Timor-Leste to find regular, paid work.

Given this situation, the tendency of young Timorese to seek their fortune overseas is not surprising. The numbers, though not precise, are striking. Wigglesworth and Boxer (2017) estimated there could be as many as 19,000 Timorese in the UK, a figure that may well have ticked over to 20,000 in the years since. Brexit will slow the growth of its community but will more likely result in its gradual shift to the Republic of Ireland or elsewhere in the EU than its destruction. Taking a cue from this demonstrated appetite for work abroad, Timor-Leste's government made it their policy to seek inclusion in various guest and seasonal worker schemes. According to official sources, in mid-2018 around 2300 of its citizens were serving as guest workers in Korea, mostly on three-year contracts in fisheries, retail or manufacturing. At around the same time around 1000 were working in Australia, mostly in six-month stints harvesting fruit and vegetables as part of its seasonal worker program (SEFOPE 2018). Thus, as of two years ago we come to a minimum figure of Timorese working abroad that is approaching 24,000. Soon there will be more Timorese making their living from the diaspora than from the state. In 2018, according to the Observatory for Economic Complexity, Timor-Leste earned a total of \$67.3 million from exports, mostly of fossil fuels. In the same year, according to the World Bank data that takes into account only formal money transfers, Timor-Leste earned over \$96 million from remittances.

Local and global in international work

Globally, Timor-Leste's story of limited prospects at home driving people to seek their fortune abroad is not a new one. At least since the Industrial Revolution the flight of impoverished and disenfranchised folk from hard up or overcrowded rural areas in search of a brighter future has shaped the urban landscapes and cultures we take for granted today.

Because labour migration is such a universal phenomenon and managed/monitored by governments and with an appetite for quantitative data, there remains a danger of neglecting the diversity of ways in which it is experienced, especially by the workers it impacts most directly. "Discussions on globalisation, to borrow the words of Gustavo Lins Riberio (2009) can "tend to focus on processes commanded by powerful agents" (2009). Inspired by the case for using ethnographic methods to address this issue set out in the co-authored 2012 volume, *Globalisation from Below* (Mathews, Ribeiro, and Vega 2012), this research proceeds from the premise that the perspective of Timorese workers within the SWP are not only distinct from those normative to policy makers in Canberra, but sometimes expressed through words, narratives and somatic dispositions that may be incomprehensible to them. While approaches to understanding the SWP that gloss over this diversity in favour of research filtered through metrics and assumptions about life familiar to Australian policy makers are understandable, they are also intellectually disingenuous—and indeed risk complicity in the erasure of subaltern perspectives that can characterise globalisation at its worst. This article seeks to throw into relief how and why, although Timorese perspectives on international work may not be readily comprehensible to outside 'experts', they should not be dismissed.

The ways in which people in Timor-Leste perceive international work are shaped by their position betwixt Southeast Asia and the Pacific and their dramatic recent history of governance by and struggling against Indonesia. Those old enough to participate in the SWP were raised with tales of Timorese abroad advocating for independence prior to 1999 as part of the *frente diplomatika* (diplomatic front). The highly visible presence of the United Nations and various INGOs since 1999 has also strengthened the perceived value of money from abroad promoting development at home. For Timorese of an earlier generation, studying in Indonesia could be a way of accruing the intellectual resources to continue their fight for a homeland. In a similar way, for the current generation, work abroad that feeds back into household and village economies can be 'reconfigured' (Leach 2018, 294) as contiguous with the heroic efforts of the recent past. Certainly, while commentators who identify the growth of Timor-Leste's diaspora as being driven by the fizzling of its domestic economy have a valid point, from within, the discourse is less negative. "*Luta nafatin!*" My informants would regularly tell each other when facing

challenges at home or abroad—‘continue the struggle’. As I seek to show further on, through envisaging their lives as part of this historical arc, members of Timor’s diaspora can find purpose and optimism even in the face of hopeless odds.

The governance of labour sending in Timor-Leste, in particular the popular and rapidly growing option of going to Australia for seasonal work, is also distinct and worthy of attention. Unlike migration to the UK which is a largely private matter (although, as McWilliam [2020, 106] has shown it is still usually dependent on being able to secure sponsorship to attain a passport from the Government of Portugal), people who go to work in Australia, South Korea, Japan or Canada do so as part of government programs that are, in theory, open to anyone who meets the basic qualifications. In the Australian case, which is my focus, applicants submit their documents to the local SEFOPE office and then undergo a language and physical test before being accepted into a ‘work ready pool’ from which they can be selected for an interview with a foreign employer, usually in Dili.

