



Submission No 33

Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with Timor-Leste

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Foreign Affairs Parliamentary Inquiry into Australia's relationship with Timor Leste

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Introduction

I make this submission in a personal capacity.

I became aware of the situation of the people of Timor-Leste in 1977 when I was living in Indonesia and had regular personal contact with the Timorese as well as Indonesian forces deployed to occupy the region from 1975. In 1982 and for the following five years as part of my regular work, I conducted research into the human rights situation faced by the Timorese. This consisted of routine trips to Indonesia to collect information and stories from the Timorese, including Church Leaders, students, professionals and officials; report writing and documentation of the unfolding oppression the Timorese were experiencing and help set up organisations to promote human rights and the recognition of the legitimate voice of Timorese living under oppression.

From 1989 onwards I continued incidental but sometimes substantial support to the Timorese to have their right to sovereignty internationally recognised, especially given the enormity of the ongoing and systematic oppression carried out by the Indonesian Military occupying forces.

In early 2000, I began working full time in Timor Leste to help in the reconstruction of Timor as an independent country. I was appointed Team Leader for an Asian Development Bank and World Bank sponsored program to carry out democratic elections in each of the 2000 + Aldeia, to appoint representatives on 440 Village Development Councils and manage funds for rehabilitation provided through an international Trust Fund, of which Australia was a significant contributor. We were the first formal and largest employer of Timorese at the time with a staff of over 200 mostly young people by July 2000.

Since that time I have been involved in a number of development type activities in Timor Leste having travelled there more than 35 times and living there for short and longer periods. Most of my work has been as Project Manager or Program Director of AusAID's work in the water supply, sanitation and hygiene sector. The company I worked for throughout this time has been the largest implementing agency in the sector since late 2001. During this time I have also been involved in a range of smaller programs associated with service delivery and civil society engagement. I have a current contract with AusAID for work in Timor-Leste and am also involved in a voluntary capacity as the Convenor of the Friends of Baucau sponsored by the Cities of Yarra and Darebin in Melbourne.

My work in International Development, during the past 40 years has taken me to many countries of the region especially to Indonesia, PNG and the Solomon Islands which countries represent our closest neighbours.

During this time I have had considerable opportunity to reflect on the relationship between Australia and our regional neighbouring countries especially Timor Leste.

I seek the opportunity to speak about my experience and reflections during this time with the Parliamentary Committee.

Addressing the Terms of Reference

Timor Leste is and will remain a country with a long way to go before it becomes a modern and equitably resourced democratic society. The good will that exists within each country for the other should be built upon and nurtured for a long-standing and supportive bilateral relationship into the future.

Specifically I would like to discuss the following points related to each of the Terms of Reference of the Parliamentary Enquiry.

Bilateral Relations At The Parliamentary And Government Levels

1. The nature of the relationship should be steady, long term and consistent. We need to learn the lessons of our less than acceptable relationship with Papua New Guinea which has oscillated from dominating to distant to demanding. We should also learn from RAMSY in the Solomon Islands which has been exceptional in some regards and very culturally insensitive in other areas.
2. We need to build a political relationship that recognizes that each country will have different sovereignty concerns and not assume a common interest, or lacking in respect for a perspective that is markedly different.
3. We need to ensure a bilateral relationship that provides Timor-Leste with the context for culturally and historically appropriate political leadership and nation building. This will require Australia to help Timor-Leste become a stable nation within the region but one that also has its own unique identity – not a puppet country subservient to the economic, domestic political or security needs of its neighbours on all sides.
4. Support Timor Leste to carry out consultation with existing and potential investors and developers, to ensure Timor-Leste gains maximum sustainable developmental benefits from exploration and exploitation of the undersea resources in the joint areas of interest of the two countries
5. Practically this would include providing resources and opportunities for ongoing engagement through exchange visits, training opportunities and subsidies to ensure a Timorese presence at

international and maintaining a strong Ambassadorial and Consular presence in Australia and Timor–Leste.

Aid, Including Support With Governance Issues

Currently Timor–Leste is experiencing rapid improvements in and around the capital of Dili but minimal change outside of the capital. If this situation continues there will be a rapid increase in urbanization towards Dili and a growing disempowered and dissatisfied cohort of young people in a country with one of the highest birth rates in the world.

The development context of Timor Leste is dominated by three important considerations.

- A resource rich potential and continuing commitment by the government to good governance and improving services to the whole population.
- Rapid population growth and lack of economic opportunities outside of the capital for school leavers.
- A low capacity to resource and manage the whole range of services to the rural population.

