



Submission No 12

Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with Timor-Leste

Organisation: Friends of Suai

Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee



Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade

Inquiry into Australia's relationship with Timor-Leste

Submission by Bill Armstrong AO, Balthasar Kehi and Ann Wigglesworth on behalf of Friends of Suai/Covalima.

1. Introduction

The aim of this submission is to highlight the importance of underpinning our relationship with one of our nearest neighbours with an approach, which builds friendship, trust and partnership while at the same time enabling the Timorese people to develop their own capacity to manage and govern their own nation. Building relationships between our peoples is important for our own long-term security as well as for the people of East Timor while at the same time it is the basis of any sustainable development program.

2. History

Australia's relationship with Timor Leste has a long history relating back to WW11 and includes the overwhelming community support from Australia during Timor's struggle for independence.

During that time and following the vote for independence the Australian community provided large-scale people to people and community-to-community support for our neighbours. This was on top of the Australian Government aid and military support.

Growing out of this long history the community-to-community friendship relationships were developed. The first of these was the Friends of Suai/Covalima. This relationship was established to support the Timorese following the traumatic departure of the Indonesian administration in 1999 and in particular the killing of an estimated 115 people in the Suai Church¹. The friendship arrangement between the City of Port Phillip (COPP) and the District of Covalima was formalised in March 2000 when a ten year agreement was signed

¹Although the number of deaths in the Suai church massacre is unconfirmed this number reflects the knowledge of Suai activists and the record of deaths on the commemoration plaque in Suai town.

by the Mayor and the Councillors of the City on behalf of the citizens of the City of Port Phillip and Xanana Gusmao (Now the PM) on behalf of the people of Covalima.

3. Friends of Suai/Covalima

Friends of Suai now renamed Friends of Suai/Covalima to reflect a broader engagement than the District town of Suai, is managed by a Community Reference Committee (CRC) of the COPP and supported by a second ten-year commitment by the City Council (2010-2020). The CRC has a number of members who have worked as development professionals in Australian NGOs in Timor-Leste and elsewhere. The Chair, Bill Armstrong AO was former CEO of Australian Volunteers International (AVI) and President of the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (now ACFID); Ann Wigglesworth, former staff member International Women's Development Agency (IWDA), Save the Children Fund Australia (SCA) and Caritas Australia; Sieneke Martin, former Oxfam and Quakers; Megs Alston former AVI, SCA and IWDA and Friends of Suai/Covalima Coordinator, Pat Jessen was formerly senior manager of the AVI Pacific Program. Also a member of the CRC is Timorese academic Balthasar Kehi. The organisation thus has at its disposal considerable development expertise as well as being an official Committee of the COPP, which involves a Council representative on the Community Reference Committee, the employment of a part-time co-ordinator and an annual budget allocation.

Friends of Suai/Covalima supports a Timorese Coordinator and other staff at the Covalima Community Centre in Suai which is responsible for a broad range of programs, which have changed and developed over the thirteen years. They include vocational training support, computer training and internet café access, scholarships for secondary school students, schools infrastructure, the secondary school library, solar panels for health clinics, a rural women's development projects with 100 women participating in 10 different sub-district groups, up-skilling of Timorese English language teachers through Australian English language teaching volunteers. All of these programs are based on a strategic plan developed in partnership with the Covalima Community and are underpinned by a process of capacity development.

4. Civil Society role in Development in Timor-Leste

The Australian Government AusAID Office of Development Effectiveness has recently published an evaluation report on Australian engagement with civil society in developing countries. The report recognised the important role of civil society in development programming and the advantages of longer term core funding to engage with selected civil society organisations². The report notes that strategic approaches for working with civil society need a sound understanding of the role and actors in civil society. This submission provides some insights into such relationships through the experiences of Friends of Suai/Covalima and its members.

² Howell and Hall (2012) 'Working beyond Government: Evaluation of AusAID's engagement with civil society in developing countries', AusAID-ODE, March 2012.

Given the large scale of international development aid that has supported Timor-Leste over the past ten years, it is surprising to find how highly the friendship relationships are valued. Various Timorese have expressed the value they place on the friendship relation as 'walking together', rather than the formal aid process where the donor sets the rules, expects the local organisation to fulfil their requirements including onerous reporting formats, different for each organisation. Timorese Friends of Suai/Covalima CRC member BalthasarKehi noted that the friendship arrangements were formed to help 'piece together the shattered lives of the East Timorese, to heal the wounds and find the basic means for survival' based on the ethos 'You are not alone. We are with you and walk with you'³.