In reality, despite support from the Australian government, in Timor the recruitment process is widely perceived to be anything but clear, and whilst on the island I regularly had people sidle up to me and ask how it *really* worked, and if I could put in a good word for them. It is widely believed that personal connections play a role in who is called for an interview, and recurring rumours of bribery are not implausible. This is to say that, although selection to the SWP is officially a merit-based system, in reality access to lucrative international work is believed to be, like access to other forms of work with the government, contingent on local networks of power, patronage and reciprocity. While this perception is generally invisible to outside actors, for Timorese it is taken-for-granted, and in line with their experiences of accessing government services more broadly—an amalgam of norms that draws on both the steep hierarchies of the island’s indigenous polities and the socially contingent models of governance prevailing in Indonesia (Peake et al. 2014). The result seems to be that while outsiders usually see the SWP as flattening Timor-Leste’s prevailing hierarchies (including those related to social-rank, education and gender) in-so-far as access to this work appears to sometimes leverage patronage networks, at times it may well also perpetuate them instead.

Labour as national struggle

One truly odd but telling feature of my conversations with these frustrated young people in Dili was the regularity with which, in seeking to explain their educational background, they would ask me if I had heard of the Westphalian System. This slightly obscure term refers to the modern system of nation-states and its beginnings in a treaty signed in the German city of Westphalia in 1648—interesting

but not a major concern for young folk in Dili in 2020, one would think. In the end I spoke to some 33 returned workers, as well as many more people from their families or communities. While there were exceptions, they were almost all of a certain type—educated and intellectually curious youth who had been among the first in their family to finish school and had then travelled to Dili in search of work, education, diversion, love or some combination of all four. Although they had studied various things, a course in international relations was the most popular choice. A history of the nation-state, including the Peace of Westphalia, seems to have been covered early on, and although their understanding of global affairs was usually cloudy, they were enthused by all things international, something that often went along with a passion for studying English. These energetic *joven* (youth) had been raised on stories about the role of how the *frente diplomatika* which (along with the *frente armada* and the urban pro-independence underground known as the *frente klandistina*) had defied both the Indonesian neighbours and a sceptical world to win their nation's independence. A slogan used by former President and current Prime Minister Taur Matan Ruak captures the zeitgeist well: “in the past we shed our blood for independence, now we must sweat and work hard for a better life” (T: *uluk ho imi fakar ran ba ukun rasik aan, fila fali ho imi, hisik kosar ba moris diak*). Hard work in peacetime, Ruak says, is not just virtuous in itself but also a way of continuing the struggle and sacrifice of those who fought in the war (Anibal 2016).

Speaking to returned or aspiring seasonal workers, I found they were typically sanguine about the extent to which their formal qualifications were not in demand by employers in Timor-Leste, or anywhere else. They expressed little or no sense that menial work in Australia was ‘beneath’ them. Almost without exception they were either happy they had been selected to pick fruit, or disappointed that in spite of their English language skills and demonstrated determination, they had been unable to find a place in the program. Some of the reasons why my interlocutors wanted this work so badly are common to labour migrants the world over—most notably a need to support themselves and their family. Some younger interlocutors also spoke of a desire to see a land beyond Timor and learn about a way of life other than their own. Yet the degree to which they mostly placed their individual experience within a larger national struggle is distinctive and significant. Almost everyone who had been to Australia agreed that work there was hard, sometimes very hard—entailing long hours, exposure to heat and cold, absence from family or loved ones and sometimes onerous discipline. It was the sense that they endured all this in the service of something bigger that made it bearable. One interlocutor set this out for me directly. “Our fathers were part of the *frente armada*” he explained, “we are of the *frente ekonomika* (economic front)”. For the educated young, most of whom had dreams of a life that went far beyond picking fruit, this collective narrative was a way of coming to terms with the menial nature of their work

and the shortfall between it and their hopes of becoming an *ema boot* (important person) with an office job. Whatever hardships they had to endure, it was for the greater good. There was a sense that no matter how difficult things were, through their own willingness to work hard in an unfamiliar foreign land the struggle for national development would also be successful.

