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Positive Deviance:

Stories of Regional Social Innovations from the Big Stories, Small Towns project

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*Big Stories, Small Towns* is a collaborative, transmedia documentary project that has been evolving since 2008. The project facilitates the telling, recording, archiving and disseminating of autobiographical narratives from people living in small towns across South East Asia and Australia through face-to-face engagement of outside filmmakers with local people. The filmmaker-in-residence model around which the project is based has been delivered to 13 towns, with more than 500 stories produced over these residencies. As creative director and producer of the project and a filmmaker in residence, I defined the overarching focus of the project, described as “shining a light on people caring for and creating their community” (Potter 2014: 219). In each residency, we, the filmmakers, have operationalised an approach inspired by the synchronous ideas of “negative capability” (Unger 1987) and “positive deviance” (Zeitlin 1991). Unlike other theories of structure and agency, *positive deviance* (and by inference *negative capability*) does not delimit individuals or communities to either compliance or rebellion, but rather portrays them as able to participate in a variety of activities of self-empowerment. Positive deviance explores how human beings both innovate and resist within confining social contexts. Within the context of the *Big Stories* project, operationalising positive deviance is the identification of behaviours or strategies that enable local people to find solutions to problems from other people in the same setting, despite appearing to have no special resources or knowledge. This chapter reflects on members of small communities featured in *Big Stories* from across Australia and South East Asia who have created local social innovations and embody this concept of positive deviance.
Through the co-created stories produced during the Big Stories residencies, a range of local, social innovations have been highlighted. Across all sites, these innovations share key characteristics—they are relationship driven, require minimal external management and have been extensively replicated (often in both regional and urban communities). To illuminate these characteristics, the paper is underpinned by a case study of the Lepo Lorun Weavers Collective, initiated in 2002 by Alfonsa Horeng in Sikka Regency on the island of Flores, Indonesia. This model has now been replicated in multiple towns across the island, engaging over 800 women. The case study of the weavers collective, one of many identified in the Big Stories project, exemplifies the notion of operationalising the concept of positive deviance by showing a focus on regional stories of local people, caring for, and creating their, community.

Since 2008, the Big Stories, Small Towns documentary project has focussed on the co-creation and sharing of stories told with residents of small towns. The project is based around filmmakers living in residence in a small town making stories with, rather than about, local people. The stories and images created are then exhibited in each town and most are uploaded to the bigstories.com.au website. Stories from different towns have also been showcased at film festivals, exhibitions, events and broadcast television. The stories from the project exist online, in the intimate space of people’s homes, in the shared spaces of galleries, libraries and museums. This dynamic network of spaces creates a spatial assemblage, specific to the ambitions of the broadcast itself. In each town, stories of everyday life in communities are re-mediated through the process and artefacts of conceiving of, creating and sharing stories. This generates a range of new and creative outcomes that include new methodologies and understandings of local cultures, language and history and ways of effectively disseminating under-represented cultures, languages and histories. Big Stories documents these multi-layered communities and explores complex relations between people, social backgrounds, technology and place. This shifts attention from individual stories towards practices of
collective identification and action, creating acts of storymaking that offer a model of positive deviance that empowers individuals and communities to reject deficit discourses that marginalise them and their ways of life.

The project started in Port August, South Australia in 2008, produced under the auspices of the Media Resource Centre, a community media organisation in South Australia. With financial support from Film Australia, the South Australian Film Corporation, Port Augusta City Council and Country Arts South Australia, I designed a participatory media project that could support local community members to speak back to external negative mainstream media reportage and to gain media and digital literacies that could support ongoing independent storytelling. I detail this work and the context from which it emerged in Potter (2014: Chapter 3), but key to this article are two points:

1. the project’s participatory methods emerged as a reaction to mainstream media representations, and
2. the methods of production change according to local contexts in each residency.

During the first residency, with key collaborators in the project, Anna Grieve, Jeni Lee and Sieh Mchawala, we agreed on an approach to the stories and images that would subsequently define the project beyond Port Augusta, offering an overarching framing for the methods of production, and the resulting stories. As noted in the introduction, this was described as “shining a light on those caring for and creating their community” (Potter 2014: 219). The stories that emerge from the Big Stories project are far from stories of rural dysfunction and decay. Rather, these are stories that speak to ideas around strengthening a sense of place, community and collective identity. The project’s focus was to produce success stories that could work to enhance the image of communities in the eyes of both the advantaged and disadvantaged. This meant finding people or groups who had identified a problem, who had become concerned about it, and who were actively looking for ways to change (or had already
begun to change). It could be about the search for solutions, as well as the solutions themselves, so it can refer to intent as well as to outcomes.

