



The Centre for Democratic Institutions

Victorian Local Governance Association's 'Working Together for East Timor' Conference, Darebin Art and Entertainment Centre, Preston, Melbourne 4-5 April 2003

CDI Executive Officer, Felicity Pascoe, attended the Victorian Local Governance Association's (VLGA) 'Working Together for East Timor' Conference and Expo at the Darebin Arts and Entertainment Centre in Preston, Melbourne from the 4-5 April, 2003.

His Excellency Kay Rala Xanana Gusmao, President of East Timor, delivered the opening address. The Conference and Expo were a VLGA East Timor Working Group initiative, bringing together 303 representatives from most Australian community organizations, groups and councils actively involved with East Timor. In particular, this event brought together representatives of a number of Victorian Councils and community groups which have formed the Friendship Relationships with towns of East Timor.

A major outcome of the Conference on April 5 was the initial stages of developing an Action Plan. This was part of a strategy for East Timor and the Australian community groups and organisations to work more effectively together for the future of East Timor. In working towards an Action Plan the Conference promoted the sharing of information and ideas between groups and individuals. Group discussions helped to identify priorities, strategies and principles for Australian groups and East Timorese to work together effectively.

The East Timor Expo was held on 4-5 April and was a rich display of East Timorese culture. The Expo included a photographic exhibition, displays of traditional arts and crafts, a performance from the East Timorese dance group 'Surik' and a parade of East Timorese Fashion. Over forty Australian organizations exhibited their work in East Timor including the Australian Agency for International Development (AusAID), Oxfam Community Aid Abroad, Care Australia, church groups including Marist Brothers and the Salesians, service clubs such as Rotary International and a number of Victorian councils and community groups holding 'Friendship Relationships' with East Timor, including the Cities of Darebin, Yarra, Moreland Hume and Greater Geelong.

CDI would like to thank VLGA for the valuable opportunity to share information and ideas with other Australian organizations, government bodies and institutions actively involved in East Timor.

The East Timor 'Friendship Relationships'

As stated by Julie Hansen, President of the VLGA, Australian support for East Timor has grown considerably over the past couple of years. This is particularly evident within the Victorian community through the establishment of the Friendship Relationships.

After 25 years of occupation and struggle for freedom within East Timor, East Timor's Popular Consultation in 1999 deciding whether to remain part of Indonesia, was a prominent step towards the establishment of an independent nation. This step received attention and support from Victorian communities. In mid-1999, the Darebin City Council called upon the VLGA to support East Timor and provide assistance and the VLGA committed to promoting democracy, peace, order and good governance in East Timor. In partnership with the Australian Council for Overseas Aid (ACFOA), the VLGA facilitated the attendance of 40 Victorians as international observers to Popular Consultation ballot in East Timor on 30 August 1999.

After the devastating violent outbreaks during the 1999 elections, the City Councils of Darebin, Moreland and Port Phillip approached the East Timorese National Council of Timorese Resistance (CNRT) representative to Southern Australia, Abel Guterres, with the hope of establishing 'friendship' relations with towns in East Timor. A 'Statement of Principles for Local Governments Working in East Timor' was signed by individuals including HE President Xanana Gusmao, the President of CNRT, President of the Municipal Association of Victoria (MAV), the Victorian Local Government Minister and VLGA President, Cr Julie Hansen. This statement acts as a guide and support for those local governments wishing to enter into a Friendship Relationship.

Today there are seventeen Friendship Relationships between East Timor towns and Victorian local governments and communities. These relationships are a long-term commitment, responsive to the needs and interests of East Timorese communities. Initiatives from the Friendship Relationships include the rehabilitation of civic buildings, supporting agricultural projects, supporting women's programs, training and assistance with local governance and the provision of humanitarian aid. Community committees in Victoria have become involved in civic events, publications, working in schools, development education for community members and community cultural and arts projects. Such initiatives promote awareness within the Victorian community about the situation in East Timor.

H. E. President Kay Rala Xanana Gusmao's Address

As the one year anniversary of East Timor's independence approaches, the address given by President Gusmao's on 5 April was pivotal. The President spoke on the direction the nation must pursue in its attempts to achieve economic, political and social stability in order to reap the benefits of newly founded independence. In addressing these issues, the President reflected on how an Action Plan for East Timor may look. The President stressed the invaluable support of the Australian population and that it was crucial for Australia to maintain its level of support and involvement in East Timor. East Timor cannot develop effectively without this support.

