

# Leftovers from our first Memorandum of Understanding

by Gordon Peake

2 February 2021



Gordon and Julia talking to Alva K. Lim, Mark Peter Notaras (top right) and Paula Torres (bottom right).

If an assessment team was to use standard evaluation criteria to assess my performance in preparing the first episode in our podcast series, [Memorandum of Understanding](#), they'd say it's too early to tell in terms of 'impact' and 'relevance' but find me wanting in terms of 'efficiency'. Producer Julia was aghast when I delivered five hours of audio for a thirty-minute podcast. I have promised to dial back the garrulous Irish pantomath routine going forward.

Our [inaugural episode](#) centres on [Agora Food Studio](#), a social enterprise in Timor-Leste set up by Alva K. Lim and Mark Peter Notaras, two aid workers who felt spiritually undernourished from years writing reports and rigging up banners hailing new programs. Five years ago, they set up their restaurant in Dili with a focus on celebrating East Timorese coffee and food – cassava, corn, wild yams, wild leaves, beans, nuts, seeds, honey, juices squeezed from seasonal fruits like monkey tail and rose apple, kombucha fermented in rosella and turmeric. They have developed more than sixty East Timorese chefs and restauranteurs since opening in 2016 and run a wide range of mentoring projects.

To use the nomenclature of William Easterly, the pair are 'searchers', hoping to find answers to individual problems via trial and error experimentation. Behind effortless-looking culinary creations on their [Insta](#) are serendipities and stuff-ups. You'll hear Alva and Mark speak candidly about their philosophy and the toil and quiet accomplishments that have gone into setting up the 'food studio-food lab' concept. I spoke also to Paula Torres, a young staff member, as well as an old friend of mine, Anacleto Ribeiro, who took a break from his job working on his country's longstanding goal of joining ASEAN to talk about how food and the customs and rituals around it are the ideal entrée into understanding how Timor-Leste really works.

Even with Julia's stellar editing, we had to leave too much fascinating audio on the cutting room floor. In this blog I touch on four important topics we delved into, but which didn't make the final cut.

## Inflexible procurement systems stymying economic development

A conversation about the ubiquity of plastic water bottles at program events (including events focused on plastic reduction) tipped us into a conversation about the rigidity of procurement systems in aid. If there is a budget for bottled water, it must be spent; if it easier to get it from overseas than look for creative in-country solutions, so be it. Budgets pre-set and developed far from Dili mean aid donors eschew local products because it is all too difficult.

The hamstringing effects of centralised procurement policies is a known problem. In 2006, a study of UN [peacekeeping](#) found less than 10% of mission spending occurred in the country in which it took place. Before Agora's time, an NGO called Peace Dividend Trust operated for a while with a focus on building market linkages between East Timorese suppliers and international organisations. While that program ended – donors stopped funding – procurement remains an issue. Donor support makes up close to 10% of Timor-Leste's GNI; small changes could make a big difference and help achieve one of the ostensible goals of aid programs, namely economic development.

### Feedback loops

Alva opened up about the pressures of running a hospitality business in a world where many of us have social media accounts and few shy on venturing opinions. She worried about being 'blasted' within the expat Dili social media bubble, an ecosystem described vividly by one wag as 'obsessed with soda water shortages, slow internet, traffic jams and selling old Tupperware.'

We live in a world where constant and intrusive feedback loops are the norm, loops where opprobrium is dished out faster than praise. I can relate. Alva's stomach-knotting about a dish is mine about publishing an article, blog or setting up a podcast.

Officially, feedback loops in development are signposted and deliberative: acronym-heavy six-monthly reports and the like. The classic critique of aid a la William Easterly is that these constitute ineffective feedback loops.

Alva's comments made me wonder if rapid and influential informal feedback loops exist but we just don't talk about them. I can vividly recall experiences of programs being adjusted (in both positive and negative ways) based on email/WhatsApp feedback from the funder that itself was premised on (frequently anecdotal) information acquired from their own sources. In a bureaucracy, a brisk phone call from a minister's office constitutes salient feedback but the influence of such is unlikely to be exalted in an annual report.

Questions I've been thinking about: In aid programming, can the import of such feedback be measured? Can it be significant to changing programming direction? Or is it too ephemeral to make a long-term difference?

### **Stress levels of aid workers**

A stone's throw from the Australian embassy, Agora became a lounge room for aid workers, apparatchiks and contractors. We joked that their joint would have been a good place to conceal secret recording devices, leaving unsaid the mordant irony in said given the starring role of bugging in an earlier chapter in the Australia-Timor-Leste story.

I asked what people talked about, hoping to get some inspiration for a mystery novel I'm starting to plot set against the backdrop of a peacekeeping mission. The pair straight-batted my question like cricketers before stumps. They're too busy in the kitchen to listen in. Instead, they talked about their efforts to make Agora a happy and light place by providing a stress-ball in the form of a well-fed stomach. This led us into a conversation about the stresses of people working in development, this industry with long time horizons, fuzzy goals, precarious contracts, court politics and so many well-meaning but critically-minded people working within it. The conversation recalled a [Devpolicy Blog](#) from last year about stressed-out aid workers.

### **The hierarchies of development**

I recently [reviewed](#) for Devpolicy a thought-provoking book that shone a spotlight on hidden hierarchies and pressures within organisations implementing development projects. That book centres on Angola, but Paula's reflections underscored just how its findings are of broader application. She talked about how East Timorese working within international aid projects fretted about their English, qualifications and feelings of insufficiency, contrasting that experience with the 'many hands make light work' approach of Agora. My chat with Paula made me think how enlightening it would be to conduct ethnographies of aid programs. Whether anyone would be up for such barometric examination is an open question.

These are the topics that didn't survive the editing process. Think how interesting the ones that made it into our first [Memorandum of Understanding](#) must be. Subscribe and download us wherever you get your podcasts and follow us on Twitter [@MOU\\_pod](#) for updates.

## Author/s:

### **Gordon Peake**

Gordon Peake is a writer, podcaster and consultant. His first book was an award-winning memoir of life in Timor-Leste, his second on the would-be nation of Bougainville.

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