

# Rebuilding Timor-Leste's education system

by Susan Nicolai

**Timor-Leste is a classic example of a post-conflict fragile state. Political will and popular enthusiasm rapidly restored a shattered education system but as donor interest wanes the new state cannot deliver services.**

When the people of Timor-Leste chose independence from Indonesia in September 1999, pro-Indonesian militias responded with brutality. At the beginning of what was supposed to be the 1999-2000 school year, three quarters of the population fled across the border into the Indonesian province of West Timor or into the mountains. In West Timor the numbers of refugee children overwhelmed poorly resourced schools and in Timor-Leste only 5% of education institutions were left standing. Schools were

local people. UNICEF temporarily became the de facto ministry of education as the UN, NGOs and communities worked to build schools. The budget for education relied almost entirely on external funds. Adoption of a sector-wide approach contributed significantly to early educational reconstruction.

Abolition of school fees, school feeding programmes and nationalist fervour for a Timorese education system drove recovery and extraordinary progress was made.

Within two years of the crisis the primary school enrolment rate had risen to 70%, significantly higher than the 51% pre-conflict rate.

Debates about language issues (in a country with around 30 languages or dialects) have distracted attention from education

quality. The decision to phase out the use of Indonesian in favour of Portuguese is controversial.

Although four fifths of the population speak Tetum, it is primarily an oral language. Around 43% of Timor-Leste people are fluent in Indonesian and most teachers and students would prefer to continue to use it. There are few young people among the 5% of the population able to speak Portuguese and hardly any Portuguese-proficient teachers.

Major problems remain. Timor-Leste has boosted school enrolments but one in five school-aged children still does not attend school, two thirds of adult women are illiterate and 60% of the population have never attended school. Trained teachers are in short supply and morale and teaching quality are low.

## Lessons learned from Timor-Leste are that:

- In the rush to return children to schools, prioritisation of infrastructure can lead to neglect of teacher training, capacity building, curriculum issues and sustainable financing.
- Community participation should not be confined to mobilising labour to rebuild and repair schools.
- Teacher training cannot be postponed until an education system is fully functioning and the curriculum known – especially in places where the teaching force is inexperienced and untrained in child-centred approaches.
- The question of language competencies and mother tongue should play a role in determining the language of instruction.
- Young people who have been involved in resistance struggles may make schools more violent and their experiences need to be addressed.

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systematically looted and teachers – most of them from Indonesia – fled. East Timor was left without a government, official language, currency, legal system or schooling.

The UN dispatched peacekeeping forces, restored order and set up a transitional authority that ruled until independence in 2002. Hardly any of the international staff who flooded into Timor-Leste understood Timorese culture or shared a common language with

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