



## **Exploring the Rebuilding of the Education System in a Transitional Nation: The Case of Timor-Leste**

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Today's education system in Timor-Leste (formerly known as East Timor) was shaped by three periods in the country's history. It was almost destroyed by the three-week crisis period in September 1999, which left more than 80 percent of Timor-Leste's educational infrastructure destroyed. The Timor-Leste education sector continues to face significant challenges owing to this difficult history.

This paper provides an overview of the history and reconstruction of the education sector. It explores its reconstruction in a complex transitional society that is a fledgling state and struggling with multiple social, political, economic, and educational constraints. The paper provides a historical context and background to the transitional nation, details the periods of colonial education, and describes the reconstruction process and the challenges currently faced by the Ministry of Education. The paper concludes with a description of the current status of education in the country.

### ***A Historical Overview of the Road to Independence***

The Portuguese reached the coast of Timor-Leste in 1515, but it was not until the 1700s that a governor was installed in Dili, the capital of Timor-Leste. Portuguese colonization ensured that the native indigenous population, particularly the coffee growers, never managed to accumulate much capital. Timor-Leste remained largely underdeveloped, with an economy based on barter.

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During the Second World War, Japan invaded Timor-Leste in February 1942 and remained in Timor-Leste until September 1945. By the end of the Second World War, Timor-Leste was in ruins.

The 1960s brought a new era of colonization during which Portugal tried to help the country recover through a series of three successive five-year plans; nevertheless, this was not sufficient to overcome decades of underdevelopment and neglect. Portugal governed Portuguese Timor, as Timor-Leste was then known, with a combination of direct and indirect rule, leaving traditional Timorese society almost untouched. In 1974 the transition to democracy in Portugal had a sudden impact on all its colonies. In Timor-Leste in 1974, two political parties—the Timorese Democratic Union (UDT) and the Frente Revolucionaria do Timor-Leste Independente (Fretilin)—formed a coalition, to prepare for eventual independence. In August 1975 the UDT, supported by the Indonesian government, attempted a coup to seize power from the Portuguese and halt the progress of the Fretilin. The coup failed and most of UDT members fled into Indonesian West Timor (United Nations Development Program [UNDP], 2002, pp 70-72).

The leadership of Fretilin took the decision to establish FALINTIL (the Armed Forces for National Liberation of Timor-Leste). FALINTIL was Fretilin's military front to organize the Timorese in their struggle for independence. FALINTIL guerrilla fighters galvanized the Timorese people throughout the national territory to resist the oppression. In spite of the strong presence of the occupying forces, FALINTIL managed to be operational throughout the whole national territory (ETAN report, 2000). To defend their homeland, the people of Timor-Leste stood up en masse, offered their sons, fed the guerrilla soldiers, gave shelter, cared for the wounded, and thus further encouraged the struggle for liberation. In November 1975 the Fretilin declared Timor-Leste as the Republic Democrática de Timor-Leste (RDTL), which was recognized by only a few mainly former-Portuguese colonies ((The East Timor and Indonesia *Action Network* [ETAN] report, 2000).

Indonesia invaded Timor-Leste in December 1975 and ruled the tiny island for 24 years. During this regime more than 200,000, or a quarter of the population, lost their lives (Schwarz, 1994; Fakuda, 2000). Indonesia favored strong direct rule, but the Timorese people never accepted this and were determined to preserve their culture and national identity, in which religion and the Catholic Church played a crucial role. The November 1991 massacre at Santa Cruz, the 1992 capture and imprisonment of resistance leader Xanana Gusmao, and the 1996 Nobel Peace Prize awarded to Bishop Belo and José Ramos-Horta put the spotlight on the human rights situation in Timor-Leste. Following the economic crisis in 1997 and 1998 in Indonesia and the overthrow of the Suharto regime, an agreement was reached between the Portuguese and the Indonesian governments to hold a referendum under the auspices of the United Nations (UNDP, 2002).

### ***Historical Background of the Education Sector***

The education system in Timor-Leste today is the culmination of a complex and varied history. Three distinct historical periods shaped its development: the Portuguese rule from the 1500s to 1975, the Indonesian rule from 1975 to 1999, and the United Nations administration from 1999 to 2002. Timor-Leste's education was markedly affected in each of these periods. Therefore, it is

important that the present situation is understood in the context of the "previous social and economic structures, as this will continue to have an impact on the current situation" (United Nations, 2000, p. 19).