These approaches are underpinned by two assumptions on my behalf:

1) humans cast their identity in some narrative form in all cultures and so storytelling is at the core of describing both individual and collective experience, and

2) participatory media have the potential to create a more nuanced, ethical, diverse and democratic media culture.

This speaks to the utopian and idealistic imaginings of the project and the hopefulness embedded within it. In the light of a mainstream media climate, which is often problem oriented and homogenising, the idealism underpinning these assumptions is vital and far from naïve. Rather, it is a critical and solutions-seeking approach to a highly-problematised mediascape. McHenry (2011) observes that collaborative narrative activities strengthen a sense of place in regional communities and contribute to a collective sense of identity. In addition, stories can both remediate and re-imagine place, community and collective and individual identity. They are at once backward and forward-looking, individual and collective.

And, as with the idealistic construct of the Big Stories, formed through a reactive connection to mainstream media, so too have theories of deviancy—both positive and negative—emerged as a reaction to perceived norms. In their paper, “Positive Deviance in Theory and Practice: A Conceptual Review”, Matthew Herington and Elske van de Fliert (2018) offer a synthesis and review of positive deviance literature. They trace deviant studies as emerging from American sociological theory from the early 1900s where the concept of “deviance” was defined as any transgression of norms, however the concept was typically framed negatively (West 2004), a harmful, malicious or disruptive deviation. Herington and van de Fliert (2018: 665) draw on the work of Goode who identifies Wilkins as an early thinker who conceived of deviance as also potentially positive. Wilkins illustrated the point
by using a bell curve and drawing attention to both ends that represented acts regarded as sinful to the left, and saintly to the right, with conforming behavior in the middle.

However, even early theorists of deviance including Durkheim (1964 [1895]) and Merton (1938) suggest deviance as an important function in the maintenance of social order and control as it affirmed normative values and morals. This reactive bond of normativity to deviance suggests that all social change begins with forms of deviance. A positive deviance-oriented approach to social change echoes many thinkers from a tradition of radical pedagogy including Dewey (1920, 1927), Buber (1957), Gramsci, (1927-35, 1988), Illich (1979, 1982, 1992) and Freire (1970). These thinkers emphasised critical awareness, the importance of everyday life, re-imagining social relations and the institutions that are the artefacts of these relations.

**Positive Deviance**

Despite the connotations of negative qualities with deviance, a body of thought and practice has emerged that sees that the “Positive Deviance” as a term in sociological studies was popularised by Marian Zeitlin et. al. with the publication of *Positive Deviance in Child Nutrition: With Emphasis on Psychosocial and Behavioural Aspects and Implications for Development*. Zeitlin (1991) describes a positive deviance approach as identifying successful behaviours or strategies that enable people to find better solutions to problems despite having no special resources or knowledge. While sociological theorists such as Zeitlin et. al. focus on the individual and family unit, organisational theorists Spreitzer and Sonenshein (2004) define positive deviance as not only an individual-level construct (as is the case with Warren’s [2003] work), but as something that can also occur at the organisational and communal levels. They also provide a framework for operationalising positive deviance consisting of intentional behaviours that significantly depart from the norms of a referent
group in “positive” ways. Positive deviance focuses on cases where groups and individuals change from the constraints of norms to conduct behaviours perceived by others as positive. Positive deviance is strengths-based and practice-driven. Much of the sociological positive deviance research emerges from the recognition that in every disadvantaged community there are individuals and families who are doing unexpectedly well. Individuals and families in situations of disadvantage, often characterised by systemic or structural disadvantage, have practices and strategies that are both positive and deviant in that they differ from most of their peers (Eastman et al. 2014). By answering the how and why questions for positively deviant behaviours, Spreitzer and Sonenshein claim that researchers can take an important step toward understanding and promoting additional positive behaviours.

