

# From little things...

## *The role of libraries in building civil societies: The East Timor project*

The process of building a nation is well under way in East Timor. The country has gained independence, free elections have been held, and the new government has delivered its first budget. Negotiations are taking place regarding the development of the oil and gas fields — a major source of income for the nation.

The Asia Pacific Special Interest group held a forum on 7 August to highlight some of the problems facing East Timor in its efforts to rebuild. The speakers were Professor James Fox head of the ANU's Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies; Alex Byrne, university librarian at the University of Technology, Sydney; and Judy Blood, a volunteer who recently led efforts to reconstruct the library of the University of East Timor.

Professor Fox led the discussion by outlining a few facts about East Timor. Although there has not been an official census, it is estimated that more than fifty per cent of the East Timorese population is under the age of 21–22 years. A young population needs education. In recognition of this, the East Timorese government has allocated between twenty-three and twenty-seven per cent of its annual budget to education (approximately \$67 million). The education budget is broken up as follows: approximately half goes on primary education, with university funding receiving approximately three per cent, which will be reduced over the next twelve months. The largest component of the small East Timorese civil service is its teachers.

More than fifty per cent of the population is illiterate, and more than eighty per cent are unemployed. Forty per cent are aged under 15 years. Thirty one per cent of students move on from primary to secondary education, and only nine per cent go on to attend university.

So, with the situation so desperate in many ways, and with the literacy levels so low, why spend much needed funds on libraries? This is the question that was addressed by Alex Byrne.

Public libraries provide access to everyday information for all sectors of the community: farming, health, education, politics. Libraries accommodate the needs of women,

the aged, children, the illiterate, the employed and the unemployed alike. They contribute to the feeling of nationhood. Until recently the public library network was made up of Indonesian branch libraries. The special needs of the indigenous population were not recognised, and were not reflected in the collections or the policy directions of the libraries.

University libraries support study and research into wider issues. In any nation local research is important. There has been much material produced by researchers on East Timor, but little by the East Timorese. The work of the fly-in, fly-out researcher, while valuable, lacks the feeling and understanding of local researchers.

East Timor now has the opportunity to establish a public library network which suits their requirements. There are many models and options available to them, but the important thing is that the East Timorese people are able to determine for themselves the system which will work best for them. They need practical help to establish the system.

So how do you rebuild a library from scratch? With difficulty, and with the commitment and determination of the East Timorese people.

Judy Blood is a volunteer with the UNTL Library Development Project and has spent time at the University of East Timor in 2000 and 2002. Judy says that her greatest skills as a librarian are as an organiser and builder. But the situation she faced when the first went to East Timor to start up a new library demanded all her skills. She says that 'patience, good humour and endless resourcefulness' were vital to face the challenges that she found there.

The university was destroyed during the unrest: the building had been burnt out, with furnishings, books and equipment destroyed. In short, when Judy first went to East Timor in 2000 there were no resources, only four staff (none with adequate computer experience), virtually no information technology support, frequent power failures, and no common language.

While the problem of housing the library has been addressed (albeit temporarily — the roof leaks, and is being replaced), the problems of staffing, training, power disruptions, shelving and lack of resources are still very real. The shelving problem is on its way to being addressed with the very generous donation of 249 double bays of shelving by the Australian National University (ANU). Other universities who have provided support include the University of Technology Sydney, and the Northern Territory University. The Victorian Education Department donated the computer equipment that will be the basis of the library system and the multimedia centre.