East Timor is the poorest Asian country in the world and one of the tenth poorest in the world. Two fifths of the East Timorese population survives on less than fifty-five US cents a day. When the Indonesian Government withdrew from East Timor in September 1999, 80% of its infrastructure had been destroyed. The needs of the East Timorese people are great and the difficulties the population faces are harsh. President Gusmao placed great value on the role of the Victorian Friendship Relationships.

After the devastation caused by the violence in 1999, the development of political, social and economic structures within East Timor is essential. It is particularly crucial for East Timor to develop a program for the economic sector. There is a lack of diversification of production and a

large majority of the population relies on subsistence and agricultural production. In visualizing an Action Plan, President Gusmao stressed the importance of diversity of production and encouraged the development of small businesses. East Timor has a micro finance system in place supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB). However, the lack of legal framework means that East Timor fails to provide investors with security in investment.

President Gusmao stated that sustainable and appropriate development of East Timor must have the support and active involvement of its people. The country is faced with the task of establishing its judicial system, promoting democracy and the development of its natural resources. The state and civil society have distinct roles to play in East Timor's development and to ensure effectiveness, they must nurture a healthy exchange of views.

President Gusmao stated that the East Timorese desire democratic empowerment and local governments can play an important role to promote this. The establishment of effective governments requires maintaining a balance with East Timor's culture. For example, failure to elect local chiefs into government positions will effectively divide the people. President Gusmao hoped to hold local government elections later in 2003. Australia's influence and assistance was seen to be a valuable part of this process.

Lack of employment is one major reason for instability within East Timor. Frustration of the people has led to violent outbreaks. A simple solution would include provision of carpentry tools for people in the rural areas to enable them to work for themselves and improve their skills. As the state is not in a position to support the rural sector, President Gusmao stressed the importance of the role of non-government organizations (NGOs) in rural areas. While NGOs can compliment the work of governments at the local level, NGOs are also important as they can avoid the bureaucratic processes in delivering development and assistance that governments often get tied up in. Their delivery of benefits can be immediate for example the provision of clean water.

President Gusmao stressed the importance of listening to the needs of the local people. He is actively involved with people at the community level. Each fortnight meets with people in their homes and talks with them to find out their needs and concerns. He meets with widows and mothers and their main concerns are commonly their inability to find money to send their children to school. President Gusmao stressed that his people needed an occupation to allow them to provide for their families.

President Gusmao stressed that not only is it important to receive aid, but to utilize aid effectively. Education is vital. The East Timorese need to be trained and not just receive goods. For example, the provision of water is not enough if the hygiene practices in a community are poor. Gusmao made his appeal to those at the conference for assistance in establishing vocational training in schools. Already he is seeing the beginnings of change in East Timor as women are working in professions such as plumbing.

Gusmao thanked all the government and non-government organizations, community groups and universities for their assistance in East Timor. In looking to the future, the President hoped that the relations between Australia and East Timor would continue to grow and strengthen and that East Timor would strengthen relations with the rest of the world as well.

Key Issues for East Timor

Guest speakers addressed the key issues facing East Timor: health, education, women's development, economic development and sustainability. The Australian perspective on these issues was presented by representatives at the national level, state level, the non-government sector and from the Friendship Relationships.

Kevin Bailey, the Honorary Consul for East Timor, spoke on economic development and sustainability. East Timor as a nation is in a period of transition to maturity. According to Bailey we therefore expect East Timor will make mistakes and learn from these mistakes just as the developed nations have learned from their mistakes during their progression to 'developed nations'. This is an important process.

East Timor is the country with the lowest national debt in the world. Development assistance should be focused on maintaining East Timor as debt-free. East Timor has the opportunity to become an 'evidence based economy' in the sense that it can learn based on evidence in history of what has and has not worked. It is important to note that capitalist systems don't necessarily work for all countries what we do need to stress is the importance of a strong legal system.