The Timorese people won the struggle for independence due to their tenacious and determined spirit and sense of identity as a distinct people. From 2000 onwards, the scale of international intervention was quite challenging to the Timorese who had envisaged freedom and development that would embrace, rather than challenge, the Timorese way.

Timor-Leste has a long history of civil society activism. Often known as the "third sector," civil society provides a people's perspective that is independent of government and the market. Civil society has been said to promote democracy through citizen participation and social actions that check and hold accountable both corporate and state power.

In Timor-Leste the activist civil society sector has grown out of a number of student and youth organisations that played a role in the clandestine movement thus there has been a transition from people's movement to NGOs. In the context of rehabilitation and reconstruction, international agencies expectations have been that local NGOs would fulfil a service delivery role. While many local NGOs set up in order to benefit from incoming aid programs, others represent a committed core of activists who continue to espouse different views, policies and actions. Some have described how they refocused their commitment from the 'struggle for independence' to 'liberation from poverty'. Many played an important role in peace-builders during the post-independence conflict of 2006, counteracting the divisive discourse of 'east and west' (while the Australian International Stabilisation Force unfortunately took up this terminology to define different groups)⁴.

In the main, the Friends of Suai/Covalima have been able to ride above these unhelpful divisions by embracing different political and ethnic groups within the organisation.

Given the large numbers of Australian agencies and other international aid organisations in Dili it is surprising to find that Timorese Civil Society Organisations (CSOs) have great difficulty accessing funds for the work they wish to do. Evidence of this was found in an in-country consultation and desk review for strengthening civil society carried out for ACFID in Jan-Feb 2008 ⁵. Timorese activists have perceived a self-serving nature of international

³Kehi, Balthasar(2005) 'Friendship City Relations between Communities and Local Governments in Australia and Timor Leste: Developing Citizen-to-Citizen Relations'

;http://www.atns.net.au/atns/references/attachments/Kehi_friendship.pdf

⁴ Wigglesworth, Ann (2013) "The Growth of Civil Society in Timor-Leste: Three moments of activism"; Journal of Contemporary Asia Vol 43, Issue 1 Feb 2013.

⁵ Wigglesworth, A; Dureau, C and Magno, J (2008) 'Timor Leste Civil Society Analysis' ACFID website:

aid, and been highly critical, for instance, of how funding was made available to international agencies but not to Timorese NGOs during the crisis of 2006 (see Wigglesworth 2013).

Timorese activists, including Suai based activists, seek relationships where their ideas are valued but they can also learn from others. An exchange of knowledge in which international expertise comes together with local knowledge to identify appropriate paths for change is the very essence of effective development. The Friendship city relationships are successful because they start with dialogue and do not impose predefined program strategies and timeframes based on donor requirements. This could be an example for broader consideration of Australian-Timorese relations.

Timorese also distinguish between ‘development activities’ and ‘project activities’. The latter is seen as funded activities, which benefit a distinct set of people (beneficiaries and staff) over a limited time period. The former is understood to be a process in which there has been consultation and analysis to identify the pathway for change that is popularly embraced. Many Timorese thus avoid the term ‘project’ when their aspirations are developmental.

At a recent Victorian Local Government Association (VLGA)-AusAID consultation at VLGA in Melbourne on 19 February 2013, friendship city groups and others were invited to hear the findings of a review by independent researchers of AusAID’s engagement with CSOs in Timor-Leste. Some of their key findings were:

- CSO capacity has regressed in recent years, constrained by lack of access to resources and a loss of advocacy focus
- Most CSO work focuses on service delivery rather than advocacy and as the government gets stronger the role of CSOs less certain
- Most funding is short term project funding, which does not build capacity. Many different reporting formats even within different AusAID funding programs within TL. This makes excessive workload for CSOs trying to maintain funding for programs
- The AusAID East Timor Community Assistance Scheme (ETCAS) has a \$1m fund that is not strategically targeted and receives large numbers of applicants. Only 8% get funded which is a waste of effort for both CSOs and AusAID staff.

Thus five years after the in-country ‘Timor-Leste Civil Society Analysis’ (2008) the lack of adequate support for Timorese civil society to develop their own defined programs is still evident. Timorese have their own priorities but it is difficult to get funding for these – they want more control of the process of project selection. Capacity building also needs to be more focussed on building effective civil society organisations than how to write project

proposals, reports and fulfil the financial accountability requirements for the donors. Accountability to the donors should not be the main focus of attention, accountability to communities with whom they work is equally important but is rarely mentioned. Local community development is fundamental, particularly in a country that is rural based and where at present large sums of money are spent on programs that bypass the local people and expand the urban base, despite the lack of jobs and other facilities.