### **Education during Portuguese Colonization**

For much of the time that the Portuguese occupied Timor-Leste, there was little concern for the education of the people as a whole. Although the Portuguese educated the families of the ruling classes, they did not concern themselves with the majority of people who lived outside the main centers. The Catholic Church was the key provider of schooling, "founding and operating primary schools, seminaries and eventually a teacher-training institution" (Wu, 2000, p. 3). However, despite all the work of the Church, only 3,000 students were attending mission schools after 400 years of Portuguese rule (Wu). The World Bank (2001) reported that by the end of Portuguese rule no more than 10 percent of the population was literate (p. 13). Those who studied during the Portuguese rule were able to study Portuguese culture and Catholic values. Millo and Barnett (2003) describe religious education in Portuguese Timor as the "main tool for building a submissive local elite" (p. 5). Those educated by the Portuguese were often sent to Portugal to complete their education, and they took on the leadership of Timor-Leste both at the end of Portuguese rule and after Independence. The United Nations also notes that some, "having completed the minimum of four years of primary education and a few months of teacher training, today work as primary school teachers of Portuguese" (UNDP, 2002, p. 47).

### **Education during Indonesian colonization**

In December 1975 the Indonesians invaded Timor-Leste and remained to rule the tiny island for 25 years. During those 25 years, a deliberate attempt was made to assimilate the Timorese with the rest of Indonesia. Indonesian teachers were sent to Timor-Leste, using a curriculum used in all other parts of Indonesia, with national examinations given across the whole country. Bahasa Indonesia was instituted as the language of instruction. In addition, Indonesia introduced the concept of Education for All, which was part of a UN program to have all children gain a primary education and then a junior secondary education. Although school numbers increased dramatically and education, from elementary through university level, became readily available during this time, the "quality of education was very low and schools were used to 'Indonesianize' the population" (Nicolai, 2004, p. 44; Pedersen and Arneberg, 1999, p101). While it benefited from the great expansion that was occurring across all of Indonesia, Timor-Leste came last in any national rankings of educational indicators (Nicolai, 2004).

Since many Timorese teachers were not adequately trained, the quality of teaching was poor, and teachers' wages were so low that many needed a second job. The teaching profession was considered of low rank and seen as a profession of last resort (World Bank, 1999a, p. 7). Teachers taught for exams, and because they needed to ensure that students passed the exams, rote learning was used extensively. Classrooms had the bare minimum of equipment and usually no electricity. There were shortages of textbooks, and there were almost no teaching aids such as posters, charts, or resource books (United Nations, 2000, p. 6).

### ***The Referendum and Crisis of 1999***

Following the economic crisis in 1997 and 1998 in Indonesia and the overthrow of the Suharto regime, an agreement was reached between the Portuguese and the Indonesian government to hold a referendum under the auspices of the United Nations (UNDP, 2002). In August 1999, with an overwhelming voter turnout, the Timorese chose independence.

Yet the announcement of the results sparked an explosion of systematic violence and killings that lasted until UN peacekeeping forces arrived in late September. In 21 days nearly the entire population was uprooted and displaced. Although many fled into the mountains and forests of Timor-Leste, large numbers were forced across the border into West Timor. In Timor-Leste, systematic violence resulted in the destruction and devastation of homes, livelihoods, and infrastructure. Some 90 percent of public buildings and infrastructure in Timor-Leste were destroyed. The conclusion of the electoral process on 17 April 2002 paved the way for Timor-Leste's independence on 20 May 2002. Today Timor-Leste, with a population of 950,000, is the world's newest democracy (Australian Agency for International Development [AusAID], 2001).

The education sector was equally devastated during the violence, with schools destroyed and massive numbers of students and teachers displaced. A World Bank report estimated that "approximately 95 percent of schools and other education institutions were destroyed and buildings, furniture and teaching materials ... have been lost" (1999b, p. 6). Furthermore, with the majority of the 5,000 teachers from other parts of Indonesia returning home, the report estimated that between 70 and 80 percent of Indonesian senior administrative staff and secondary teachers had departed (1999b, p. 6).