Limitations for current theorising on positive deviance include a lack of critical inquiry on what constitutes “positive,” especially when exploring values-based outcomes, rather than more straightforward nutrition outcomes (nf: Zeitlin et. al.). To this end, my framework for operationalising positive deviance within the Big Stories project draws on Roberto Unger’s thinking on formative contexts, false necessity and negative capability as outlined in Social Theory: Its Situation and Its Task (1987) and False Necessity (2004). Unger (1987: 89) notes that a formative context consists of imaginative assumptions about the possible and desirable forms of human association as well as in institutional arrangements or non-institutionalised social practices. Formative contexts of ideologies and institutions become fixed through the constraints of society, echoed, reinforced, and amplified by the illusions of social thought. This, according to Unger, is the essence of the notion of false necessity. Unger proposes an anti-necessitarian social theory that helps form a social understanding that might free itself from institutional and structural fetishism—an imagined identification of “highly detailed and largely accidental institutional arrangements with comprehensive and vague ideals like freedom and equality” (1987: 200). Unger goes on to
note that “an anti-necessitarian social theory does not strike down the constraints, but it dispels the illusions that prevent us from attacking them” (1987: 215).

To actualise this anti-necessitarian social theory, Unger (1987) describes the concept of negative capability, appropriating it from John Keats’s use, which was focussed on the artist’s capacity for uncertainty, mystery and doubt. A capacity, Keats’s noted, was not constrained by “any irritable reaching after fact and reason.” (cited in Li 2009: 1) For Keats, negative capability is framed by the artist’s receptive openness to the world, and rejection of those who tried to formulate theories or categorical knowledge. Unger’s conception of negative capability explains how human beings innovate and resist within confining social contexts. Unger summarises this as “our power to defy formula and to transcend constraint” (2007: 104), and “not imprisoning insight in any particular structure of thought.” (Unger, 1987: 156). It is a “denial of whatever in our contexts delivers us over to a fixed scheme of division and hierarchy and to an enforced choice between routine and rebellion” (1987: 156).

While recognising the constraints and influence of the formative contexts upon a person of social and institutional limitations, Unger finds that people (both individuals and groups) are able to resist, deny and transcend their context. The varieties of this resistance are negative capability.

Benkler (2006) describes Unger’s work as central to the emergence of a “third way” literature that explores alternative production processes that do not depend on the displacement of individual agency by hierarchical systems. Unger (1987, 1998) emphasises transformation rather than dissolution of ideas of community and objectivity. He relates this change in the content of basic social ideals to certain efforts at human empowerment where both the conception of human solidarity and the practice of ascribing normative force to views of personality or society are reassessed. These efforts can be summarised as: we are not passive receivers of objective being. Whilst we may be conditioned by formative contexts of
institutions and ideologies, they do not determine us and we can rebel against this conditioning. Through dialogue, we can imagine and re-imagine reality and work to progress and transform it. Reality is constructed and negotiated in collective action, rather than through an individual subject looking out at an objective world. Individual and collective emancipation and practical progress are both dependent on the transformation of access into agency. Practical, positive progress adheres to Unger’s definition as innovation or discovery resulting in the development of our power to “push back the constraints of scarcity, disease, weakness, and ignorance” (Unger, 1998: 5). Therefore, both practical progress and emancipation depend upon the capacity to transform social effort into collective learning and to act upon the lessons learned, undeterred by the need to respect a pre-established plan of social division and hierarchy or a confining allocation of social roles. Unger (1998: 7) observes:

both practical experimentalism and individual emancipation require arrangements minimizing barriers to collective learning. This view is in turn connected with a thesis about our relation to the institutional and discursive structures we build and inhabit.

Unger (1987) positions his work between deep-structure social theory and what he describes as positive social science. He argues that deep structure social theories, such as classical Marxism, privilege institutional routine practices and contexts. This limits the possibilities of human social development through privileging structural and contextual frameworks. It is social science adhering to a large-scale script of history. As a filmmaker, I drew parallels between this notion of deep structure social theory and linear documentary films, especially those that emerge through broadcast or state funding models. In Potter (2014: Chs.2 and 3) I drawn on a body of literature and practice spanning 50 years of institutionally-driven documentary practice and note that the necessity of foregrounded structural, institutional frameworks that define the commission-based funding model limit social development possibilities. Once produced, these standalone films are fixed objects, reflecting a particular
moment in time and purporting to be of historical and archival value.

