

Building Collaborative Partnerships for Timor-Leste

2012 Theme: *Supporting Education Programs in Timor-Leste*

The Blue Mountains East Timor Sisters (BMETS) and the University of Western Sydney (UWS) combined forces to stage a day's Forum concentrating on "Supporting Education Programs in Timor-Leste". It was held at the Parramatta campus of UWS on Saturday 14 July and was attended by over 120 people representing numerous groups supporting Timor-Leste in NSW.

Ms Kirsty Sword Gusmão, Goodwill Ambassador for Education and wife of the Prime Minister, gave the keynote address: "Working Together for Timor-Leste: A New Chapter". The closing speech was made by His Excellency Mr Abel Guterres, East Timorese Ambassador to Australia.

Participants included:

Australian Catholic University <http://www.iace.acu.edu.au>
Bega Valley Advocates for Timor-Leste
Bairo Pite Hospital
Biblioteka Ermera, Gleno, Timor-Leste <http://www.bibliotekaermera.org/>
Blue Mountains East Timor Friendship Committee –Hatobuiliko
<http://www.bmcc.nsw.gov.au/yourcouncil/easttimorfriendship>
Blue Mountains East Timor Sisters <http://www.bmets.org.au>
Canberra Friends of Dili <http://austimorfn.com/canberra-friends-of-dili/>
Emergency Architects Australia
Every Village
Friends of Aileu
Instituto Mary MacKillop <http://www.mmiets.org.au>
Hunter East Timor Sisters <http://hets.weebly.com>
Kangaroo Valley Remexio Partnership <http://www.kvrp.org.au>
Kiama-Zumalai Friendship Group <http://www.kiama.nsw.gov.au>
Manly Friends of Oecusse <http://www.mfoo.org>
Marist Asia Pacific Solidarity
National Library of Australia <http://www.nla.gov.au/asian/east-timor>
Nazareth Outreach Community (SA) <http://www.nazareth.org.au>
Pittwater Friends of Soibada Inc. <http://www.pittwaterfriendsofsoibada.org>
Rotarians Education and Training
Springwood East Timor Support Group

Four speakers then had ten minutes each to present their perspectives.

1. **Kaye Schofield**, Principal Sector Specialist for Education, AusAID
"AusAID: Supporting Better Learning Outcomes in Timor-Leste"
2. **Professor Damien Kingsbury**, Director, Centre for Citizenship, Development and Human Rights, Faculty of Arts and Education, Deakin University, Melbourne
"Friends as well as Neighbours"
3. **Jude Finch**, Blue Mountains East Timor Sisters, Former AVI Timor-Leste
"Working Collaboratively on the Ground"
4. **Richard Brown**, Project Coordinator of the Friends of Aileu Project, Chair of the Victorian Local Governance Associations' Timor-Leste Advisory Group
"The Friends of Aileu - A Case Study"

Participants had the opportunity to engage with others in one of these workshops:

1. Pre-school and primary education
2. Early literacy and the mother-tongue project
3. Informal Education Centres and adult education
4. Student exchanges: higher education; vocational education and training for trade skills
5. Educating future educators and other professionals
6. Training programs for productive community activities (agriculture; handicrafts; tourism, etc)
7. Health Education
8. Educational infrastructure: School buildings; solar and water facilities, etc
9. Friendship and Finances: the practicalities.

Comments heard and Insights gained

- When donors or development partners lack on-the-ground experience and knowledge and/or have fixed ideas, the result includes much wasted money and effort.
- Timorese priorities and needs must take precedence over Australian priorities and needs.
- The model of short-term projects often lack appropriate training elements and do not last. Whilst the beginning-middle-and-end process fits Western bureaucracies and budget timelines, it often does not fit Timorese need. Donors and workers need to be vigilant about whose need we are serving.
- AusAid's approach is changing so that it is now seeing more clearly the value of working with Timorese NGOs.
- Many groups run forms of scholarship initiatives.
- There are about 40 Friendship Groups across Australia, largely as the result of the collaborative work of Abel Guterres.
- The Friendship Group model of community-to-community support is unique to Australia and Timor-Leste and is being studied more widely as a successful way for other countries to assist each other.
- Timorese people and groups are asking for long-term commitments from Friendship Groups and others. Some groups whose first 10-year commitment is coming to an end have been asked to sign up for another ten years. This has implications for funding and maintaining the impetus among Australians.
- Many comments were made publicly in the large and small groups, and privately, about the necessity of
 - being in for the long haul
 - taking time to make decisions
- Groups emphasised that major principles of development include listening carefully to what the Timorese say they need, establishing it with them in a sustainable way and forming alliances among all concerned.
- Efforts towards Australian school to Timorese school interaction did not take into sufficient account the extreme cultural, social and economic differences between them.
- The new President, Taur Matan Ruak, has signalled his intention of supporting grassroots initiatives e.g. small grants to women.

- 60% of Timor's population is 18 years or younger.
- 50% of the people have languages other than the official Tetun or Portuguese as their mother tongue. Some people do not know Tetun at all.
- John Hajek of Melbourne University recently worked with Kirsty Sword on Oecusse to write a children's book in one of the island's three languages. Parents and teachers came together for sessions to write a book. There was a lot of argument and laughter over how to express the ideas and spell the words, and after extensive back and forth, they came up with a consensus and proceeded to produce the book.
- The twin issues of policy and management face hurdles in both the Australian and Timorese Government sectors. In both countries policy making risks being divorced from local needs. In Australia, management concerns can become the focus, with extensive surveys and reports taking resources from projects. (The outgoing President José Ramos-Horta has commented that Timor-Leste was the most reported-on nation on earth. It remains Asia's poorest country, however.) In Timor-Leste the lack of management skills means that budgets are not spent and progress is slow.
- People educating others in Timor-Leste need to remember that it is not just management and training skills that need to be addressed, but that most people's ordinary education was deficient. Mathematics and science education, as well as language, were not of a sufficiently high standard to ensure even basic understanding of the most elementary facts and processes. Train-the-Trainers models must address basic maths and language skills.
- Importance of groups to cooperate in the same sector or geographical area to ensure services are not duplicated.
- There should be equality of educational opportunity throughout Timor-Leste. Everything should not be centred on Dili and Baucau.
- How do groups like ours sustain the momentum for education in Timor Leste?
- A question was asked in the major forum about AusAid's transparency in reporting, and the accessibility of its reporting to the public.
- Participants urged the Timorese Government to spend available oil and gas money on education and roads.
- Timor-Leste is in the G7+ Nations. (17 nations rising out of extreme poverty, including South Sudan)
- Next Forum in 2013 organised by Kangaroo Valley Remexio Partnership. Forum in 2014 in Dili.

Some participants' education materials were on display.

Sisters Susan Connelly, Irene Macinante and Rosita Kiss.

Congratulations to BMETS and UWS for this great forum, the first of many we hope.