### ***The Transitional Administration and the Reconstruction of the Education Sector in Timor-Leste***

In October 1999 the United Nations Security Council gave the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET) overall responsibility for the administration of Timor-Leste and the power to exercise all legislative and executive authority—including the administration of justice (Azimi and Chang, 2003). The World Bank established the Timor-Leste Joint Assessment Mission (JAM) in 1999 and the Trust Fund for East Timor (TFET), which mobilized funds to establish the Emergency School Recovery Project (ESRP) (World Bank, 2008). The ESRP had several components: rehabilitate schools, provide textbooks and school furniture, develop policies, and facilitate social mobilization. Alongside its donor coordination missions, the World Bank also used international consultants to support the work of the ESRP.

The National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT)—the umbrella organization for major Timorese political parties—established a Department of Education that included many former Timorese officers from the Indonesian Timor-Leste Provincial Office of Education. During the emergency period (until June 2000), the CNRT district education officers supported UNICEF and UNTAET in collecting data on how many schools were functioning and how many students and teachers were involved and also assisted in the distribution of school supplies. Until teachers were employed as civil servants in September 2000, the CNRT district education officers also coordinated the monthly

honorarium and Portuguese language classes held in Dili for the district teachers. The CNRT educators staffing the district and national CNRT offices were initially volunteers who began receiving remuneration and back pay from UNTAET only in August 2000. Without their management, coordination, cooperation, and incredible goodwill, emergency schooling in Timor-Leste would certainly have failed.

### ***Key Features in the Reconstruction and Rehabilitation of the Education Sector***

#### **The Emergency Period**

During the emergency period, schools in reasonably good condition had been reopened by the Catholic Church and by local teachers organizing ad hoc classes. UNICEF had provided around 600 School-in-a-Box sets and a modest incentive for teachers (Lee, 2000, pp. 62–63). The UNTAET-administered Combined Funds for East Timor (CFET) was the budget that provided the schools with required emergency equipment such as UNICEF's School-in-a-Box, blackboard paint, chalk, soccer balls, and musical instruments.

#### **School Rehabilitation**

When schools reopened in October 2000, although repairs had been undertaken by non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and UN agencies, not one classroom had been rehabilitated by the ESRP. Furthermore, some of the repairs (undertaken by NGOs) had left the schools in a dangerous condition and many repairs had to be redone. The ESRP originally aimed at rehabilitating 2,100 classrooms. By the end of March 2001, 771 classrooms in 157 schools had been fully rehabilitated, and although not timely, the ESRP exceeded its initial target by completing a total of 2,964 classrooms by the end of 2001 (UNTAET, 2001, p. 10). By June 2002, 2,780 classrooms had been reconstructed in 535 schools and 87,000 sets of furniture and 2,063,517 textbooks had been distributed for 140,000 students (TFET, 2003). An Australian-based firm worked with a team of Timorese engineers during the school rehabilitation process.

#### **School Furniture**

As most of the furniture was missing from government schools, it was originally planned to import plastic desks and chairs for the short term while wooden furniture was being produced. In a further agreement (when the original decision to use plastic chairs was scrapped) it was decided to use locally made wooden furniture, that 40 percent of furniture would be locally produced and 60 percent would be imported. Four international companies won bids to produce 25,000 sets of school furniture (two chairs and a double desk), and 10,000 single-chair-and-desk sets. Twelve companies from 11 districts were selected by national tender to produce 14,000 sets of furniture, and no company was allowed to bid for more than one of the 1,500–3,000 sets per district (UNTAET, 2001, pp. 12–13). Technical assistance was provided by AusAID for the successful Timorese companies. The World Bank had originally estimated 50,000 furniture sets would be sufficient, as consultants anticipated that, following the JAM, schools would be working on a double-shift system. However, apart from a few schools in Dili, this did not happen, and consequently the school population needing to be catered for was not 100,000 but over 200,000 students. In 2003,

visits to various schools revealed many of the students were bringing their own chairs to school, while others had to sit on the ground. The situation improved between 2003 and 2005, but a resurgence of violence in 2006 again led to the destruction of some schools and school furniture.