Unger (1987) describes positive social science as a practice that sees society and history as an endless series of episodes of problem solving. Unger argues this leads to denying explanation in favour of simply detailing conflict and resolution. This granular problematising of the world can be seen to be paralleled in the Big Stories project, and potentially more broadly in creative participatory practices, in two ways. The first is that of the subject of research as a problem that might be solved. The subject of research in this project is local people addressing local problems. The subjects of research are also the solution-seeking behaviours, the solution seekers themselves and the conceptualising and implementations of these solution and the impact of this. The presentation of the research in the form of the participatory processes, transmedia artefacts and stories are multi-valent tools. The second way is critical reviews of the stories that emerge from the project which look to the artefacts produced (the stories) as texts to be read as if an essential truth will emerge from these small stories. The granular, individualistic reading of stories as texts that contain an entirety of truth or a granular focus on one episode of the multiple research subjects of the project is similarly reductive, dehumanising and anathema to understanding the practices of collective identification and action that are an essential part of the Big Stories project. The stories become multi-valent artefacts that can be data, artwork, story, educational resource and an embodiment of the relationship between facilitators and participants.

Unger (1987: 50) concludes that both forms of social theory deny human ability to hope, resist and reshape the social and conceptual world and are inherently dehumanised, and that a lack of vision of alternatives denies the human ability to hope, resist and reshape our social and conceptual worlds. Central to the Big Stories project, therefore, is the minimisation of barriers to collective learning and an attempt to re-imagine our relations to formative contexts (and encourage that re-imagination for others). It is therefore essential to engage with
the task of embodying the assumption that real freedom is not an individualistic pursuit. Freedom is predicated on fostering a community where the ability of the mind to assess and act upon the reality of the world is a blessing rather than a source of repression.

In seeking to build a hopeful framework that works within the intersection of the three key conditions of individual expression, institutional and ideological contexts, and practical progress, I have chosen to use the phrase “positive deviance” when describing the approach to co-creation in place of “negative capability,” despite the term lacking the depth of Unger’s project. The term “positive deviance” reflects the fact that many of the tactics involved in challenging accepted codes of behaviour are characterised as deviant or abnormal, as determined by dominant discourses of knowledge and power. In addition, I used the term positive deviance from the outset of Big Stories, and its use in this context accurately reflects the historical language of the project. Positive deviance (and by inference negative capability) described the approach to community in Big Stories. The project’s focus was to produce success stories that could work to enhance the image of communities in the eyes of both the advantaged and disadvantaged. The creative actions of making stories and images across a variety of mediums and contexts open up opportunities to re-imagine place and social relations. The act of making can embody personal and communal agency to transcend the formative contexts of institutions and ideologies. This act of transcendence as an expression of desire is a form of positive deviance. This deviancy, when accepted collectively, is subsequently reinterpreted as a process of “collective learning” that can allow those involved to escape on a “line of flight” from their particular hyper-controlled situation. Within the Big Stories project, the operationalisation of positive deviance has provided a way of capturing, through the artefacts of the stories that are told, the behaviours that traditional conceptualisations of deviance overlook.

Positive Deviance in the Big Stories, Small Towns Project
The combination of positive, local narratives and local solutions that emerge from the *Big Stories* project has constituted a powerful tool in strengthening a sense of place and contributing to a collective sense of identity. Placemaking requires sensitivity to local contexts. Rather than seeking external solutions to local problems, local solutions constitute another key element of creating place. The process and products of *Big Stories* have developed tools for high impact advocacy on behalf of the community. Putland (2011), Potter (2014, 2017a, 2017b, 2017c) and Ryan (2015) have highlighted some of the project’s impacts in some settings in Australia and Cambodia. To extend on these studies with further examples of impact, films from Strathewen, Victoria, Australia, co-created in 2013 about the community-led recovery from the Black Saturday bushfires have now been incorporated by the Victorian Bushfire Recovery Association as describing a model of best practice of community-led recovery and are used in training and support programs by the Red Cross and University of Melbourne. The stories from Indigenous people in Banlung, Cambodia are held in the Bophana national archive in Cambodia and are archived by UNESCO as part of their collection of intangible cultural heritage. The stories were also used to foreground Indigenous voices in policy discussions of land and Indigenous rights and in fundraising endeavours for these communities.

Stories from the Men’s Shed in Port Augusta, produced in 2008, were used as part of submissions to a senate hearing into male health and to support other regional communities in replicating the program. The Port Augusta shed is widely acknowledged as one of the first Men’s Sheds in Australia (Golding 2015). Golding also notes the rapid proliferation of sheds from around 30 in 2005 to 1416 internationally by 2015 (Golding 2014). The stories were used by the Port Augusta men’s shed as their submission SA Great Regional Award Winner Community Group and the advocacy of Port Augusta shed founders and supporters was key in facilitating the spread of sheds to other communities across Australia and internationally.
Similarly, in Beaudesert, stories of the Young Men’s Indigenous Group have been used by the founders of that group to support the development of young Indigenous men’s and women’s groups in other Queensland areas.

