



Submission No 52

## **Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with Timor-Leste**

Organisation: Friends of Maliana

Joint Standing committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and  
Trade Inquiry into Australia Relationship with Timor Leste

Looking beyond the state: aid and government support to  
the local level in Timor Leste

Friends of Maliana  
2nd April 2013

The Friends of Maliana have had a community to community relationship with the sub District of Maliana in the District of Bobonaro since 2000. The Friends have worked closely with Leichhardt Council, Sydney Secondary College, Blackwattle campus and emergency architects Australia on a variety of programs.

The relationship and all its projects are negotiated and discussed through a Comité of Xefes da Suco, a community youth representative and a women's representative. The District Administrator and Sub District Administrators are also on the Comité. Construction projects are managed through the District Administrator's office. Community projects are managed through the community centre and library funded by a mix of direct funding from Friends of Maliana, Leichhardt Council and funding applications from external bodies.

The Friends have, since 2005, followed with interest the proposals and draft legislation for decentralisation. We followed with interest the discussion on the potential relationship between and the respective roles and status of the proposed District Assemblies and Xefes da Suco. We have contributed directly to the development of the capacity building plan for decentralisation developed in 2010.

There has been resistance to decentralisation both by the GoTL and bi lateral agencies. The resistance has different characteristics. Bi lateral agencies reported during interviews for the draft capacity building plan that they were in principle opposed to decentralisation at the time as the central government was not yet strong enough to control decentralised activities and the potential for corruption and waste was therefore high. Advice from the GoTL mirrored this advice although senior bureaucrats spoke enthusiastically about the potential benefits of decentralisation.

As is well documented getting resources to the Districts and disbursed effectively has been slow with a growing divide between Dili and the Districts. While this has not yet reached critical levels the signs of 'mismanaged' projects from the 'centre' grows. We have witnessed several such projects in Maliana that have left locals scratching their heads. This is not to say that all projects and activities undertaken by the Friends of Maliana have been smooth sailing. However what we have experienced is that there are customs, practices and local institutions in Maliana that are able to effectively 'problem solve' governance and practical issues. The manner in which this is done uses customary processes and styles of communication not found in project management text books.

A critical factor for success is trust. Once trust is built it is possible to have open discussions and for real listening and learning to occur. Trust is built over the long term and through visible deliverables. The deliverables need not be big but they must be a clearly expressed local need, work for the local community and be able to be sustained and built on.

Before 2009 there was little or no Australian aid presence in Maliana community as the focus was central government. Since 2009 AusAid has funded programs at a local level through contracts with non-government agencies. A significant part of the funds go to a number of Australian volunteer organisations that place volunteers in Districts. The Friends of Maliana have contributed to and worked with a number of these volunteers. This has been very effective in improving regular communication between ourselves and the local community. Previously we relied on twice yearly visits. The volunteers have also provided support to staff for developing capacity and activities such as those at the community centre and library.

We are aware that a level of frustration at the slow rate of development in the districts and the perceived growth of elites has led to frustrations being vented by groups of young people

towards some malai workers. Maliana is an urbanised area and the daily living practices such as hygiene, toileting and access to food is very different to remote and rural areas. The adoption to urbanised life is causing challenges for locals. The visible gap between those who appear to be benefiting and those not benefiting from what development is occurring is stark. In addition some central government imposed plans such as the relocation of the local market (a key source of income for many families) and the development of a parallel elite education system adds to the impression of outside imposed rule. At one community meeting as we relaxed post meeting the wry humour was - 'first the Portuguese invaded, then the Indonesians invade and now Dili is invading'. What is relevant and urgent is that the people of Timor Leste see that they can have a participatory role in their governance in a manner that is meaningful and understandable.

Our experience is that there is significant expertise in the local community that can be harnessed. The leadership qualities of the Xefes of course has an impact as has the capacity of the District Administrators office not only for technical tasks but also for working effectively with local community leaders and customary practices including those that have developed during resistance times.

There are many Friendship groups in Australia linked to Districts and Sub Districts. Many work closely with or through local councils in Australia. The experience and expertise of these groups is similar to the Friends of Maliana. Australia runs a decentralised form of government through local government that is not dissimilar to the model proposed in Timor Leste. Local councils in Australia are charged with implementing public works and services that are largely predetermined by a higher level of government. Local councils in Australia do have revenue raising powers not included in the draft Timor Leste legislation. These powers are relevant in an Australian context but not yet relevant in the Timor Leste context.

Our view is that the expertise that exists in local councils in Australia that could be much more effectively harnessed to support decentralisation in Timor Leste particularly through community to community relationships that are based on trust, respect and are durable over time.

Our experience in Australia has been that many local councils and peak organisations tend to see activities in Timor Leste as the domain of the federal government and so resist active involvement for fear of confusion with 'sister city' arrangements which have often been viewed as excuses for overseas jaunts by elected members. Communities on the contrary embrace the relationship and are always very willing to work for community outcomes in Timor Leste. We would like to see the good will and expertise in the community more effectively harnessed. Local councils can play a key role, particularly in the decentralisation process, in a wide range of local service development and delivery.