

OAN KIAK

Organizational Overview and Approach to Gender

Oan Kiak is a community-based small enterprise collective based in one of the most isolated rural communities in Timor-Leste, Barikafa, an *aldeia* in the subdistrict of Luro in Lautem district. Oan Kiak was established in 2003 and now has 24 female members and 5 male members, the men participating in a limited range of tasks. While a literal translation of ‘Oan Kiak’ is ‘poor or orphaned child’, culturally the phrase carries the meaning of ‘the poor people of Timor’. The leaders of the group, President Ajilda de Jesus Fernandes and Secretary Theresa de Jesus Fernandes, explain that they chose this name because at the outset the group ‘had nothing, just the people’.

While neither an NGO nor international agency, this profile of a community-based collective has been included so as to give a sense of the kind of work that is being done at a local community level on gender-related issues, and how the work of such collectives at times intersect with national or international NGOs. The group’s access to broader gender networks and discourses is at this time very limited and dependent on opportunities opened up to them by organizational partners, primarily Concern Worldwide, and other rare visitors to their community.

Oan Kiak developed initially as a loose *tais*-weaving network. For Oan Kiak, the act of coming together to practice weaving skills represented a significant social opportunity. Yet sales of their *tais*, especially to foreigners who work in or visit Timor-Leste, was also seen as a way for the women to raise much-needed revenue and gain some economic independence. Given Barikafa’s isolation from the capital, however, the selling of *tais* has proven an extremely difficult task.

In 2003, Oan Kiak was able to adapt its practices and formalize its structures significantly due to contact with Concern Worldwide, an international NGO that was undertaking broader consultation with communities in Luro sub-district at that time. Prior to beginning intensive work in the area Concern identified Luro as one of the most isolated communities with some of the highest degrees of absolute poverty. Concern established relationships with over 20 community groups in Luro, some of which—like Oan Kiak—were already in existence and some of which formed after learning about Concern’s plans. These groups received material assistance, training, planning support, and regular input and monitoring from a locally born and based Community Development Worker as well as from Concern’s Dili-based staff.

With the development of a relationship with Concern, Oan Kiak decided to start a small kiosk. Concern subsequently provided the group with cash support of US\$130, helped to reconstruct a small community building that had been destroyed in 1999, and gave assistance with some planning support. From the success of the kiosk, as discussed below, Oan Kiak has expanded into other areas of small enterprise as outlined below.

Six of the Concern-supported groups in Luro consist predominantly of women, including Oan Kiak. Concern has found that supporting women’s groups is one useful model that, in combination with other approaches, can be used to create change to gendered conditions in communities where subsistence agricultural practices dominate. Concern recognises the limitations of this model, for example leaving untouched men’s roles in the gender equation and potentially creating more work for overburdened women. However, through experience

Concern has also found that women's groups tend to create a space where women are better able to adopt new roles that they may not find possible otherwise.

For Oan Kiak, like many community groups, the significance attached to being a 'women's group' or 'mixed group' is much more fluid than is typically found in international organizations' perspectives. On the one hand, Oan Kiak's leaders attest to the necessity of looking particularly to women's development, explaining that with national independence came the possibility to press for greater opportunities for women. On the other hand, however, they are not strictly opposed to men's involvement or membership. In fact it is taken for granted that men will have a role to play in their group, though not at a leadership level.

The members of Oan Kiak speak about the impacts of their work upon their lives as women in a variety of ways. Most commonly the women point to the material outcomes of their work, arguing that their activities fulfil practical needs within families and the local community. Oan Kiak's activities assist in alleviating the poverty of their community, allowing the group to forward-plan as well as to loan money to individual community members at the minimal interest rate of one per cent. This loan system has already aided community members, commonly mothers, to cover the children's school costs—sums that are often very difficult for subsistence farmers to accumulate at any one time. An inflow of cash is almost an unprecedented phenomenon in a community with limited integration into a cash economy, where typically goods are paid for through bartering locally grown rice.