### **Teacher Recruitment**

The head of CNRT Education determined that of the 5,000 staff allocated to CNRT's priority education sector, there would be 3,000 primary-school teachers and 1,740 secondary-school teachers, with the remaining 260 positions shared among the head office, the 130 district offices, and the university. By April 2000, UNICEF was providing a monthly incentive to almost 7,000 people to teach in primary schools, but in the first year the government could afford to hire only 4,740 as primary- or secondary-teachers (Nicolai, 2004, p. 79).

Together with the CNRT district education heads, the CNRT head of Education determined the criteria, including minimum qualifications, for people to be allowed to sit for the teacher recruitment test. Coordination at the district level was maintained by collaboration with the CNRT district education heads and the UNTAET Social Affairs officers. The cooperation of all district staff was crucial. They had to distribute information about the recruitment process, candidate eligibility (a high school diploma or equivalent at a minimum), establish testing centers, coordinate security with the UN Police, and generally ensure the public was kept informed. In some districts, the staff had to walk for hours to get information to schools that were inaccessible by road. In May 2000, approximately 5,000 eligible candidates sat for the primary-school-teacher recruitment tests (UNTAET, 2001).

### **Textbooks**

As Portuguese was to be phased in as the language of instruction (beginning with grades 1 and 2), in the 2000–2001 school year, textbooks were provided by Portugal for grades 1 and 2 at the ratio of one book to six students. The World Bank ESRP was therefore concerned with textbooks for grades 3 to 12. As the 1994 Indonesian curriculum (albeit modified) was still to be used while the new Timorese curriculum was being developed, CNRT Education decided to purchase Indonesian textbooks. To support literacy, there was also a push by the World Bank to purchase picture books without words for the early grades, because of the large number of different mother tongues among Timorese children.

Over 70 teachers, selected by CNRT from different grades and subject areas, met with a World Bank consultant and UNTAET staff to discuss textbooks and decide from which publishers they would request samples. After the books arrived, the teachers met in groups to select textbooks and teacher reference materials for the new school year. Each textbook had a different Timorese cover, with a forward written by Xanana Gusmao in Portuguese, Tetun, and Indonesian. A team of teachers then vetted the textbooks selected and deleted all references to Indonesian ideology, geography, and history (UNTAET, 2001).

### **Teacher Professional Development**

In 2000, UNICEF's main activities included efforts to provide an incentive for volunteer teachers, to supply UNICEF's School-in-a-Box and recreational/sporting kits, and to distribute building materials for the rehabilitation of approximately 90 schools. Primary-school teacher training

began in January 2000 in Dili and follow-up training continued throughout the year, moving to cluster schools at district and subdistrict levels (UNICEF, 2000). The UNICEF-sponsored workshop trained 52 Timorese teachers in a two-week seminar. The course provided future Timorese primary-school teachers with training in civic education, human rights, English, natural sciences, mathematics, and the history of Timor-Leste. Forty of the 52 teachers were deployed to outlying districts to teach, while 12 attended an advanced training-for-trainers course in Dili. UNICEF sponsored the training program for teachers (UNICEF, 2000). The situation in secondary schools was even more difficult, with no secondary teachers, and university students were encouraged to take up jobs in secondary schools, despite most of them having had no training in teaching or classroom management (UNDP, 2002).

## *Discussion*

### **Challenges in Education since Independence**

Despite the achievements following Independence, Timor-Leste still faces enormous challenges and struggles under harsh conditions in all aspects of education reconstruction, namely, infrastructure, human and material resources, curriculum implementation, resources and textbooks, and the dilemma of languages of learning. It is essentially the difficulty of teaching in Portuguese, so teachers currently use a mixture of Bahasa and Tetun to teach.

