

# An interview with Ego Lemos, ecological and human rights activist, singer and song writer.

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Interviewer: Shalmali Guttal, Focus on the Global South



## *Pressing Issues for the World*

In my point of view, something very crucial for all of us around the world are the environmental problems that this planet is facing. My message to people—especially leaders of every country—is, think wisely; don't think only how to create benefits for business without thinking about the impacts on the environment—this is why we have the climate crisis. We need to support every living thing in this planet. As world citizens, everything we do will give impacts to each other—whether we do good or bad things, they all have impacts. We have one atmosphere, one water, one air.

What happened in Japan this year with nuclear power gave us so many lessons. The world needs to think about energy sources that do not harm the planet. This is the concern that everyone must have. In Timor-Leste, people follow the news but only think that Tsunami is the major cause of disaster in Japan this year. Only small numbers of people are aware that nuclear power plants are also creating disasters. Therefore, every decision they make about the types of energy sources they adopt will have

impacts. Now, we are thinking of using heavy fuel as one of our energy sources in Timor Leste. Not many countries are using this heavy fuel; my concern is that, this power plant can result in negative impacts on air, water and soil quality, and human health. We will need more money and time to address these impacts but we have no guarantee that we will actually be able solve the problems that arise. Always, we think that this is a cheap way to invest in this kind of power, but we ignore the longer-term impacts, which will actually be more costly to us.

Before the Japanese disaster, so many scientists said that nuclear power is safe and does not produce pollution and carbon. But the raw material for nuclear power is from sources that we should not use. Mining these sources creates terrible environmental impacts and if a nuclear disaster happens, we have no way of knowing how far the radioactivity spreads. In the area of the nuclear power plant that was destroyed by the Tsunami in Japan, radioactivity has spread, local food and water have been affected, and

there are miles and miles of areas that have been contaminated.

As world citizens, we all need to have strong connections with each other and pressure our leaders to rethink how to build our countries and choose ways of building our countries that benefit the world as a whole.

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## *Music and Activism*

At present, I work mostly with farmers and young people. I am a singer and a musician, and I try to share whatever I can with people, especially with Timorese people.

Music is a great tool to influence events and things. It is very powerful and can influence so many people. Timorese people love music and dancing. From the beginning, as a singer and song-writer, I tried to write music about the environment, unity, the country and human rights.

I wrote songs about and for farmers. Now my music is played in almost all the radio stations in Timor-Leste and I get many invitations to play in other countries. This is a great opportunity for me to share ideas with people in other countries.

Before I play, I tell people stories that show connections between our lives and the environment. Before I go to a country, I learn about the country so that I can express my thoughts to the local people and share their concerns. The German government now says that they want to reduce and eventually stop nuclear energy by 2015 and invest more in renewable energy. This is great news and a very important step. But the government did not make this decision themselves, the German people pushed for it. So at my recent concert in Germany, I congratulated the German people. If what the German government says becomes a reality, it will be a great lesson to us to follow.

I also write songs about issues that are important and inspire me. I have been very concerned about human rights and human trafficking. I read a lot about it and wrote a song, *It's My Right To be Free*. Before the Japan disaster I wrote a song called *Let's Fix the Earth*, and I performed it in Japan in Nagoya, Kyoto and Tokyo in 2010. These two songs are in English. I also wrote a song called *La Via Campesina* in English, to tell people about the peasant movement, what they are trying to achieve, and about food sovereignty as the way to solve hunger around the world. Most of my songs are in Tetun, but I try to translate them to English so that many people can understand. But

music is universal; even if someone does not know the language, listeners always appreciate music and songs that are genuinely from the musician's heart.

### ***Balibo***

The *Balibo* song is the heaviest song I ever wrote. If the song just comes out of my head, that is ok, I can just write it. But in the case of *Balibo*, I read the history and saw the footage of the film, and I felt so heavy. It brought back memories of the occupation, the massacre, and how so many people died during those times. I could not sleep, reading and remembering the horrible stuff that happened to people. But then I decided that I have to write something down or I won't feel comfortable. And one night at 3 am, I woke up and the tune and lyrics were in my head, because the whole situation was so sad. I was in Australia, studying for my master's degree, so I had some distance from the actual area. I was away from home and it was the right moment to write the song. I did the first draft that night from 3 am to 7 am. I sang it over and over again and finally said "that's it". Then I translated it into English and sang it in exactly the same way as in Tetun. I recorded the song and sent it to the film director--this was in 2008. At that time, the film director was on holiday and did not reply. When he came back we recorded the song and it came out well. Then the song got nominated for the Screen Music Awards and I did not even know this till a journalist asked me about how I felt that my song had been nominated in the top 5 for the award! Then the media asked me how I would feel if I won the award, but I said, being nominated in the top 5 was already

enough for me. This was the first time that a Timorese was nominated outside Timor. Then the Screen Committee emailed my manager and asked him if I could perform live at the awards night as a guest performer. I performed *Balibo*. But before I played the song live, the Committee announced that I had won the award.

