The Empowerment Of Education In East Timor Through In-Service Teacher Training

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Abstract

East Timor has reached independence in 2002, after two periods of colonialism and after severe violence, especially following 1999. As a result, the country was almost destroyed, and lost its qualified workforce in all sectors, including education. To ensure national independence it is essential to reconstruct and build the basic infrastructures for all sectors, and mainly, prepare a technical and professional elite expected to ensure the autonomy of the society and the sovereignty of the state. In this context, education plays a key role. The Timorese Government has supported several approaches to empower national education, mainly through in-service teacher education. In this paper we propose to (i) characterise the educational system in East Timor and how it has changed in recent years, and (ii) contextualize and characterize the in-service teacher education in East Timor.

Keywords: International cooperation, teacher training, Asia, East Timor

1. East Timor: a new country

East Timor, also known as Timor-Leste and Timor Loro Sae, is a small but rugged and mountainous island located in South East Asia. East Timor is currently the second world’s newest nation. It became, for the first time, an independent country on May 20, 2002. This followed 450 years of Portuguese colonial administration, 24 years of illegal occupation by Indonesia, and 32 months of temporary international administration by the United Nations Transitional Administration of East Timor. Transformation of the educational legacy of the Portuguese and Indonesian occupation periods is a vital factor in building an independent and economically, culturally, and politically sustainable future for East Timor.

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East Timor is one of the world’s least developed countries. In terms of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) Human Development Index (0.495 for East Timor in 2011) it was ranked 147 out of 187 countries worldwide in 2011 (UNDP, 2011). In 2011, GNI (Gross National Income) per capita was estimated to be US$3005 (UNDP, 2011) and in 2007, approximately 37 percent of the total population lived on less than US$1.25 per day. In 2011, infant mortality was 56 deaths per 1000 live births (UNDP, 2011), and data from 2008 indicated that 370 women died for every 10,000 live births. Malnourishment is widespread. A study conducted by UNICEF in 2002 found that 47 percent of children under the age of five were stunted, 43 percent were underweight, and 12 percent were wasted. Data from the Preliminary Report on the 2010 Census indicates that East Timor’s population is about 1.2 million. Approximately 41 percent of the country’s population is living in poverty. Endemic poverty is both a cause and a result of limited capacity in the education sector—both historical and current. Around 76 percent of the population are subsistence farmers, and live in rural areas (Heyward, 2005). Access to many communities and their schools is limited, with roads in poor condition or non-existent. Access in the wet season is even more problematic. However, it is important to emphasize that in the past five years, East Timor has made considerable progress in improving its people’s livelihoods, alleviating poverty and improving social conditions (UNDP, 2011). Much of these improvements stem from the way in which the revenue from the Petroleum Fund is being used to promote human progress through the development of the non-oil economy.

2. The path to independence and its consequences on education

As stated by the Timorese during the course of the 2001 participatory assessments for the National Development Plan, the link between educational attainment and poverty reduction has been recognized. The Timor-Leste Survey of Living Standards showed that in 2007, educational attainment remained low. A substantial percentage of the population (57 percent) remained uneducated to primary level, including nearly half of all adult females and about one-third of all adult males. Only 14 percent of the population had education to secondary level. Furthermore, the 2002 East Timor UNDP report states that the tertiary education sector is diminutive, with only 2.8 percent of adults enrolled. This low level of development was intensified by a period of violent retribution perpetrated by the Indonesian military and militia groups after an UN-sponsored referendum on August 30, 1999. This referendum ended the 24-year Indonesian occupation. In the wake of this referendum, widespread violence and destruction of public and private property left the nation severely weakened. The country was in ruins and lost almost its entire qualified workforce in all sectors, especially education, due to the wave of violence before and after the referendum (Robinson, 2009). Around 90 percent of secondary teachers, 20 percent of primary teachers and most administrators in the education system were not indigenous East Timorese and departed at this time. Significant loss of life and the displacement of entire communities seriously disrupted schooling (Heyward, 2005). Moreover, this period of violence is thought to have destroyed 80–90 percent of school buildings and other infrastructures (UNDP, 2002). In October 1999, the UN approved a resolution establishing the United Nations Transitional Administration in East Timor (UNTAET). This organization, working with the indigenous transitional government – the East Timor Transitional Administration (ETTA) – governed East Timor until independence in 2002. Schools were officially reopened following the violence in October 2000 and classes restarted in November 2000. The National Development Plan, which was formulated in 2002 after nationwide consultation, made education a vital feature of its strategy for alleviating poverty and nation-building. A total of seven out of ten East Timorese nominated education as the top priority in this process. However, the context poses major challenges for the development of education and achievement of objectives in a newborn country, which lacks experience and resources, and about 48 percent of the population of which is at or under the age of 15. In addition, the country’s total fertility rate in 2001 was around 7.5 children per adult female, which is among the highest rates in the world. In this overwhelmingly Catholic country the phrase ‘populate or perish’ has a ring of authenticity. Heyward (2005) states that incidental conversations with village people suggest families see it as their duty to repopulate their country following the loss of life in the conflict with Indonesia.
3. Restructuring education

In recent years, the Timorese Government has invested in fundamental aspects of the education sector, such as:

i) reconstruction and construction of educational infrastructures,

ii) reinforcement of the institutional capacity, and

iii) improvement of the educational system (both in curriculum development and in the recruitment and training of skilled teachers) (Jerónimo, 2011).