Kevin Bailey stressed the importance of economic growth for East Timor in the sense of three fundamentals- the rule of law, property rights and division of labour. Australia can support East Timor in building its economy through means such as eco-tourism and assisting to develop coffee as a cash crop. East Timor could build its own niche for organically grown coffee.

Dr Livermore spoke on health issues in East Timor. Through her experiences working in Aileu at the Uma Ita Nian health clinic, Dr Livermore was able to outline the major health issues facing the East Timorese. The health clinic treats approximately 24 000 patients a year and the major illnesses include malaria, tuberculosis, epilepsy, skin disease and leprosy. As the local government is not fully established since Independence small communities groups often supplement government action.

Education and improving literacy rates are extremely important in dealing with health problems in East Timor. There is a need for vaccine coverage in East Timor. Dr Livermore warned against creating dependency of local people on foreign assistance and also forcing a loss of local culture and pride. In all the development work in East Timor, foreign nations and organisations must ensure that the resilience and uniqueness of the East Timorese people is preserved.

Chris Dureau, Project Manager of International Development Support Services, spoke on good governance and local government. In defining good governance, Dureau outlined the importance of public participation in decision making processes, transparency and accountability within the government and the private sector, the provision of services in response to people's needs, human rights, combating corruption, promoting justice, the rule of law and advocacy for change.

Within East Timor people have little association with their government at the top level due to the tyranny of distance. People are far removed from the top levels of government geographically as there are over 2000 hamlets, or sub-villages, in East Timor and there is a lack of transport. The immediate needs of the people are met by those at the village level rather than the top government level.

The recent forces for democracy within East Timor identified by Dureau were the Clandestine Movement which the President bears a strong degree of responsibility for, the Women's

Movement (OMT), the CNRT/UN Transitional Authority and the Consultative Process for the National Plan. Within East Timor, tradition plays a vital role in legitimacy for those people in authority. The political and administrative functions are pre-determined by the sacred house or kinship groups one belongs to. These are the people currently holding positions of power within a community. The current status in East Timor is that there are many examples of democratic governors at the sub-village and village level. But there is very little at the sub-district or district government level.

First Lady, Madam Kirsty Sword Gusmao, Director of the ALOLA Foundation, spoke on women's development, education and the role of the ALOLA Foundation. The ALOLA Foundation was founded in May 2001 and works in partnerships with East Timorese women's NGOs and groups. Through weavings and handicraft activities ALOLA aims to benefit survivors of sexual violence and their families. Mrs Sword Gusmao drew attention to the priceless and under utilized resources in East Timor. Traditional society and religious laws have meant that in some areas women are disempowered. This is evident in fertility where women are unable to control their reproductive capabilities. The major priorities for women are education and food for their children.

Australian Responses

Australia's involvement in East Timor comes from a range of sectors: national and local community groups, Victorian and national Government. The conference saw representatives speak from AusAID, Multicultural Affairs, the non-government development sector and from the Friendship Relationships. Speakers outlined Australia's response to the East Timor crisis from a range of perspectives.

Representing Australia's official aid program Ross Muir, Director of the East Timor Section within AusAID, outlined the five areas of priority in assisting East Timor: governance and capacity building, rural development, water supply, health and education. Muir stressed the importance of working with community groups and NGOs to improve donor coordination and avoid duplication.

The future of East Timor looks bright however there are a number of challenges that face the new nation. There is a need for continued strategy for financial and economic management. Security in East Timor is an issue with the danger of militia activity on the border increasing insecurity. Health and nutrition is a major challenge.

The future of the AusAID aid program in East Timor will focus on three areas. The first will address poverty reduction and growth through financial management and private sector development. The second focus is governance and capacity building. The third is health and nutrition focusing on improving maternal health and child mortality.

Kaye Darvenzia MLC, Parliamentary Secretary for Multicultural Affairs began her address stating her support for East Timorese refugees to remain in Australia. The Federal Government has claimed that East Timorese living in Australia are no longer legitimate refugees as they once were during Indonesian occupation of East Timor. Under this claim, those East Timorese living in Australia, some of whom were born in Australia and have been living here for close to ten years, are being told to return to East Timor. According to Darvenzia, the Federal Government's refusal to grant permanent residency to the East Timorese living in Australia ran counter to values of respect, compassion and human rights held by the Victorian Government and Victoria

community. In support of this sentiment the Victorian Government, under Steve Bracks, recently allocated \$50 000 to assist the East Timorese in representation to achieve permanent residency. Darvenzia's statements were met with vociferous support from conference participants.