This tendency of young Timorese workers to position their diasporic labour within a broader narrative of national struggle, has striking parallels with the spirit that pervades life at the Timor-Leste's premier language training centre Science of Life (SOLS) 24/7.¹ There students are explicitly inculcated in the idea that training will not only improve their own prospects but make them better able to contribute to the development of their country. As a regular visitor to their four various residential training centres in Oecussi District over the years, I watched the live-in students begin and end their days raising the flag and reciting the national anthem. They would practice their English by chanting slogans like "I love East Timor very much!" Once they asked me to give a motivational speech on how I thought they could make Timor-Leste an "advanced country like Australia". Although English is taught in Timorese secondary schools, in Timor SOLS has developed a reputation as a cheap and affordable place to acquire this prestigious skill. Most young Timorese who speak English, seasonal workers included, have lived at one of their centres or benefitted from their courses.

For anyone who has spent time in Timor-Leste recently, it would be difficult not to be aware of SOLS, and indeed in collecting data for this paper it was a key research site.² It arrived in 2005, and although its size has fluctuated, current members say it has around 30 residential centres and sub-centres throughout the country. Its mission, genuinely non-profit, is to provide people with the chance to improve their lives through education. This consists largely of English lessons, although other subjects including IT and money management are also offered, as well as its eponymous Science of Life System™—a set of golden rules urging diligence, discipline, compassion and positive thinking.

Although it was founded in Cambodia, SOLS in Timor-Leste is strikingly local. Centres consist of thatched huts or reclaimed Indonesian-era ruins with exceptionally simple classrooms (open-air), dormitories (sleeping mats) and kitchens (serving boiled cassava leaf and rice) that run on a minimal budget. Good students eventually become teachers. Fees compare favourably with what it would cost students to live at home.

When asked what brought them to SOLS, students invariably answered, with heart-breaking earnestness, that they hoped English would increase their chances of finding a job. When I started visiting them in 2011, this response was typically more an aspiration than anything else—a plumb NGO position was unlikely to appear, and while migrating to the UK was an option for some it came with daunting social and financial costs. Now most of them do have a plan—to register to pick fruit

in Australia. It is noteworthy that, although it is a non-government organisation, life at SOLS is overtly nationalistic. As mentioned above, each day begins and ends with a raising or a lowering of the national flag and the singing of the national anthem. Students pledge that they will strive to become 'leaders with character' in order to 'develop Timor-Leste'. Also interesting is the way in which, alongside language training, SOLS teaches its students other skills specifically (most notably basic accounting and money management) intended to help them get by as respectable wage earners in a market economy—something that is particularly significant given that many of its students are drawn from communities in which subsistence agriculture and ritualised exchange have historically been more important than the cash economy. In this sense, SOLS is arguably engaged not in ideologically neutral instruction in numeracy and language skills, but a form of what Silva (2017) describes as 'economic pedagogy'—'a project intended to 'monopolise the sources of government, prestige and social reproduction via the state, its institutions and projects.' Analysing government sponsored *tara bandu* (ritual prohibition) ceremonies carried out around Ermera in 2012 with the intention of encouraging people to dedicate less of their wealth to ritual exchange, Silva describes how the state was able to effectively appropriate customary authority in order to promote ways of understanding and use wealth that would ultimately undermine its influence. In the case of SOLS we see a comparable situation—an NGO that has successfully mobilised the nationalist, spiritually minded, do-it-yourself ethos of Timorese collectivism in order to promote the idea that individual wage earning is a better way to live.

For all its similarities with its Pacific neighbours, SOLS in Timor-Leste highlights that working abroad is embedded in a distinct context—specifically a tradition of self-organised, nationalist youth. Organisations such as this have had a long history in both fascist Portugal and the Indonesian Orde Baru (Bexley and Tchailoro 2014; Kuin 1993). Archival footage from the early 1970s shows children being drilled by the short lived FRETILIN government (TV New Zealand 1975). Almost fifty years later one of these kids, now my landlord in a coastal village in Oecussi and about 60 years old, delighted in entertaining his own children with a half-remembered Portuguese marching song about how the youth should give everything for their country.

The Indonesian concept of organised nationalist youth has had an even longer lasting impact. The concept of *pemuda* has been central to Indonesian nationalism since its inception, and the generation of Timorese students that absorbed this narrative as part of their education in the 1980s and 1990s were, ironically, able to make it the basis for their own nationalism. Although the armed resistance was never completely wiped out, as the 1990s wore on it was the *frente klandestina*, a mostly urban movement of nationalist youth who became the driving force behind it. One of the most significant components of this was an organisation known as RENETIL (a Portuguese acronym for The National Resistance of Timorese Students)

whose main purpose was to organise nationalist activities among Timorese students in Indonesia. Veterans of the movement describe how, although they hoped that studying abroad would give them an edge in the job-market, their activities there were orientated not towards personal gain but collective struggle (Silva 2013).