A notable impact of the *Big Stories* project as a whole was its use as a model for the ABC Open project. ABC Open producers work with regional Australians to co-create stories through visual and written media. To date, according to the ABC Open website, almost 200,000 stories have been created and dozens of Open producers are employed in residence in regional ABC radio stations across Australia. In addition to being a model for ABC Open, numerous *Big Stories* formats, such as the Dreams photo series, are replicated in the ABC Open site. This influence at institutional scale further reflects elements of an important theoretical underpinning that has shaped my approach and reflections to the operationalising of concepts related to positive deviance within the Big Stories project. The potential for institutional transformation is not the essential goal, however it is a profound possibility. Working with institutions can support development of individual and collective agency.

Freire (1970) points out that institutions can be a creative act: “it is as transforming and creative beings that humans, in their permanent relations with reality, produce not only material goods—tangible objects—but also social institutions, ideas, and concepts.” And as Unger (1998) has described, power can also be developed through revision of these structures, as well as resisting or transcending them. In the exercise and strengthening of our positive deviance—our capacity to defy the limits of our social and cultural contexts—Unger proposes that we may even make institutional and discursive structures more hospitable to this practice of deviance.

Over the course of a *Big Stories* residency on the island of Flores in Indonesia, there was a group of women who appear to embody these ideas put forward by Freire (1970) and by Unger (1987; 1998). They have transformed and revised local social and cultural
institutions through creative, collective actions and as a result have defied gendered limits of their formative context. The next section of the chapter will outline and review the *Big Stories* residency in Flores and reflect on elements of the creative transformation effected by the local operationalisation of practices, which will be framed as positive deviance.

**Background to the *Big Stories* Residency in Flores, Indonesia**

In 2015, with the support of Screen Australia and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (through the Australian International Cultural Council), the *Big Stories, Small Towns* team (consisting of me and documentary filmmaker Charlie Hill-Smith) worked on the island of Flores with the Lepo Lorun Weavers Collective in Nita Village, near the capital of Maumere in the Sikka Regency and a team of Indonesian filmmakers, led by Dodid Wijanarko, to create films, photo essays and a range of other media including a feature length documentary *Au Lorun (I Am Weaving)*. A website was created on the *Big Stories, Small Towns* platform and a range of social media outputs showcased the production and stories produced. Workshops on filmmaking and photography were also run in the community and local screenings and performances supported extensive local participation by members of the Weavers Collective and wider community.

Dodid Wijanarko had worked in Flores previously and had met the founder of the Lepo Lorun weaving collective, Alfonsa Horeng. I had previously undertaken a West Papua-based *Big Stories* project with filmmaker Enrico ‘Rico’ Aditjondro. Rico introduced me to Dodid and we began to discuss another *Big Stories* project in the region. Central to this discussion was the approach of positive deviance in terms of shaping the overarching tone of the project. I suggested that the *Big Stories* project in Flores could offer stories and images that might re-mediate mainstream media representations in Indonesian media that portray Flores as a backward place. Based on this, Dodid identified Alfonsa and the local weaver
community in Nita town (The Indonesian naming of this is place is ‘Nitakluang’. This can be translated as Nita town or Nita village, with the suffix ‘kluang’ more commonly translated as town) as a possible story thread for the project. Dodid described Alfonso’s experience returning from the city of Surabaya following tertiary study and starting up a weaving collective in the village in 2002, the subsequent growth of that collective and replication of the collective model to other communities. This model of local, social innovation that builds on the pre-existing creative capacities in new and surprising ways fit well with the *Big Stories* framework. I was able to raise funding through grants from the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Australian International Cultural Council) and Screen Australia to support the project. After confirming funding, Dodid and I put together a production team, including Frengky ‘FX’ Making, a West Papuan filmmaker who had been mentored during the Big Stories West Papua project.