Nowadays, East Timor’s education system still shows the legacy of colonial rule, but with this rule by two colonial powers that had very divergent concerns (Shah, 2012). For most of their period of rule the Portuguese showed a slight interest in mass education. The Indonesian approach to education was quite different. The Indonesian government was determined to achieve universal primary education. According to the 2002 UNDP report, around 1985 almost every village had a primary school. However, such an increase in the number of schools was not concomitant with increased quality of teaching. Furthermore, Indonesia used teaching as a strategy of ‘Indonesianization’ of the population. The government discouraged the use of Portuguese (the language used in East Timor during the Portuguese period, alongside Tetum and other indigenous dialects), and in the 1990s it was banned in schools – perhaps due to its association with the independence movement. The Indonesian language was implemented as the official language of East Timor. During the Indonesian period, Tetum gained greater support as a lingua franca, along with the Church itself, as a defense of national and cultural identity (Gameiro, 2010; Soares, 2010). The use of the indigenous language for liturgical purposes was approved by the Vatican in this period. Portuguese also survived throughout the Indonesian period, essentially as the language of the elite. It is historically associated with the educated indigenous minority under Portuguese rule. Since independence, the national constitution has designated Portuguese and Tetum as official languages and the Indonesian language and English as working languages. The government has adopted a policy of bilingual schooling but indicates that Portuguese is the preferred official language of instruction. Presently this constitutes a serious issue, since teachers are expected to teach in Portuguese, but most of them do not have a sufficient grasp of this language. The majority of teachers, who were educated in the Indonesian language during the Indonesian period, are not yet proficient to teach in Portuguese and the students also lack the ability to learn in this language. Given this situation, teachers tend to use Tetum or other local dialects (Heyward, 2005). After independence a lack of teachers was noted, and a large number was recruited on a voluntary basis. Most of these teachers were not qualified (a large number hold only primary education) (UNDP, 2002). In 2007, 75 percent of East Timor’s 12,000 teachers were not qualified to teach under the standards defined in the country’s National Education Act and by the Ministry of Education. Consequently, in 2008 the Government provided intensive training for 3,000 teachers. In 2009, this program was extended to cover 9,000 teachers. In addition, 617 teachers completed undergraduate programs and 36 teachers were attending postgraduate programs. These intensive training programs are now mandatory for all teachers and are an ongoing initiative (East Timor Government, 2010).

4. International cooperation for education: an example between East Timor and Portugal

In order to obtain competent and trained teachers, the Timorese Government has heavily invested in teacher training, mainly in-service teacher training. To achieve this goal, the Timorese Ministry of Education has relied on the support of international experienced higher education institutions, many of which are Portuguese and Brazilian. The significance of relying mainly on remote Portuguese and Brazilian institutions emerges not only because Portuguese is one of the two official languages, but also because it is the language selected for education. It is thus necessary to guarantee that Timorese teachers are taught how to designate every science concept in Portuguese so that they will later be more apt to teach their students in such language. The bond of cooperation between East Timor and these two countries essentially focused on further developing the quality of education through the reintroduction of the Portuguese language courses, the regular intensive courses, the PROFEP-Timor courses and
the Bachelor’s course (BC) (Jerónimo, 2011). These programs have been conducted over the past years with the aim of contributing to the enhancement of the quality of education in East Timor.

4.1. An example of an in-service teacher training course

One of the higher education institutions that has been collaborating on the restructuring of the secondary education curriculum is the University of Aveiro, in Portugal. Furthermore, it has been cooperating on several teacher-training courses and programs fully taught in Portuguese (Albergaria Almeida, Martinho & Lopes, 2012a). One such program coordinated between the University of Aveiro and the Timorese Ministry of Education was the eighth edition of the teacher training bachelor’s degree, which included several modules that corresponded to different subjects. A detailed description of the teaching, learning and assessment strategies used in this course can be found in our previous works (Albergaria Almeida, Martinho & Lopes, 2012b; Lopes, Martinho & Albergaria Almeida, 2012). The last module consisted of 300 hours of training in Science Education, namely in the areas of biology, chemistry, mathematics, and physics, evidencing the recognition of its value towards the development of a country. A total of 301 teachers attended these science modules during November and December 2011 at the National Institute for Teacher Training, located in Dili, East Timor. Despite all 301 science trainees having previous teaching experience, only a few had formally graduated from higher education institutions; of those, the language of their studies – Tetum or Indonesian – had been different from the language they should privilege while teachers – Portuguese. The huge diversity of the in-service teachers’ educational backgrounds was a common feature to all the four science subjects and constituted a huge challenge for the trainers, who attempted to level the knowledge of the teachers. Being conscious of the crucial role they will have in the future education of the country, the trainees revealed a huge motivation and sense of responsibility. Timorese teachers also demonstrated awareness of their own limitations and difficulties, showing solidarity with each other in order to minimize and overcome these obstacles. Due to the teaching methods usually used in East Timor, which overvalue memorization and the passive acquisition of knowledge (Earnest, 2003; Heyward, 2005), the trainers identified some underdeveloped general competencies, which should be strengthened. Despite all their difficulties, the teachers are eager to participate in training courses, aiming to improve their skills. There remains a real hunger for education within East Timor. The teachers who participated in the course described here surpassed the trainers’ highest expectations.

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