



Kangaroo Valley – Remexio Partnership

I'd been in East Timor for a week. I started on the West Timor border at Maliana, working with an ATA team installing solar lighting and power systems into schools. The schools had been rebuilt and wired for electricity but, with no electricity available, the ATA team was there to install solar systems and 240 volt inverters to provide some power and run lights.

Friendship Group has been involved with since the year 2000. I've only been involved with the group for a year but had heard a lot about the Padre from Chris Nobel. He is a very special man with a deep commitment to his people; a compassionate man and we formed a strong bond. That night we talked about some of the projects that the Group help him with. These include our continuing support of three teaching students at the Baucau College. We spoke about possible assistance with Remexio school library, which is in its infancy, and the possibility of putting a student through a Library training course in Dili.

Brian Visits Remexio

What a welcome. We'd arrived at the entrance of Tuna Mana (a remote village of Remexio), to be greeted by traditional folk dancers, guitarists and five hundred people. They placed garlands round our necks and led us into the makeshift church that had been built with United Nations tarpaulins and tree branches.



Tuna Mana welcome

It was a Sunday morning in late October, and I was in East Timor with the local priest, Padre David and Anton Vikstrom and Justin Stewart from the Alternative Technology Association (ATA). Chris Adams from a Victorian Friendship group was also present.

Padre David was in Tuna Mana to celebrate Mass for the first time, hence the welcome. The rest of us were looking at the possibility of providing solar lighting systems to an area that's had minimal assistance.



Timorese trainee installs solar panels in a Maliana school – under close supervision

ATA has been working in East Timor for five years and has sixty systems up and running. The day before going to Tuna Mana I'd met Padre David. He came down to Dili to pick me up and take me back to Remexio. This is the area that the Kangaroo Valley – Remexio



Padre David shows Brian the Remexio school library – desperate for books

Although Remexio still shows the ravages of war, Padre David wants to foster civic pride by converting a roundabout in the centre of town. He aims to create a public space by fencing off the roundabout from wandering stock and planting it out with shrubs and flowers. He also wants to build a statue depicting the symbol of Remexio. Although he has some of the funds, the cost of building materials has skyrocketed in Timor.

The KV Group had previously refurbished a Uma (house) that has primarily been empty, apart from housing a few students recently. It was suggested that it could be used on a more permanent basis for student accommodation. However, ownership of the building needs to be established. With all the turmoil that has occurred in Timor, property rights are sometimes confused.

When Padre David heard that I knew something about computers he brought out an old laptop that had been given to him three years ago but had died recently. Although I got it going, it seemed to be so relieved to have someone give it some tender loving care that it decided to expire. He used his laptop regularly for church and school work and also for showing DVDs when he visits outlying villages. Now has to carry his DVD player, TV and generator wherever he goes. Although we didn't discuss it, I'd like to see him get another laptop, but feel that as this is used more directly for his pastoral work it would be nice to see it provided by the Catholic community.

The following morning I was invited to attend Mass and give a short talk. The church was full and I was reminded of a statistic I'd recently read: before Indonesia invaded in 1975 only 10% of the population was Catholic. Now it's over 90%. It seems to me that the Catholic church has done a lot to keep the fabric of



Brian and Padre David at Tuna Mana, Justin Stewart and Anton Vikstrom behind

society together through the intervening years.



Brian introducing himself to Tuna Mana community in the make-shift church

After Mass we went on a walk through the village. Most of the houses were of traditional design – round with steep and low overhanging thatched roofs with only an entrance and no windows. The winds were very strong while we were there so the fewer entrances the better. There were no chimneys or other outlets in the roofs so the insides were blackened with smoke.



Justin with some of the local kids, typical thatched houses in the background

They are very dark even in the daytime. I asked to be shown the available lighting – it was a small paint tin about half the size of a tin of baked beans with a wick out the top. They use whatever fuel they can get: kerosene, petrol, diesel or palm oil.



The only available source of lighting

This is the only source of light for most, or possibly all of the village. Fuel costs US\$1.20/ litre and they use about seven litres a month. Including the US\$2 cost for a truck ride out to buy fuel, this is about US\$10 a month. Sometimes they run out altogether and live without any light for a while. The amount of light given off is minimal and barely enough to read by.

Even though these people are dirt poor they managed to put on a spread of biscuits, cassava and rice served on a very beautiful dinner service. I'd love to know the story of that service. Unfortunately I wasn't up to it having

picked up a bug in Dili the day before.

After lunch we met with the people in the church to discuss the lighting project.

ATA developed the proposed lighting system 'Lampu Diak' (see separate box), for exactly this sort of application. Their aim was to make the system both technically and financially sustainable. They will train local technicians to install and maintain the systems, and have established a schedule of maintenance and replacement costs. Each household that receives a unit will contribute an initial \$10 payment followed by \$2 a month to cover maintenance and replacement costs. A 'Solar Management Committee' will be set up to administer these funds – to pay the technicians and buy replacement parts



The systems being proposed consist of:

- a battery to store electrical energy,
- a solar panel to charge the battery,
- a charge controller encased in a box with the battery and light switches,
- two Compact Fluorescent lights with cabling and fittings.

The solar panel is mounted on a bracket on the roof and the controller is mounted on the wall inside and the lights installed wherever the householder wants them.

Common ES Screw fittings and automotive crimp connectors ensure wiring is cheap and simple to install.

The cost to households will be less than their current outlay on lamp fuel and should ensure each system is used and maintained effectively.

The following are a range of the comments made by the villagers:

Water and light are the most important things for us and we have neither satisfactorily. Water is a one hour round trip down the hill carrying by hand and light is only the small kero tins.

We only have kerosene and when we run out the children cannot study, only during the day.

So... the lighting project goes ahead. We identified approximately one hundred and twenty houses in need of lighting. The group has made the mistake in the past of contributing to selected individuals in a community, and found that this can cause more problems than it solves. The only solution is to offer solar units to every one of the one hundred and twenty.

At a cost of \$150 per unit, this means the Kangaroo Valley-Remexio Friendship Group needs to find about eighteen thousand dollars.

Dig deep people – donations are tax deductible. Make cheques payable to:

KV East Timor Assistance,

If you include your address and send your donations to:

John George
1255 Moss Vale Road
Kangaroo Valley
NSW 2577

we'll make sure you get a receipt from AFAP allowing you to claim a deduction.

Funds are already rolling in. We are producing an attractive Gift Voucher – an ideal Christmas gift for those relatives who have everything. The voucher acknowledges the donation of a lighting system for one remote East-Timorese dwelling. A gift that will really go on giving.

Brian Bailey