

“Maibee Mama, hau hanoin hanesan nee (but mama, I think like this)”

I have recently returned from eighteen months work and study in East Timor where I was fortunate enough to be involved with a group of very strong, resilient and capable, young Timorese women. We worked together in a local NGO with me as the international technical advisor. My role was to act as mentor, trainer, proposal writer and doer of any other odd jobs that seemed appropriate. Being easily the most senior person in the office I quickly lost the title of ‘Mana’ (sister), and became ‘Mama’ (mama). This was a term of respect and affection which, out of vanity, I initially resisted until I realised it gave me the right to sit in the front of the truck on long trips and to eat first at parties.

After many years working in Australia with various NGOs and managing Aboriginal training programs, I felt that I had a lot of knowledge and skills to share with the group. We would often have informal training sessions at which I would enthusiastically ‘share’ with them my bounty and they would just as enthusiastically and attentively listen to my every word. At these times my heart would swell and I would no longer have doubts about what I was doing in East Timor. I knew-indeed-that I was truly ‘building their capacity’. That was until of course a soft and respectful voice from the back of the room would interrupt me to say “but mama –I think like this” and then proceed to tell me that what I was saying was interesting but they had another way of doing things.

What was happening in fact was, that I was being gently and respectfully reminded that no matter how expert or knowledgeable we think we are, when it comes to sharing knowledge and skills, the beneficiaries of our wisdom have every right to choose their own way- and should most definitely be encouraged to do so.