**Lepo Lorun Weaver’s Collective**

The history and cultural significance of weaving across Flores has been well documented (e.g. Barnes 1987, Hamilton et. al. 1994, deJong 1994, Buckley 2012). These are ancient traditions, and Buckley (2012) notes that many Southeast Asian weaving traditions are related and share common ancestry that can be traced back to Neolithic cultures on the Asian mainland. Alfonso Horeng observes in the documentary produced as part of the *Big Stories* residency, *Au Lorun (I Am Weaving)*, that there is strong evidence that weaving practice has been in existence in the region for over 2000 years. Alfonso notes there is a bronze statue of a traditional weaver in the National Gallery of Australia dating to around 600BC. Alfonso reflects that only now do people in Flores and in Indonesia more broadly realise the historic value of the statue and the practices represented.

In the Sikka Regency, the Tenun Ikat weaving tradition has long been an instrumental part of everyday life. The cloths are still exchanged on a relational level—notably as part of a
marriage dowry (deJong 1994) and for building relationships between family groups and village communities. Weavings are exchanged for goods and services including food, stock and equipment. The weavings themselves represent a complex connection to place, tradition and environment. The cloth that weavers use was once made of cotton grown in the region and rare cloths still use this Flores cotton. Dyes used in the process are sometimes made in the traditional way with local indigo creating the iconic blue shades on the cloth. The pictorial and geometric motifs tell stories and indicate social status such as whether the wearer is married. Weavings are created for different purposes, from everyday use to sacred, ceremonial wear. The acts and products of traditional weaving are a complex system. However, according to Alfonsa, despite the acknowledged social-cultural and historical importance of weaving in Flores, the women weavers have not been perceived as equals in local society. Alfonsa’s goals for the standing of the weaving women in society are high. She says, “It is sad to hear people refer to them as artisans instead of maestros…The women weavers of Flores are maestros from the time they are very young until the day they die.” All of the work emerging from the *Big Stories* residency, from the *Au Lorun* documentary to the web series sought to reflect on and elevate the cultural and social standing of the weavers. In a support letter to the project, Alfonsa observed that the *Big Stories* project (spanning films, website and the activity of making the works) offers a unique opportunity to support the Sikka region to create a lasting archive for both the local community and for those interested in the region and Flores’ culture.

In the documentary *Au Lorun (I Am Weaving)*, Alfonsa notes there are a lot of things she set out to change locally when she returned to Flores from Surabaya. Alfonsa notes that she had made a decision to return to her parent’s town rather than stay in Surabaya or another big city. Alfonsa recalls, “My father always said: ‘Never leave the land your great grandfathers inherited to you, and develop it for a good cause.’ That wisdom was what
convinced me to leave my career in the big city of Surabaya and return home to develop Flores.” On her return in 2002, Alfonsa’s parents, who are teachers, gifted her a small piece of land on the outskirts of Nita village. Nita is a small village tucked away in the tropical hills some 12 kilometres from Maumere, the capital of Flores. This hilly region dominated by Catholic seminaries and small villages is well-known for its weaving, known as Tenun Ikat, a weaving method using pre-dyed thread and hand-tied motifs. In the portrait film produced on Alfonsa as part of the Big Stories project, she says, “I wasn’t a leader with some kind of powerful influence over people. I was considered a young adult. I was 27 years old, a young person who had recently returned from Java from my education.” Despite her youth and inexperience, she had a vision and so, on her new land, Alfonsa started a weaving group, Lepo Lorun (the House of Weaving) with 14 women in 2002. As Alfonsa observes in the portrait film, “I wanted to develop what we already have with the ‘kain tenun ikat’ [both the traditional weaving practice and the artefact of the ‘Sarong’ produced according to this practice] without taking away the traditional values.”

Each village in Flores that has a weaving tradition has its characteristic motifs, either icons or geometric patterns or symbols (Buckley 2012). In one of the Big Stories portraits of other Lepo Lorun weavers, Memi states that “Maumere sarong and other woven fabrics is the pattern—Sikka sarongs have big patterns, patterns from Kio are much smaller than those from Maumere.” In the documentary film Au Lorun, Alfonsa observes that the motifs geo-locate the cloths and notes that every village not only has its own designs, it has its own philosophy and its own weaving style, often based on each traditional root used in the dyeing process. Not only do the motifs carry meaning, the dyes carry meaning in terms of the type of dyes used, the process of dyeing and the understanding of what that dye root and the resulting colour means. The colour wash also carries meaning: for example the indigo plant is extensively used across areas. In one of the shorter Big Stories films Indigo Colour, Alfonsa
details the process making of the indigo colour from the Indigo plant and the process of dyeing and setting the colour using lime. Alfonsa reflects in *Au Lorun*, “I had heard so much about how our great grandmothers used to make natural dyes from plants such as mango, mengkudu [noni], indigo and turmeric. So, I thought, why not revive this knowledge? We can benefit from what we already have around us and contribute to the environment at the same time.”

