

SUBMISSION TO THE INDEPEDENT REVIEW OF AID EFFECTIVENESS

Background

This submission draws upon observations of international development assistance in Timor-Leste. I have been involved in aid to Timor-Leste over the past ten years through the friendship movement which was established in the aftermath of the Indonesian-sponsored militia violence which followed the popular consultation in 1999. The friendship movement, which has official support from the Government of Timor-Leste, is largely but not exclusively Victorian based, is linked to local government, and provides ongoing community-to –community support for Districts, sub-districts and communities in Timor-Leste.

The friendship movement is founded on good neighbour principles, and builds upon the very strong connections between Australia and Timor-Leste, driven in significant part by the relationships at community level with the Australian Timorese refugee community, particularly in Melbourne but also in other states.

It is not intended to discuss the merits and deficiencies of the friendship movement but to make some general observations on international aid gained through my experiences with Timor-Leste, in a volunteer capacity and through my work with a community health service in Melbourne, supporting community health projects in Timor.

Some Observations

Lack of coordination between international agencies: While there are a vast number of international agencies involved development assistance in Timor-Leste, the international aid effort has been fragmented and uncoordinated, and uneven in its geographic spread of benefits, despite persistent efforts on the part of the Government of Timor-Leste to impose greater coordination and control. This presents particular challenges for Timor-Leste; the uneven distribution of benefits can unintentionally exacerbate underlying community tensions e.g. East vs. West. Communal conflict has had devastating consequences for Timorese society (the Crisis of 2006, outbreaks in 2007 and the attempt on the life of President Jose Ramos-Horta in February 2008).

Short Term Funding Cycles: Many of the international aid programs are short-term in nature, geared to agency funding requirements and relying on the recruitment of qualified international staff, working with local (usually unqualified) staff and communities. The lasting impact in terms of benefit and capacity-building is variable, and has been questioned at senior government level. AusAID-funded programs should be closely analysed to assess whether this cyclical approach to funding has also been detrimental to the ongoing viability of AusAID-sponsored programs in Timor-Leste.

There is a need to focus on the longer term development and consolidation of the core civic structures and institutions which underlie effective government and service delivery, rather than short term imperatives.

Lack of Collaboration: Information sharing between agencies is ad hoc, which means that agencies do not necessarily learn from the experiences of others which inhibits wider understanding of needs and 'what works' (or importantly, what does not work). Lack of collaboration between agencies greatly limits the effectiveness of aid programs, leading to some ludicrous situations where there is little contact with local organisations working in essentially the same field.

This in part reflects an element of competitiveness and staking out of territory amongst aid donors and agencies. This can undermine transparency in decision-making, create unhealthy levels of dependence at community level, and weaken the national democratic structures of government.

Lack of Professional Training for Local Personnel: Many international agencies are undertaking important work in delivering health programs, for example, through the training of outreach community facilitators, often peer leader volunteers who work at village level. Such efforts will be vital for a long time to come but are not sustainable as a primary health delivery mode over time, if unpaid. There is a need to provide opportunity and career paths for Timorese to work as paid professionals in a wide range of professions to assume control of service planning and delivery, and for better, more informed decision-making.

Administrators at District level have expressed concern and a lack of confidence in their own knowledge and skills, which impacts on decision-making. Their need for professional training, including formal qualifications, has been emphasised. Most lack tertiary qualifications. Lack of formal training for many administrators and others working government administration and service delivery can place them at a distinct disadvantage in dealing with more highly qualified professionals from other countries; this can undermine working relations and the longer term effectiveness of international initiatives. Training for local administrators (through programs such as the local government training program) should be complemented by facilitating access to formal education.

Qualified health workers are particularly important in the field of health promotion, for example, in attempting to bring about real change in the foreseeable future in the all-important area of water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH). Timor-Leste is the focus of a major funding program through AusAID to address WASH-related problems, particularly in rural areas where open defecation continues to be practised, with adverse consequences for community health. AusAID and partners are opting for community-based solutions which emphasise behaviour change rather than technological solutions.

Significant behaviour change over time could be achieved through well targeted and resourced health and hygiene promotion programs, complementing infrastructure development. For behaviour change to be enduring, community education programs need to be delivered in local languages by local people, in schools, health clinics and in daily life, in full cognisance of leadership structures and cultural norms; not just through short programs conducted by international agencies.

The sustainability of WASH programs also depends on local people having appropriate professional training and qualifications as engineers, technicians and skilled workers. This has been documented by others including WaterAid Australia.

