



Submission No 20

Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with Timor-Leste

Organisation: Hunter East Timor Sisters Project

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



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28 March 2013

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The Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee
Joint Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade
Department of House Representatives
PO Box 6021
Parliament House
CANBERRA ACT 2600

The Hunter East Timor Sisters Project (HETS) is pleased to make the following submission to the Inquiry into Australia's relationship with Timor-Leste, March 2013.

We appreciate the opportunity to contribute towards this inquiry.

Regards
Louise Nash
on behalf of Hunter East Timor Sisters Project



Submission to the Inquiry into Australia's relationship with Timor-Leste, March 2013

Submitted by: **Hunter East Timor Sisters (HETS)**

This submission addresses the following terms of reference of the Inquiry into Australia's relationship with Timor-Leste:

- aid, including support with governance issues;
- cultural, educational and science exchanges;
- people to people links.

This submission is from the Hunter East Timor Sisters Project (HETS) (<http://hets.weebly.com>). HETS was formed in December 2008 in response to a request from visiting East Timorese activist, Beba Sequeira, for assistance for women in Timor-Leste. Since it began HETS has contributed to improving opportunities for women in Timor-Leste by raising funds for projects under the guidance of Asia Pacific Support Collective–Timor-Leste (APSC-TL). HETS fundraises in a variety of ways to contribute to projects that advance opportunities for women in Timor-Leste, for example scholarships for young women to allow them to further their education.

Timor-Leste is confronting many challenges as a new and developing nation. These challenges are largely as a consequence of its history of colonisation, violent occupation and oppression. Now as a newly independent nation the people and the government of Timor-Leste face enormous obstacles with widespread poverty, ill health and limitations in education and employment opportunities. As Timor-Leste, one of the world's newest democracies, is Australia's nearest neighbour it seems critical that Australia supports Timor-Leste to address these challenges.

Some of the issues that need to be addressed include:

- **Widespread poverty**
Timor-Leste has been rated by the United Nations as the poorest nation on earth with a per capita income of less than \$US1.50 per day. 44% of the population lives below the poverty line and 46% of households have no potable water.
- **High population growth**
The population growth is the highest in the world, with women of reproductive age having 7.8 births. Women have limited access to family planning.
- **Malnourishment**
Despite high levels of breast feeding, the majority of children (and their mothers) are malnourished, with one report showing that 60% of families had no food for at least one day in the previous fortnight.
- **Poor access to education with high levels of illiteracy**
School fees are relatively high and so families can often only afford to send one child to school. Illiteracy rates are approximately 50%, with approximately two thirds of women being illiterate.

Illiteracy rates are complicated by the use of Portuguese, Tetum, Indonesian and 34 dialects. About 15% of the population can speak Portuguese, 35% Indonesian and more than 50% Tetum.

- **Limited infrastructure throughout Timor-Leste**

There is little infrastructure in East Timor. The roads are extremely poor and in bad weather impassable. There is limited electricity supply outside of Dili and even in Dili power cuts are frequent.

- **Government expenditure**

Government expenditure comes from import charges, taxes, grants from donor countries and money from the Oil Development Fund which has an estimated royalty flow over the next 20 years of \$4.1b. The aim of the Fund is to ensure that interest from the oil royalties grows at a faster pace than withdrawals, so that when royalties cease the fund will still be earning interest.

In this context there are a number of recommendations that HETS makes:

1. Education is a key issue in Timor-Leste. Consideration needs to be given to the provision of:
 - local scholarships to help with secondary and tertiary education fees;
 - libraries and library resources;
 - food for children at school;
 - school buses (dependent on road conditions);
 - teacher training including scholarships and costs for teachers to attend such training;
 - basic educational resources such as chalk, notebooks and pens;
 - more scholarships for Timorese students to study at university and TAFE in Australia;
 - opportunities for scholarships for post school study in Timor-Leste. This would increase the capacity of local educational institutions and open up opportunities for people who are unable to leave Timor-Leste to study (family or other commitments).
2. Consider increasing the percentage of Timorese royalties from the Greater Sunrise gas field.
3. Advocate for an international tribunal to cover crimes against humanity during 1975 to 1999 in Timor-Leste.

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