### ***Major issues for Timor-Leste***

What makes me sad is that so many young people have left the country. They leave their villages, come to the city and go to work overseas—North Ireland, England and South Korea, mostly working in meat or chicken factories. In South Korea, Timorese labourers are working in factory and fishing boats. I went to North Ireland last year when I was on a European tour and went to visit my cousin. I could see that they were not happy.

Why is it that Timor-Leste has so much money from oil and gas, but we cannot create employment here? We are sending our productive young Timorese abroad to work and importing labour from outside to work here.

In 2007, we started permaculture scouts in Dili and they have now spread to rural areas. The first permaculture camp was held in 2008 and more than 400 people came from all over the country. They stayed for 4 days and learned many different things: permaculture, survival, tree planting, etc. When they left they cried--they said it was not enough! When I came back from my master's studies, we did a camp in 2011 and that was even bigger—there were 532 people. The average age of the

people who came to the camp was 15. There were Timorese people and some outside visitors also, and it was for 5 days. There were even more activities in this camp; everyday we had 15 activities happening. There were workshops and skills training on how to make compost, save seeds, make tree nurseries, design gardens, build structures with wood or bamboo, make good soils on hillsides and so on. On the last day, they just brought water and walked out of the camp; they had to learn to read maps and find their way. Along the way they were given clues of what to do to find the next clue, and so on.

The last activity of the camp was a challenge for the scouts: to come down the hillside on a rope, swim and walk in swamp like a buffalo. It was so much fun and the people were so happy; I could see it in their faces. And I thought “wow!” These young people just need people to orient them. These scouts are now initiating mini-camps in their own areas: Meinaro, Atauro island, Maliana, Aileu, Same, and also in one of the Universities in Dili, called UNPAS/ University of Peace. And now every week, we have activities and lessons or classes here at the Permatil office. We also facilitate the Permascout secretariat here at the Permatil building.

### **Permatil**

In 1996/97, I joined the student movement. In our group we had different sections – some learned about herbal medicine and there was one section on agriculture, which I co-ordinated. We called it organic agriculture at that time, and it was an underground movement. Then I worked for Fokupers[1], co-ordinating humanitarian aid for women victims who had been prisoners. After the massacre in Alas (Same district) in 1998, there were many IDPs[2]. So my work expanded and I worked with Yayasan Hak/Hak Foundation[3], not only for women but also for all victims. The Indonesian military left Timor-Leste in September 1999. In late November 1999, a permaculture volunteer named Steve Cran came to Timor-Leste and introduced me to permaculture and we started to work together. We named the organisation ETPDI (East Timor Permaculture Development Institute). Then I resigned from Fokupers and Hak, and Steve and I started doing training in Permaculture. In 2002 I set up Permaculture Timor-Leste (Permatil).

Permaculture is a philosophy of combining human beings and nature to work together. All permaculture practices are about linkages between human activity and natural processes.

Its about sustainable agriculture and sustainable cultures. This system exists in every country but with different names. Bill Morisson and David Holmgren coined the name Permaculture in Australia in 1978. The reason I got so interested in it is because I found that it is very related to my beliefs and what I was trying to do.

The last message I want to highlight is that we need to support farmers in every country to connect with each other and share their knowledge with each other about sustainable agriculture and traditional knowledge. We have to claim back our traditional knowledge, protect our lands, seeds, genetic resources and water, and win back our rights of what we want to eat and grow. The world is now facing food and economic crises because those with capital control our world. But we need to change this. If we allow capital to rule the world, it will create disasters and this planet will not live long. We need to reunite the world.

The Permatil motto is: ***Care for the earth, care for the people and care for the future of Timor-Leste.***

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1 Fokupers [Forum Komunikasi Perempuan Timor Lorosa'e]  
2 Internally Displaced Peoples  
3 Hak [Hak Asasi dan Kemanusiaan]