Changes in material conditions have led to important cultural changes as well. Reflecting upon their group's progress, the women of Oan Kiak explain with pride that while before 1999 visitors to Barikafa would have been received only by men, now it is they who are able to introduce visitors to their community. More generally, and in an unprecedented manner, women collectively control services that are now integral to the livelihood of the community, adopting leadership positions beyond their traditional gendered roles. The members have also used the opportunity of becoming a small enterprise group to become literate and numerate.

Moreover, Oan Kiak is proud that its members come from different *knua*. While the geographic distance between *knua* is not great, the tight kinship networks within *knua* can make such organizing across different *knua* quite difficult. Previously women from different *knua* tended to be suspicious and fearful of one another and unlikely to spend much time on one another's land. Now women have established strong relationships across these cultural boundaries through working together as part of Oan Kiak.

At the end of 2005, Concern moved its regional office from Luro to Los Palos. Oan Kiak now operates as a largely autonomous group with Concern staff visiting for monitoring purposes every few months.

Programs

From its various small enterprise activities listed below, Oan Kiak annually divides profit dividends equally amongst its members. In 2004 each member received \$14.50, in 2005 \$50 and in 2006 each member received \$66. Over these years the group has accumulated more than \$3000 total in profits.

Kiosk

While many kiosks originating from microfinance schemes have struggled in Timor-Leste, the kiosk operated by Oan Kiak has been highly successful on a range of fronts. It provides local people with an alternative or supplementary supply of goods that is far more accessible than the weekly market some 12 kilometres away, which is reached on foot. Moreover, the work by the collective has meant that money derived from sales of goods has been able to stay within the community.

Literacy and Numeracy Development

Beyond the financial success of the kiosk, the small co-operative experience and profit generation gained through this activity have enabled the women to pursue other projects and goals. The management of the kiosk created the demand for basic numeracy and literacy development, with the women holding regular classes to advance various skill sets. Many of the members, most with no or minimal formal education, can now write their names and use basic bookkeeping methods to keep track of the income generated (rather than placing the coin received for an item next to the type of product sold which was the previous technique for recording sales). In the past, Concern supported the placement of a local teacher to regularly facilitate classes with the group. Without Concern's presence in the immediate area Oan Kiak now wishes to find other ways to improve members' literacy and numeracy development. Amongst themselves Oan Kiak group members have also practised public speaking and presentation skills in order to promote their activities to visitors.

Agricultural Production

To offset the material investment of Concern in the kiosk and a mechanical rice mill (see below), the women of Oan Kiak have been keen to display their own level of initiative by developing further activities. They have established a communal garden, produce peanut butter from peanuts grown themselves, and grow corn and rice for members' own usage.

Oan Kiak has also established a poultry-raising enterprise involving the buying, fattening and reselling of chickens. A rice mill is a further initiative that was purchased with support from Concern. Men in the community received training about how to use the mill, though the female members of Oan Kiak say that they would also like to learn more about the proper usage and maintenance of the machine. The community as a whole has access to the mill to process their dried rice and corn for a minimal cost, which is directed back into Oan Kiak's pool of earnings. Typifying the vulnerability of organization such as Oan Kiak, the rice mill has been out of use since early 2006. This was the result of a simple machine part breaking but group members have been too concerned by the security environment to travel to Dili to purchase a replacement part.

In early 2007 the Oan Kiak members had just received word that a proposal submitted to the Ministry of Development had been approved. This will result in a grant of \$330, which Oan Kiak will use to buy *karau*, or buffaloes, to assist with agricultural tasks.

Contacts

Location: Aldeia Barikafa, Subdistrict Luro, District Lautem

- Can contact through Concern Worldwide

Excerpt from: Trembath, Anna and Damian Grenfell, *Mapping the Pursuit of Gender Equality: Non-Government and International Agency Activity in Timor-Leste*, Globalism Institute, RMIT University, Dili, July 2007, ISBN 978-0-646-47770-1, pp. 52-55.