To an outside observer the future of young Timorese workers abroad, including Australia, is challenging to say the least. The work they do is precarious, the experience of being away from home is often disorientating, the wages they send back tend to get quickly eaten up servicing the needs of those who stay behind, and no matter how well they look after their own families their country's economic future is highly uncertain. And yet, in spite of all this, Timorese workers in Australia persist at their difficult jobs, and thousands wait enthusiastically (if not impatiently) to join them. While this is partially explicable in terms of people simply trying to meet their own needs, the Timorese national story of struggle against all odds (including, notably, pronouncements by outside observers that their cause was hopeless, see Braithwaite, Charlesworth, and Soares 2012, 61-78) clearly plays a part in bolstering their resilience. Regardless of how things might appear to researchers who are unfamiliar with their home context, Timorese can draw on this heritage to envisage their work abroad not primarily as alienated labour within a grossly unequal global system but also as a way of contributing a meaningful part to a national struggle they have been inculcated into since childhood. A struggle which they will eventually win.

The fog of peace: accessing international work through local networks

Just as Timorese seasonal workers in Australia can draw upon their national story in giving meaning to their work abroad, so too are the processes through which they seek to attain such work contingent on local modes of governance. These ways and means of acting are generally not visible to those without a detailed knowledge of the Timorese context.

In theory, the SWP is managed jointly between Australia and Timor-Leste. While recruitment is the preserve of SEFOPE, Australia seeks to support these workers through its Pacific Labour Facility (PLF), currently operated by a contractor, Palladium. Although this work is complex, a significant part of its focus is seeking to ensure that clear information about the Program is publicly available and to put in place measures, "to ensure recruitment processes are fair, transparent and equitable" (DFAT 2019, 12).

Although the good-will of all parties in this can be taken for granted, it is acknowledged that Timor-Leste may lack the 'capacity' to achieve this goal without assistance, and there are a range of materials designed for distribution through social media that aim to answer questions relating to the SWP, including the steps

one needs to take to sign up to the program. Identified in neat stages, these steps begin with an initial visit to the SEFOPE office for an interview with an Australian employer. Reading these materials, one could be mistaken for believing that winning a coveted place working in Australia was a straight-forward seven step process and that clarification is just an email away (SEFOPE 2019).

In reality, from talking to returned workers (or, even more often, frustrated prospective workers) it was apparent that this was not how they saw the situation. Whatever the truth about what is happening, there is a widespread sense of confusion about how someone might go about being selected, and a sense of desperation among potential applicants who are convinced that the system is rigged in favour of those with connections.

The nature of this discord quickly became apparent as soon as I arrived in Timor and began seeking out people who could help me better understand this topic. When I put the word out that I was interested in speaking to people who had returned from Australia, my Facebook and WhatsApp messages quickly started piling up.

Despite being clear that I was not a government representative and had no power over who was selected to the SWP, I quickly found that many didn't seem to believe me:

"Maun (older brother), would very much like to work in Australia. Can you help me?"

"Maun, I am very sad because I am unemployed. I speak good English. Do you know how I can work in Australia?"

"Maun, I applied to work in Australia, but I was not called for an interview."

While I eventually also managed to speak with individuals who had come back from Australia and their families, the overwhelming majority of the messages I received were from people who wanted to go to Australia and hoped that I could somehow assist them in doing so. Confronted with this I would attempt to clarify the situation, sometimes by directing would-be applicants to the official material that had been produced by SEFOPE. More than anything else these efforts tended to elicit disappointment. Most gave up quietly, but there were a couple of individuals who didn't get (or ignored) the hint, and continued to badger me, repeatedly asking to meet up with me and insinuating that I was willing to help other people and not them. My protestation that there was already an established process for applying for the seasonal worker program ('just check the website') and that they needed to talk to SEFOPE was clearly not credible to them. Later I asked a number of informants I had known for years why this might be the case. They confirmed what I had already suspected, that people who were behaving in this way felt I had unfairly brushed them off, and that if I really wanted to help them I could.