John Sloan has also spent three months in Dili with UNTL library staff. He was funded by the SA Department of Education. He continued the training and helped establish the online catalogue. Later this year, two librarians (from Shepparton and

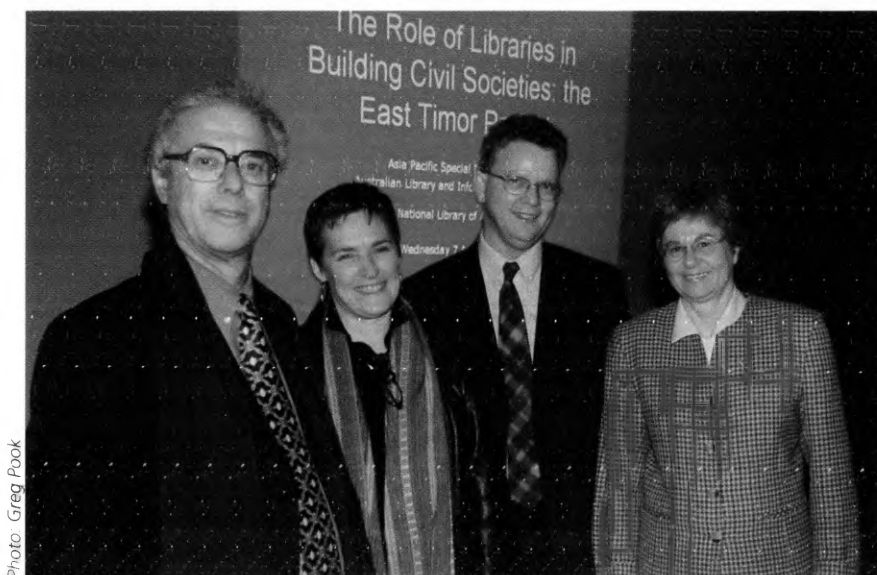


Photo: Greg Pook

At the APSIG seminar were Professor James Fox, head of the ANU's Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies; Judy Blood, volunteer with the UNTL Library Development Project; Alex Byrne, university librarian at the University of Technology, Sydney; and Jennefer Nicholson, ALIA executive director

Adelaide) are going up as volunteers for three months. They are self-funded with a little financial assistance from Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA [Australian People for Health, Education and Development Abroad, an initiative of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (ACTU), to provide overseas humanitarian aid. Their website is at <http://www.apheda.org.au>].

#### What is still needed?

Funds, equipment, training, resources — the job has barely begun. Judy estimates that to have the library running efficiently and effectively a fully-trained librarian (or librarians) will have to be on-site for at least the next two to three years to help build the library systems and provide the much needed training.

#### How can you help?

The project requires a co-ordinated approach. To facilitate this, Friends of the UNTL Library groups have been established. At present, there is one in Melbourne and one in Sydney. And as a result of the forum Jill Haynes



John Sloan with two East Timorese library staff

[[jhaynes@ausport.gov.au](mailto:jhaynes@ausport.gov.au)] has been co-opted into setting up a Canberra branch of the Friends of UNTL Library. A meeting will be held shortly and announced widely on e-lists and in the media. These groups will help to co-ordinate the donations of equipment and resources and will provide central repositories for these donations. Why not start a friends group in your state or territory? Information about the program can be found on the UNTL Library Project website [<http://www.untl.labor.net.au>].

Union Aid Abroad-APHEDA originally established this project. It has been the projects mainstay over the last two years. APHEDA funded Judy's two trips to Dili, provided her with great support on the ground, and much more besides.

#### Making a donation

Here are some guidelines on how to make a donation to the UNTL project.

- APHEDA handles donations to the project. Donations are tax-deductible and receive proportional matching funding from AusAID. Details will be available on the website shortly.
- When considering donating significant material goods or soliciting donations for the project, please contact the Friends of UNTL Library Group for feedback and advice.
- The Friends Group will also be able to tell you where to send or drop off your donations.
- If you have a small bundle of bookends sitting in your storeroom, or desk supplies left over from when you were downsized last year, these will always be useful in East Timor.
- Any contributions, no matter how small, will be valued, even if it is just a tub of paper clips, a box of IBM discs or a packet of pencils picked up at Kmart while doing the Saturday morning shopping. ■



Volunteers load the shelving into a shipping container at ANU — money is needed to help cover the cost of freight.

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