### *Language*

Timor-Leste has at least 12 separate languages and many more dialects. Yet after Independence, the constitution established Portuguese, Bahasa Indonesia, and Tetun as the new official languages (UNDP, 2002). Educators already struggle with the mixture of local oral languages, a curriculum in Indonesian, and the hunger to learn English. One of the main difficulties in adopting any change is due to the lack of a common language to use in teaching teachers; another is the lack of teaching resources to support learning in *any* language. While Portuguese is now one of the official languages of Timor-Leste, few Timorese under 40 years of age are fluent speakers. Most of the students and teachers in schools do not speak Portuguese themselves (only older elites and those from the diaspora who returned from Portugal, Mozambique, or Angola speak it), and teachers do not have the capacity to teach in that language. As one teacher at a junior secondary school explains,

*There is currently confusion about languages. We have textbooks in Indonesian but the level of Indonesian known by the students is not good so sometimes we have to explain in Tetun. All of us young teachers in the school do not speak Portuguese and we also [are] not interested to learn the language.*

(Earnest, unpublished field study).

It is important for the government to put a mechanism in place so that teachers can teach in Portuguese. Although schools are still teaching in Bahasa, Tetun, or both, the textbooks used by most secondary schools are from Indonesia and books from Portugal have been donated to most primary schools. The government of Timor-Leste has extended the time during which Tetun will be used in the classroom.

### ***Resources and Textbooks***

As in many less developed countries and transitional societies, the harsh reality of the situation is that most schools function with barely minimal resources, some districts' schools having no roofs, desks, or chairs and most schools not having access to electricity, water, or adequate sanitation facilities. Just before UNTAET handed over administration to the newly elected Timorese government in April 2002, it reported that at the beginning of the 2001–2002 school year more than 240,000 primary- and secondary-level students were attending school; 6,000 teachers had been recruited to teach; more than 700 primary schools, 100 junior secondary schools, 40 preschools, and 10 technical high schools were open and functioning; and over 2,780 classrooms in 535 schools had been rehabilitated (UNTAET, 2001).

Over 1 million textbooks had been distributed to students and teachers when UNTAET handed over administration in 2002. There is an acute shortage of textbooks, and of those available, many do not meet new standards. *Lafaek* (Tetun for "crocodile") is a Tetun magazine published by CARE Timor-Leste with donor funding. This colorful magazine provides articles on a variety of topics: health, civics, child rights. This immensely popular magazine, with an accompanying teacher magazine, is currently the only resource distributed to all children and teachers five times a year (CARE, 2007). Books in Tetun produced by the Mary MacKillop East Timor (MMET) program Mai Hatene Tetun have also been included in the new curriculum and have been made available to all 800 primary schools in the nation (MMET, 2006).

### ***On-going Professional Development of Teachers***

A major issue confronting the government and the education sector is the poor quality of education in terms of teacher capability and teacher qualifications. There is a high absenteeism for teachers and students, (Nicolai, 2004, p. 34) and a high student-to-teacher ratio—up to 62:1 for primary schools and 40:1 for secondary schools. The gender imbalance among teachers is also of concern, with only 30 percent of primary-school teachers being women. Professional development of teachers in schools continues through classes in the Portuguese language, teaching methodologies, and education psychology in programs offered by IFCP (Instituto Formação Continua Professores) in Dili. The IFCP is a directorate of the Ministry of Education that provides training for teachers from all districts.

A Bacchelerato of Teaching (this Portuguese title equivalent to the US Bachelor of Education) course is offered by IFCP for teachers in Dili and Baucau who have reached a prescribed level in the Portuguese language. Unqualified teachers are put on a fast track to gain suitable qualifications, and professional development is provided for the underqualified. However, teachers in areas other than Dili must depend on workshops offered by NGOs and the UNDP.

Another difficulty in the professional development for teachers is the lack of a common language for teaching teachers. One way of providing continuing teacher professional development is through the existing Friendly Schools Project, an innovation of UNICEF where there are 100 clusters of 5 to 10 schools, with one acting as a hub or mother school that supplies training, learning resources, and support services to the other schools. In mid-2005 there were already 32 clusters installed, involving about 315 schools (Romiszowski, 2005, p.

8). The challenge lies in reorganizing teacher-training structures and creating a national higher pedagogical institute.