“Everyone knows that SEFOPE just send their families”, I was told by one unhappy young man as he sat miserably in his front yard, ‘there’s no point in even applying’. Whether this was accurate was impossible to say. Certainly, I met people who did seem to have succeeded in joining the SWP without personal connections. Nonetheless, the idea the process was rigged was widespread—repeated to me by most of the aspiring young workers I spoke to.

The view, normative in Timor-Leste, that regardless of what might be stated officially, access to seasonal work was mediated by personal connections, stands in stark contrast with the perspectives of Australian actors within the program. For them such behaviour is viewed as corrupt and totally unacceptable. Australian actors within the SWP evince an understandably inflexible commitment to the idea that the program sits within a publicly acknowledged and agreed upon set of rules and regulations. Indeed, a major part of the Australian aid effort to Timor-Leste and other countries in the region is its Governance for Development (GfD) program which describes itself as aiming to effect ‘poverty reduction in Timor-Leste through economic development and improvement in the delivery of government services’ (Cardno 2019). While GfD is separate from the PLF, both reflect Australia’s commitment to helping Timorese institutions embody professional, transparent, and apolitical forms of governance.

For Timorese actors involved in the governance of the SWP there are many reasons to be receptive to this well intended agenda. However, although the Timor-Australia relationship tends to be construed as a partnership, in both the specific case of the SWP, and in its dealings with international patrons more generally, there is an unspoken asymmetry of power. Timor-Leste is only one of many countries that sends workers to Australia, and there is an overwhelming number of people waiting to go. This is a relationship in which Australia is in the position of strength and, by extension, the socially contingent Timorese ways of getting things are in a distinctly subaltern position.

It is not the purpose of this article to cast judgment on this situation. Rather my point is that that governance in Timor-Leste reflects what Brown (2014) describes as an “ecology of relations” that can be “described neither by liberal nor customary frameworks” and in which patronage relationships deeply matter. This situation also appears to be reflected in the way people think about the SWP. To put it another way, in the case of the SWP, as with most other Timorese government processes, the formal mechanism is at best a framework, and at least just an acceptable public face for a more complex, culturally contingent reality (Aspinall et al. 2018; Cummins 2015). What foreigners may see as corruption or incompetence is, in some cases, simply the manifestation of a way of getting things done which values relationships over bureaucratic process.

The procedure by which people apply for a place in SWP is worth describing further.

Until last year, people who wanted to join the seasonal worker program had to travel to Dili and submit their documents (*fó dokumentus*) at the central SEFOPE office there. This is a highly stylised process adapted directly from that prevailing in Indonesia whereby applicants muster copies of their identity card, school leaving certificates and a CV written according to a uniform format (all of which takes considerable doing in itself) along with an application form and submit them all in a manila folder. Informants told me that it is very important that these folders are blue. The background of the passport photo that comes along with it has to be a certain type of red. One striking aspect of this is that the applications cannot be in any way personalised, in fact if anything the process is seen as being more about showcasing the ability of applicants to conform with the rules and display deference to authority rather than demonstrating any special aptitude for the job in question. For any sort of government job, but especially for the SWP, the number of applicants is generally overwhelming. Although these numbers are far from official, SEFOPE staff told me they thought that even before the 2018-2019 recruitment almost 9000 new applicants submitted their documents, and there were already 10,000 waiting to go.

What happens after documents are submitted is less clear. Candidates who fit the basic age and health criteria are, in theory, invited back for a physical test intended to ensure that they have the minimum strength and agility to do the work at hand, although the way in which this was carried out seemed inconsistent. Some returned workers chuckled as they described how at their physical test, they had been asked to lift up a box and put it on the table. Others recalled having been put through large sports day style events in which hundreds of candidates were doing push ups and endurance runs—a routine rumoured to have been adapted from that used by the army to select recruits. One returned worker admitted that she had not done the physical test at all but was somehow still selected. There is also supposed to be a written exam intended to ensure that prospective workers have a basic knowledge of English, although once again the degree to which this was effectively applied is questionable. Many workers reported working with people who knew no English at all. Others who were near fluent were rejected. Finally, some, though not all, of the returned workers reported being asked for a short interview (perceived by some as a test of their ability to speak English) in which they were asked about their motivations for working in Australia, although again, what role this played in who got selected was completely opaque.