As cheaper, imported cotton and synthetic, more vibrant dyes came to dominate Flores weavings, traditional processes and materials became less time- and cost- effective. Part of the process of bringing the collective together was to revive these traditional processes and to frame this work of growing and making both cotton and dye as instrumental to the creation of authentic weavings that would embody the ideal of weaving as works of art and significant cultural and historical artefacts. In the *Indigo Colour* film Alfonsa notes that, “there are 11 primary dyes in Flores.” Alfonsa displays a visual chart that shows formulas for mixing colours using natural dyes and says, “We’ve also tried to standardised the colours that weavers used as part of trying to create clear classifications and recipes for the dyes and for the colours. We make up formulas to create consistent colours.” Professionalism, consistency and cultural and historical awareness are recurring themes in how Alfonsa conceives of the work of the collective. This awareness feeds into a broader informal pedagogical program focussed on empowerment. In the *Au Lorun* documentary, Alfonsa outlines this program. She says, “for this community we would like to create a good educational system and for it to be a learning centre that serves everyone here.” In order to do this, she wants to focus on one thing (weaving) and do it seriously, while at the same time be an agent to develop the women’s education. Alfonsa notes that this understanding of education doesn’t necessarily refer to formal education; rather, this is about building on natural talents and developing relationships with other “stakeholders,” with the weaving practice as multi-modal means to foster agencies
of self-expression, historical and cultural standing, economic value and independence. This reflects the radical pedagogical thought highlighted earlier in this chapter that emphasises the importance of everyday life from thinkers such as Antonio Gramsci who describes a notion of the “organic intellectual.” Alfonsa goes on to say in *Au Lorun* that the women in the collectives have to create what she calls “an educational package” in order to “deliver their talents in order the women of Flores to be able to live independently and better.”

As part of the *Big Stories* project and the *Au Lorun* documentary, many members of the Lepo Lorun collective were interviewed. Questions centred on their perception and experience of the collective, their understandings of the Tenun Ikat and personal reflections. One of the collective members, Memi, comments that they didn’t see “Kain Tenun Ikat” as having economic value in the past. However, there has always been perceived cultural value. Memi goes on to observe that now the traditional sarongs have value both economically and culturally. The use of traditional processes, natural fabrics and dyes has become a selling point. Other members note that the weaving is an economic driver for local families. Theodora Elizabeth (Beth) provides administrative support for her husband Yanto in his construction business. Beth’s work in the weaving collective provides additional income that pays for their children’s education. In her *Big Stories* portrait film, Beth also reflects on a profound connection to ancestors and culture in her practice of the weaving. Beth describes how her weaving has been informed by her deceased aunt’s legacy. Beth’s aunt was from Lembata Island. On her death, she willed her most sacred and previous Ikat to Beth. These Ikat incorporate motifs, dyes and cloth unique to Beth’s aunt as well as being emblematic of the Lembata Tenun Ikat style and form. For Beth, the legacy Ikat are a tangible memorial of her aunt as well as a script for her to learn from as she incorporates the patterns, dyes and materials into her own weaving. The result is a Sikka / Lembata fusion that is a new
expression drawing on recognisable weaving motifs from both regions but filtered through Beth’s connection to her aunt.

By 2016, the Lepo Lorun collective in Nita town had grown to 56 people. In addition to this high impact in Nita, there were a further 42 weaving collectives with 1026 active members spread across the rest of the island. Each collective was set up around a similar profit share model. However, the economic arrangements are a basic functional operational principle. The methods of weaving and the valuing of local knowledges—as embodied in the local motifs, dyes and cloth—were the key framing principles of the collectives. The women would come together and practice their art and ensure they maintained their cultural expression and became masters of the cloth. This aspiration to mastery and the positioning of the weavers as artists has been central to the success of the collectives. The groups are artists’ collectives that offer economic, historic, cultural and social benefit for those involved. In order to activate this benefit at a local level, Alfonsa has engaged globally, visiting more than 30 countries to promote the practice and history. Alfonsa states that the weaving is “the integrity of our culture. And if we go somewhere and wear kain tenun ikat it means our pride stays with us.” The traditional value of weaving fulfils cultural and traditional needs. Alfonsa observes that the weaver’s work has not been given credit in the past, “many people perceive these women as nobodies, and what they do as nothing, but our traditions, in the hands of these women, have been preserved.” Alfonsa goes on to state that, “through weaving we’re able to preserve culture, heritage and raise economic status of women.”