### ***The Current Situation in Timor-Leste***

#### **Education Indicators**

In October 2003 about 600 teachers, headmasters, parents, and other stakeholders from around the tiny nation attended a three-day National Education congress as a precursor to drafting the National Education Policy. They put forward recommendations that form the basis of the current Education Policy (World Bank, 2005). The education status indicators from the Timor-Leste Human Development Report (UNDP, 2006) reveal extremely low education standards. The adult literacy rate in the 2004 census (National Statistics Directorate, 2004) was only 50.1 percent (56.3 percent for males and 43.9 percent for females). The education system is currently stratified into six years of primary, three years of lower secondary and three years of upper secondary education. The net primary-school enrollment rate was 78.3 percent; the lower and upper secondary enrollments were 37.6 percent and 19.9 percent, respectively.

#### ***Tertiary Education***

There is an acute lack of tertiary institutions to provide professional skills and other training; tertiary enrollments are at a mere 2.9 percent. One of the immense challenges facing Timor-Leste today is providing for its youth, with more than 50 percent of the population under the age of 15. There is a high incidence of youth unemployment, many youth lack basic skills, and male youth are drawn into joining martial arts groups. Access to tertiary education is extremely limited (World Bank, 2005). Portugal, Brazil, New Zealand, and Australia offer a limited number of scholarships at the undergraduate and graduate levels. A number of students are currently undergoing medical training and specialization in Cuba. A small percentage of students also study in Indonesia. The youth of the country have very little opportunity to further their education.

#### ***Curriculum Development and Implementation***

Over the past few years, the government, supported by UNICEF and other partners, committed to the development and rollout of a new national primary-school curriculum for all grades. In June 2005 the Primary Curriculum Implementation Plan was approved and the new Timorese Primary Curriculum began to be phased in: from grade 1 in September 2005 and progressing to grade 6 by 2010. The Ministry of Education's new Tetun curriculum was launched in Dili in December 2006 by President José Ramos-Horta. The Ministry of Education and Culture (MoEC) will provide training to all teachers in the appropriate use and delivery of the curriculum and is in the process of developing policies and guidelines for textbooks and learning materials. The MoEC curriculum division will continue to require technical assistance for several more years (MoEC, 2005).

### **Conclusion**

Stability in Timor-Leste is currently fragile and the country is susceptible to conflict. Internal ethnic factors contribute to the risk of renewed violence within the cycles of endemic poverty, a lack of disposable income, and a dearth of employment opportunities (World Bank, 2005). The violence in 2006 sparked a humanitarian crisis and led to the displacement of up to 15 percent of the population. The crisis brought education to a standstill for an estimated 30,000 primary-school children in the capital, Dili, and affected learning for tens of thousands of others in classes throughout the country. The resumption of formal education in September 2006, supported by UNICEF and the MoEC, was a pivotal step in the process of restoring a sense of normality for children whose lives had been deeply affected by the violence in the country (UNICEF, 2006).

The education sector faces decision making across the board, as the new curriculum from primary through senior-secondary school is designed and introduced and as the Education for All—Fast Track Program is implemented, attempting to achieve universal primary education by 2015. Long-term planning for the development of Tetun and other indigenous languages must be a government priority, and financial resources and expertise need to be invested in this task. The roles of the official languages—Portuguese, English, and Bahasa Indonesia—need to be determined and published (MMET, 2006). The growth of teaching in the Portuguese language will bring its own difficulties, as textbooks and other teaching resources have yet to be developed and distributed to schools across the country.

With teachers forming the backbone of an effective education system, the Ministry of Education must develop an action plan so that teachers not only have professional development sessions but also work toward certification. Most of the teachers in secondary schools are undergraduate students and many have not undergone any professional teacher training. Certification and skill upgrading may have to be compulsory for the first three years, and only then can the government assure the quality of its primary- and secondary-school teachers.

It must be acknowledged that Timorese teachers, school administrators, educators, and students at all levels are motivated and enthusiastic. They live and work in difficult conditions and have limited pedagogical knowledge and training, especially in modern methods of teaching, but try to do their best under difficult circumstances. The challenge lies in the Ministry of Education's ability to respond to these constraints. It is imperative that the government and NGOs combine efforts to address these issues, aiming to bring Timor-Leste's education sector up to international standards and recognition. Although there are no easy answers to the overwhelming problems facing education reconstruction in Timor-Leste, the resilience, endurance, and hope of the people demonstrate a desire to succeed against all odds.

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