Darvenzia outlined the Victorian Government's involvement and priorities in East Timor assistance. The key areas of support are medical, the development of civil society, education and infrastructure. The Victorian Government is supporting the development of a mobile media unit that will assist in setting up local radio in East Timor. The Victorian Government is also working with Australian Volunteers International (AVI) in the placement of Parliamentary members in East Timor to assist with strengthening the government.

Christine Perkins, Manager of the East Timor Program within AVI spoke about AVI's involvement in East Timor. According to Perkins, part of the success of the volunteer program is the cross-cultural understanding of those volunteers working abroad. Perkins stressed the importance of the strength, mutual understanding and trust between community groups and aid workers.

In 2000, AVI placed volunteers in CNRT. This was a difficult task to find the most appropriate voices to respond to. As Perkins highlighted, it is easy to respond to what we think, rather than listening to the voices of the people we are trying to benefit. Aid workers must play an important role in building the self esteem of the people in East Timor yet at the same time ensuring community ownership of a project.

Finally, Cr Ray Perry, for the City of Darebin talked about the Friendship Relationships between Victorian cities and East Timorese towns. He outlined the assistance that the Victorian cities have been involved in including the provision of guest houses and fire trucks to Australian volunteers. Perry stressed the focus of the relationships with the community groups was a mutual trust and shared values.

Working Together for East Timor

Group discussions allowed individuals to discuss topics of particular interest to them. CDI representative was involved in a discussion group on strengthening local governments in East Timor. An important point raised by an East Timorese living in diaspora was that East Timorese affiliate most strongly with their community groups at the local level than with the nation as a whole. Establishing an effective and appropriate local government must recognize this fact as well and incorporate East Timor's cultural norms. The discussion group looked at the reasons for instilling effective local governments. The group discussed the necessary support mechanisms that would enable a local government to operate effectively. This was made problematic by the lack of human resources in East Timor. Questions were raised about the suitability and appropriateness of the Australian government model for East Timor. Could the Australian model provide useful assistance to East Timor in establishing its own constitution and government structures?

CDI's involvement in East Timor to strengthen parliamentary and government processes provided a useful model for the group as to how assistance in the area of governance may work effectively. In 2001 CDI funded a project that brought to Australia East Timor's Inspector General and, following the success of this visit, two members of the Constituent Assembly of East Timor later that year. CDI arranged meetings for the Inspector General and members of the Constituent Assembly with the Commonwealth Auditor-General, with members of the NSW

Audit Office, the Independent Commission Against Corruption (ICAC), the Office of the NSW Ombudsman, the NSW Public Accounts Committee, the Diplomacy Training Program at the University of NSW, Transparency International, and round table meetings with both AusAID and with academics and experts from the Australian National University. The East Timorese visitors were able to actively engage in discussions and share information with various institutions and government bodies within Australia relating to the promotion of government transparency and accountability.

CDI's projects in East Timor were not a means through which Australia could dictate a government structure for East Timor that mirrored Australia's own. The Inspector General and members of the Constituent Assembly were able to utilize the information provided on Australian institutions, accountability mechanisms, ensuring transparency and divisions of power in order to think constructively about an appropriate model for East Timor. The study tours were mutually beneficial for members from Australia and East Timor as they provided the added opportunity of strengthen relations within the region.

The challenge the Australian community now faces is how to move forward in its support for East Timor as the new independent nation takes its place in the region. While the discussions were brief due to time restraints a number of valid points were raised from a number of discussion groups. The discussion groups generated a list of eight identified priorities:

1. The development of infrastructure;
2. Promoting awareness of East Timor's needs for development;
3. Strengthening education for the purpose of development;
4. Community based awareness of gender violence;
5. Women's health;
6. To organize a conference on issues such as East Timorese culture, mythology and gender-based violence;
7. Youth employment;
8. Communications, particularly the improvement of internet access;
9. No forced repatriation for the East Timor inhabitants who are currently living and working in Australia.

President Gusmao intends to utilize this information in assisting the construction of an Action Plan for East Timor.