Conclusion

Image 1 Alfonsa’s Dream: “I wish my homeland of Flores to be a model island to showcase the value of cultural and environmental preservation and sustainability. Indonesian
Government task must be to care/ protect local lands and governance.” Photo by Martin Potter.

As part of the ongoing Dreams photo series that has been part of the *Big Stories* project since the first residency in Port Augusta in 2008, many of the Lepo Lorun collective shared their dream. Alfonsa’s dream (Image 1) indicates both her ambition for Flores as a whole and her role now as a leader and advocate for local rights and empowerment. She says:

I wish my homeland of Flores to be a model island, to showcase the role of cultural and environmental preservation and sustainability. The Indonesian Government’s task must be to care/ protect local land rights and governance.

Alfonsa’s collective weaving model realises this dream as it taps into deep cultural, social, historical and gender practices. The collective model has transformed local, national and international perceptions of Tenun Ikat. Key ideas from Alfonsa’s local innovation can also be generalised. The collective represents an amplification of women as key economic and cultural drivers. Through the collectivised model of income sharing and subsequent replication of the model in other areas—resulting in over 1000 women creating and working within collectives across Flores—this has echoes of other local social innovations that have emerged in other sites in small towns that have been observed in the *Big Stories* project such as the Men’s Shed movement.

All across the world, people spend much of their lives at work, engaged in practical economic activities. It matters whether people’s workaday lives are shaped so as to tap and sustain the common element in democracy and experimentalism. To have an understanding that the production of tangible, everyday objects can also result in the production of ideas, concepts and even institutions might result in operationalising positive deviance towards practical progress and emancipatory outcomes. Central to all aspects of material progress is
the relation between cooperation and innovation. Innovation requires cooperation. Nevertheless, every real form of cooperation remains embedded in arrangements generating settled expectations and vested rights of different groups relative to one another. People regularly resist innovation because they correctly believe it to threaten such rights and expectations. However, this proposal risks moving towards abstract declarations. Through exploration of the Lepo Lorun weavers case study, we might see elements of this transformative ideal.

Emerging from the Big Stories project, the artefacts of videos and photos produced are multi-valent works. They are the material embodiment of the production of these new forms of local knowledge and transformative ideals. They are a creative co-construction in and of themselves. Traditional stories of everyday life of this community are re-mediated through the process of the participatory media—generating new and creative outcomes, methodologies and understanding of Flores culture, language and history as well as informing broader Flores culture, language and history. The resulting stories illuminate characteristics of positive deviance, identifying behaviours or strategies that enable people to find solutions to problems despite having no apparent special resources or knowledge. Through the participatory, inter-cultural process of co-creativity the variety of media (films, photos, website etc.) produced constitutes a reflexive interplay between participants and filmmakers in residence. As a result, this media can be viewed not only as texts that can be read that describe, to some extent, the social, historical and cultural context out of which the Lepo Lorun Collective emerged.

The media can also be understood as enacting a shift away from a centralised vision of storymaking defined by a single author or documenter, toward a collectivised storytelling practice. The result is a “living”, participatory, transmedia work that moves attention from the rhetoric of texts to be read, to practices of community organisation and the technological and
embodied material relations, which aspire to produce a collectively enacted sense of place and identity.

Throughout the *Big Stories* project with the application of new technologies, new ways of learning and new critical theories, there is a utopian attempt to radicalise institutions and social practice, in order to enable space in everyday life for a community to articulate and reaffirm progressive tendencies. This process was conceptualised as “reconstruction” by progressive educators like Dewey (1920) and philosophers such as Gramsci (1929 – 1935, 1971) who noted that every critical juncture offers a possibility of re-imagining, in which “the normal functioning of the old economic, social, cultural order provides the opportunity to reorganize it in new ways.” (Hall, 1987: 19) As much as we acknowledge the agency of an institution upon humans, we must also consider the possibility of human agency upon the institution. In every case there is a formative context that can be transformed, and in every case there is a productive tension between realism and imagination. Unger (1987) states:

we must be realists in order to become visionaries and we need an understanding of social life to criticize and enlarge our view of social reality and social possibility.
References


**Filmography**