5. Australia's potential to promote development in Timor Leste

There has been a substantial amount of academic research on Timor-Leste by Australian researchers which provides significant knowledge about Timorese history and culture and analysis of some of the development challenges in the country. Australian development assistance could benefit from this in-depth analysis from researchers to provide real insight that will allow more thorough and nuanced consultations with Timorese partners and better programming of practical interventions.

The Australia-Timor-Leste Friendship arrangements allow community to community relationships in addition to official and private relationships. The lessons from these arrangements are that long term commitment to support is highly valued by the Timorese, planning and decision making based on dialogue and trust between Timorese and Australians is able to deliver a sense of partnership that is often absent from official aid. Various Timorese have described this relationship as offering mutual respect, which is distinct from the power relationships inherent in aid (donor-beneficiary) relations.

In the case of Friends of Suai/Covalima the long-term commitment made by the City of Port Phillip (a 10 year agreement followed by a further 10 years) enabled a genuine partnership and friendship to develop naturally as the two parties built trust and cooperation. It took some 7 years for the Timorese to finally say we can manage the program without the support of a AVI volunteer coordinator on the ground and this has now gone from strength to strength and the Centre now employs some 15 full-time, part-time and volunteer staff.

Important in this process were the exchanges that took place and the opportunities that were given to Timorese to spend time in Australia to learn English while at the same time observing the operations of community organisations and local government. Also a significant number of people from Port Phillip have visited Covalima over the past 13 years to assist with evaluation, monitoring, teaching English, providing technical support for development of an internet system and computer program classes and solar systems etc. While these programs have been remarkably successful the most important elements have been the development of relationships and trust in which the owners and drivers of the programs are the Timorese themselves.

Perhaps one of the most remarkable achievements is the success of a very low budget approach, proving that large sums of money are not necessary to enable change to take place and this challenges the approach of large international NGOs and government aid programs. Time spent on building trust and confidence in the friendship/partnership pays

great dividends with respect to the way programs are monitored and evaluated and of course long term commitment, commitment far beyond the limited 2 or 3 years mostly budgeted for by most aid donors.

The Friendship Group approach is a marriage of local community paid and volunteer staff with Australian community volunteer input and local government support and participation. There are we believe important lessons to be learnt for both Government Aid Programs and International NGOs in this regard. Importantly, the Timorese need to be active partners in the decision making and can take management responsibility in the knowledge that they have friends who will support them financially and in capacity strengthening, over the long term.

6. Recommendations

1. That the Australian Government Aid Program give greater recognition and assistance to civil society to better enable support to be delivered to rural communities and strengthen opportunities in the rural areas. This would provide balance to the Government aid program's current focus on 'Effective Governance' which concentrates aid in the urban areas, creating a distorted economy which is encouraging village people to leave their homes and move to the large towns.
2. That Government recognise the importance of the trust and partnership building between the people of Timor Leste and the people of Australia through the Friendship network. The Australian Government should consider ways to build on this successful community development and capacity building approach by recognising the benefits of long-term low level funding support.
3. FOS/C propose that the Australian Government give consideration to the development of a community based advisory mechanism to advise on appropriate funding for local community development and capacity building programs. This should also include local government to local government programs preferably where the local government is working with their own local constituency. Support of the friendship arrangements has the potential to encourage the emergence of democratic local government processes which engage effectively with local civil society concerns and interests.
4. A Partnership Funding window should be established for 'Community and Civil Society Capacity Strengthening' based on a low-level but long-term (5-10 years) commitment to district level partnerships. This fund should be managed in collaboration with civil society organisations in Australia (including local councils) where genuine community engagement has been established. The requirements for support of such programs should be evidence of existing community based partnerships and programs and firm evidence of community support both in Timor

Leste and in Australia. The new Government Partnership for Development (GPDF) initiative would be excellent if it did not have a \$1m budget minimum. This would generally require expatriate management and therefore not allow a style of programming that facilitates activities that Timorese civil society can manage, for them to build capacity and grow.

5. These programs should have annual planning in collaboration with local civil society and district government partners. Long term change indicators used in monitoring and evaluation of these programs should be based on broad outcomes and should involve a round-table exchange and sharing which becomes a focus of development learning. Participants should include the Australian Embassy in Dili as the Australian Government representative.

Prepared by:

Bill Armstrong AO, Chair of FOS/C Executive Committee, CRC,

Dr Balthasar Kehi, Member of FOS/C Executive Committee, CRC and

Dr Ann Wigglesworth, Chair of FOS/C Community Development Working Group, CRC

On behalf of Community Reference Committee (CRC), Friends of Suai/Covalima of the City of Port Phillip.