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Eating the meat but keeping the bones – aid from Timor-Leste

By Elisa da Silva and Michael Rose
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In Timor-Leste, when people receive a gift, they are often advised to *han isin sikat ruin* (eat the meat [but] keep the bones) – that is to say, happily take what is given, but never lose track of the favour. Just as it is sometimes necessary to receive help, Timorese like to remind each other, so too is it important to remember what has been received and give back.

Although the country is best known (especially to readers of this blog) as an aid recipient, this ethic runs deep in Timor-Leste, and over the past decade or so has begun to shape its foreign policy, specifically through a small but meaningful program of [South-South](#) solidarity aid. Timor-Leste still faces a range of serious social and economic challenges, but nearly twenty years after the restoration of its independence, leaders feel increasingly in a position to start repaying the goodwill Timor-Leste has received from the international community.

There are many reasons why countries [commit](#) part of their wealth to helping people beyond their borders. Donations can be at once a way of advancing a donor's strategic interests, and an expression of their sympathy with those who are less fortunate. Timor-Leste's program of 'solidarity' aid is no exception. For Timorese, like myself (Elisa), contributing to various sorts of disaster relief is not just a moral imperative, but also a way to show that we have arrived as a nation that can stand on its own.

In Timor-Leste this has involved contribution to disaster response efforts in other countries. Over the years I estimate we have provided around US \$15 million to support countries including [Portugal](#), [Laos](#), [Myanmar](#), [Indonesia](#), [Australia](#), [Thailand](#), [Malaysia](#), [Cape Verde](#), [Philippines](#), [Brazil](#) and [Sri Lanka](#), during natural disasters ranging from fires to volcanic eruptions. While the amount we give is relatively small, and we don't have the resources to fund longer-term development programs like our larger friends, we hope we can still make a positive difference. Our history has made us very aware that when it comes to [international relations](#) even small gestures can have tangible results.

As part of my work as a diplomat and Timorese, our solidarity aid program is an issue that is particularly close to my heart. For this reason, in recent years whenever I have had the chance, I have tried to seek out the views of Timorese citizens on how they feel about the nation's money being spent like this. The results of these conversations have been encouraging.

I have no doubt that the idea of Timor-Leste's wealth being used for solidarity aid has broad support – the concept of *han isin sikat ruin* is one that is widely and deeply accepted among my people. At the same time, there is also a keen awareness that our domestic challenges need to be the main priority. So, while there seems to be wide support for the idea of providing solidarity aid, people want it to be well targeted – we do not have money to waste. Interestingly, in talking to people about this issue there is a sense that the concept of *han isin sikat ruin* goes both ways. Like our neighbour, Indonesia, and other countries throughout Southeast Asia, Timor-Leste is a place where relationships and consensus building are a very important part of how things get done. Giving what we can to our neighbours is a way of improving the likelihood that they will also be willing to help us in our hour of need, should that ever arrive.

Somewhat to my surprise, in discussing the issue of solidarity aid, I have found that the conversation tends to quickly turn to the other things the money could be spent on. Members of the younger generation in particular are very aware of the limited opportunities for high school and university graduates. Although they understand the principles behind our solidarity aid, they wonder why more effort hasn't been put into things like diversifying the economy, which is still largely dependent on oil and gas, and offers very few opportunities to the young. Likewise, even given marked improvements over the past decade, we still suffer from appalling rates of child malnutrition, our education system struggles, and too many people don't have access to clean water. Despite widespread understanding of the principle behind solidarity aid, Timor-Leste's government needs to be cautious that such expenditure is not, or at least is not perceived to be, prioritised over domestic needs.

Corollary to this, policymakers in Timor-Leste might also do well to ask whether or not donating money is always the best way of helping and showing solidarity. We already have quite a good track record of providing statements of solidarity in the wake of international incidents – are there other forms of support we could provide? One possibility that we might consider is that of being more strategic in the way we use our vote in international forums. It was not so long ago that we ourselves relied on friends (foremost among them former Portuguese colonies in Africa such as Angola and [Mozambique](#)) to support our cause in the

United Nations. Now that Timor-Leste has a vote of its own, do we need to give more thought as to how we might use it to show solidarity with those in need and support causes we believe in?

Timor-Leste takes pride in being a small nation with a big heart. We are young, but we have travelled a long and difficult path to independence. Although we have forgiven those who stood against us, we have not forgotten the value of standing with others. No one in Timor-Leste questions that the concept of *han isin sikat ruin* is central to what we aspire to be as a nation, but serious discussion over what it means in practice is long overdue.

Elisa da Silva authored this post with support from Michael Rose.

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