In theory, workers who passed all these stages were then placed into a ‘work ready pool’. from which people would be called upon for interviews with foreign employers. Contact from SEFOPE, if it was to occur, was by telephone, something which caused anxiety in itself. Timor-Leste’s mobile network, though extensive, is unreliable, and those who lose their phone or their number cannot always afford

to immediately replace it. Many of the people I spoke to lived in terror of missing the call, which could change their life.

The sum result of all of this among prospective seasonal workers was confusion, and a widespread conviction that the unwieldy official path was at best unlikely to provide results and at worst not really intended to. There was widespread puzzlement as to why one person was selected for an interview and not another, and indeed even from an outsider's point of view there was no good explanation for this. When I asked SEFOPE and other figures with an inside knowledge of how government worked in Timor-Leste they would typically chuckle and say something like 'this is not Australia, Mike'. As mentioned above the applications were not personalised, and for each opportunity that comes up there are hundreds of equally qualified candidates to choose from. While there have been widely publicised examples of public servants involved in labour sending being moved for allegedly favouring friends and relatives in the selection process, the degree to which this was politically motivated is hard to say. Actual or aspiring seasonal workers were also a fraught source of information about this. Those who had been waiting for a call back from SEFOPE for years tended to be embittered, often pointing to people they perceived as less qualified (that is to say with less ability to speak English than themselves) but better connected who had been called for an interview. Returned workers, on the other hand, would sometimes concede that getting an interview for a position could be a matter of knowing the right person, although not in their case, or that of anyone they directly knew.

Given the reality that selection to the SWP in Timor occurs within a setting where it is widely accepted that access to jobs or other state resources is contingent on political and social affiliation, it is probably disingenuous to believe it is fully merit based. For outsiders, in particular those working in the policy space, this presents both a challenge and an opportunity. The challenge lies in accepting, non-judgementally, the reality that in Timor-Leste the norms surrounding public governance are different from those prevailing in Australia. The opportunity is that once having recognised this gap exists, work can begin on building a realistic understanding of how recruitment processes in Timor-Leste work. Such an understanding might, eventually, inform a solution to this specific issue that is satisfactory to everyone. While it is all very well for policy to be informed by principle, pre-existing practice must also be considered if it is to be effective.

Conclusion

Labour mobility is a global phenomenon lived through local frameworks. While the movement of labour can be approached through the prism of economic data and high-level policy, the experiences of labourers cannot—a reality that is too often overlooked or glossed over. Top down research approaches to understanding the SWP and similar programs are necessary and no doubt well-intended, but such research needs to also find ways of engaging with the stories of those who do the work, in all their cultural and linguistic distinctiveness.

While the focus of this research has been on the specific case of Timor-Leste, in considering the SWP more broadly the enormous variety of places from which workers come poses a serious challenge. Although all ten participating countries might fairly be placed within Austronesia, from Papua New Guinea to Fiji, they vary greatly in terms of their languages, religion and economic activity. By sketching how the experiences of Timorese SWP workers in Australia are embedded in distinctly Timorese frameworks for being in the world that may not be readily apparent or comprehensible to foreign observers, this paper seeks to gesture to the importance of recognising and engaging with this diversity in thinking about how the SWP works and its impact on sending countries.

Although from an outsider's point of view Timorese participation in the SWP might seem to be primarily about the accumulation of wealth or personal experience, closer engagement shows it is also inspired by a spirit of collective sacrifice and struggle abroad that has roots going back at least forty-five years, arguably longer. In so far as this narrative is important to how workers meet the challenges of toiling in an unfamiliar environment, its existence is of significance to anyone interested in understanding the Program's impact on Timorese individuals and communities. Likewise, whilst an outside observer would likely see recruitment to the SWP as a flawed, though merit-based process, the reality, only perceptible through observation from the inside, is that in Timor there is a widespread belief that it is often contingent upon personal connections and patronage relationships. While the degree to which this is in fact the case is difficult to say, the reality that it is widely believed has a tangible influence on how people think about the SWP and is thus significant regardless.

The idea that policy relating to labour migration should be attentive to the perspectives of those who participate in it, or aspire to, is not a novel one, or at least should not be. While the SWP, and similar programs, can operate without such an awareness (and indeed, to a certain extent, are currently doing so), without it they will struggle to fully appreciate the needs of the workers within it. Expanding the role of ethnographic methods in understanding their experiences would be a great first step towards changing this.

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Notes

- ¹ In 2019, SOLS 24/7 in Timor rebranded as AHHA Education.
- ² My material on SOLS 24/7 became a blog on the subject for the Development Policy Centre (Rose 2019).

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