In providing support to Timor–Leste, Australia should continue to comply with the more recent recommendations for improving Aid Effectiveness¹. This should be done in such a way that Australia is open to recognizing that the representatives of the people and future national leaders are not only current parliamentarians and government officials but also leaders of village communities and acknowledged civil society organisations. In regard to the latter point, the following quotation from the latest of the High Level Meetings of Aid Effectiveness is important to acknowledge

Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) play a vital role in enabling people to claim their rights, in promoting rights based approaches, in shaping development policies and partnerships and in overseeing their implementation. They also provide services in areas that are complementary to those provided by states.²

In this context Australian support for aid in strengthening democratic governance, improving service delivery and promoting the engagement of citizens in nation building should continue for at least another two decades. Relating to this aspect of the terms of reference, I make the following recommendations:

6. Continue to maintain at least current and even more substantial levels of aid to support both the strengthening of governance and the delivery of services to Timor–Leste.

¹ Namely the 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th High Level Meetings of International Donors and Recipient Countries for improving Aid Effectiveness that have taken place during the past 10 years.

² Busan Partnership for Effective Development Cooperation; Fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, Busan, Republic of Korea, Dec. 2011, Article 22

7. Continue to maintain and expand a focus on improving development infrastructure and a full range of services to the rural sector where the majority of the population resides.
8. Continue support for improving governance in a low-key but effective manner by providing opportunities for culturally sensitive and appropriately qualified middle and high level technical advisors for both the machinery of government and for technical areas, such as engineering or trades professionals.
9. Ensure continuing and ongoing support to education, especially tertiary and technical education through scholarships and exchange programs to Australia and other suitable countries within the neighborhood.
10. In designing aid programs, and in addition to the internationally acknowledged principles of aid effectiveness, far greater recognition should be given to acknowledging and mobilising the strengths and assets of the people for whom the aid is intended. A much stronger case should be made for using what is now referred to as a strength-based or endogenous approach to development practice. A very successful model for adopting this approach was the 8 year Basic Education Development Program in PNG.
11. Drawing on existing models of engaging with civil society organisations currently supported by AusAID, such as those under the democratic governance program across eastern Indonesia – including ACCESS, the Churches Partnership Program in PNG and Vanuatu, SINPA in the Solomon Islands, and AACES in Africa.

Economic Issues, Including Trade And Investment

Australia, especially across the whole of the North (West, East and Centre), provides an opportunity for Timorese to live and work in a range of capacities, from semi-skilled workers to higher levels of employment in the service and tourist industries. Acknowledging this I recommend that there be more opportunity to

12. Facilitate opportunities for guest workers to come to Australia for shorter and intermediary periods through out the year and in support of services in urban and rural work.
13. Provide incentives for Australian business to develop trade links with the outlying parts of Timor.
14. Provide scholarships and apprentice schemes for Timorese with interest in the commercial sector.

Cultural, Educational And Scientific Relations And Exchanges

Nurturing culture is a very high priority for the Timorese people. There is hardly a moment in daily live for Timorese that is not in some way or other influenced by their culture. At present there is very little recognition of this in our bilateral relations whether it be at the government-to-government

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level or within the aid program. For this reason future relations with Timor-Leste should

15. Acknowledge cultural differences by providing dedicated training to Australians working in Timor-Leste
16. Develop programs or make available funds specifically to foster cultural exchanges, including music and the arts in general.
17. Develop opportunities and resources for exchanges between young people including with those now living in remote and indigenous communities across Australia.
18. Being open to the culture of Timor as an extension of recognizing cultural diversity in Australia. Including the culture(s) of the people of Timor-Leste in celebrations with Australia is one way to do this.
19. Recognise the existing cultural and historical links between Australia and Timor Leste going back to the occupation of Timor by the Australian Armed forces during the Second World War. This would include acknowledging and celebrating the strong connection that certain communities of Timor Leste where there still exist people who were alive and supportive of the Australian troops. It is important that such people be given the opportunity to tell their story and to have it recognised as part of the history of both countries.

People To People Links

In consultation with civil society organisations and associations Australia could be much more pro-active in seeking ways to promote people to people relationships within the Third or Civil Society sector. – There is an enormous potential to draw upon and support a whole range of existing organisations who are reaching out to help the people of Timor-Leste. These include work in the health sector, including prevention of blindness and support for people living with blindness, support for people living with a hearing disability, disability access and awareness, general practice and support for clinics and health outreach programs, friendship associations who provide technical and capacity building support, financial support for a water supply, sanitation and hygiene, nutrition programs, education at primary and secondary level and many more.

For these reasons Australia should

20. Deliberately and systematically support short and long term volunteer programs consisting of Australians willing to live and work across Timor-Leste
21. Provide opportunities for two-way exchange programs by encouraging Federal, State and especially Local government to support such exchanges.

22. Provide more official recognition of the contribution made so far and continuing to be made by Friendship Associations from across Australia.

Conclusion

Through this written submission, I seek to have a personal hearing with the Commission of Inquiry to explore some or all of these points made and to share the rich and most rewarding experience I, as an Australian citizen, have had with the people and Government of Timor-Leste.

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