Lack of Opportunity in Higher Education: Lack of opportunity is a major constraint to effective skills capacity-building in a whole variety of professions in Timor-Leste and should be a significant focus for AusAID funding. The lack of suitable courses in Timor-Leste is a source of frustration for many capable people, who could make a real difference to their communities. Interrupted education and the limitations of the current education system narrow the options for many.

Overseas study involving lengthy periods of absence imposes considerable emotional and financial burdens on individuals and their families, particularly applicants over the age of 25, who frequently leave behind young children. Courses within Timor would open up possibilities for a wider number of capable people who could continue to live and work within their communities whilst studying.

AusAID should target the development of the higher education sector in Timor-Leste, including promoting and funding partnerships between Australian universities and the National University of Timor-Leste (UNTL) and other leading higher education institutions. This would not only strengthen the

development of the sector but provide for peer support and possibilities of exchanges for further training and professional development. UNTL should be assisted to become an institute of excellence, offering internationally accredited courses.

There is much that could be achieved by Australian universities working together, rather than competitively, to make available the best of what Australia has to offer. This could include assistance with the development of bridging studies, course content, teaching materials and resources, visiting lecturers and tutors, and supervised work experience, either in-country or in Australia, and ongoing professional development. Australian academic institutions should seek to complement, rather than to compete with, input from other countries. There are many benefits to be gained for Australian institutions in broadening perspectives and international connections.

The precedent for this in Timor-Leste is the partnering between the Australian Catholic University and the Catolico Para Firmacao De Professores, Baucau (Baucau Teachers College) which offers Australian-accredited primary teacher training.

There are similar benefits to be gained from potential partnering in the vocational education and training sector.

Limited Availability of AusAID-funded Scholarships: Australia compares poorly in the number of scholarships on offer to Timorese for study in Australia. As I understand it, the base level allocation of scholarships per annum is just twenty, with partial funding of other scholarship places. Significant advances could be made in human resource capacity in Timor-Leste in the medium term if the number of scholarships was significantly increased. I note past requests from President Jose Ramos-Horta for Australia to provide in the order of 700 places in the TAFE sector to help meet the skills shortage in Timor-Leste.

The benefits would be substantial, from a variety of perspectives: enhancing the quality of service delivery and decision-making in Timor-Leste; addressing fundamental gaps in knowledge and skills; reducing unemployment and alleviating frustration for Timorese youth; building economic capacity and income generation in the underdeveloped private sector; and importantly, reducing Timor's dependence on foreign nationals and foreign aid. For Australia also, there is the added benefit of establishing positive long term relations bonds between Australia and Timor-Leste, as concluded by the Lowry Institute study (*What Makes a Leader? Mapping Leadership in Our Region* by Fergus Hanson and Alex Oliver, October 2010).

Australia's contribution in the provision of scholarships should be compared with the contribution of the Government of Cuba in health training, particularly medical training: approximately 700 Timorese will graduate in forthcoming years after five years medical training in Cuba, while another 150 students are currently training in the Cuban-supported medical faculty established at UNTL. While the process of absorbing the Cuban-trained medical graduates into the health sector presents both challenges and opportunities, the program will radically transform health service delivery in the country within a relatively short period of time. The program illustrates the importance of adopting medium term approaches to development assistance, particularly in education and training.

Education as Welfare: The current AusAID Overseas Aid Gift Deductions Scheme- Guidelines for Obtaining Tax Deductibility May 2009 still deem scholarships and education support as welfare, not development assistance. Yet this ignores the benefits in skills and knowledge and capacity building which occur through carefully targeted education assistance. This is a contradictory and unnecessary impediment to capacity building in countries like Timor-Leste. The provision should be reviewed and at the very least, redefined. After all, the Australian Government does not consider its scholarship program to be a form of welfare assistance.

Domestic Political Imperatives: development assistance to countries should be based on the needs of the country, independent of domestic political considerations. It is my contention that the number of scholarships to Timorese in part reflects domestic politics, linked to immigration and misconceptions of the intentions of Timorese in wanting to study in Australia. In my experience, the primary motivation for most Timorese studying in Australia is to help rebuild their country, and as such, there is limited likelihood of overstaying on student visas.

The structuring of scholarships should also be geared to need, and in this regard, there should be scope for students to obtain work experience in Australia before returning to Timor, to maximise the benefits for the individual and for Timor-Leste.

Submitted by
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