

Understanding Timor-Leste

Adult & Popular Education in Timor-Leste

Edited by Bob Boughton

Ten Years On: Adult Education & Development in Timor-Leste

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This paper is based on in-country research I have been doing with my colleague Deborah Durnan since 2004. Our research utilizes the theoretical framework of political economy, adapted for the study of adult education in developing countries by our colleague Frank Youngman of the University of Botswana (Youngman 2000; Boughton & Durnan 2005). Our methodology is participatory action research, which means that we conduct our research in partnership with local Timorese adult education leaders, and our focus is on action – specifically, the design, delivery and evaluation of adult education policy and programs. One of our goals is to help local adult educators in Timor-Leste develop their own analyses and understandings of the national adult education system as it is emerging, and to make decisions, based on the evidence we help to collect, about the directions in which the system should be heading. Following a brief given to us by the previous FRETILIN Minister for Education, Rosaria Corte Real, and confirmed by the AMP Minister Joao Cancio after he took office, the work has divided into two main tasks. Firstly, we have assisted the government to plan, deliver and evaluate the national adult literacy campaign which was launched in 2007 (Sekretariadu Nasional KNA 2007; see also Boughton 2008; 2009). Secondly, we developed a draft strategic plan for non-formal adult education for the period 2008-2015 (Boughton and Durnan 2008).

My presentation begins with some basic propositions about the role of adult and popular education in development. This is followed by a brief review of the history of adult education in Timor-Leste prior to independence. Next I look at what has been achieved since independence, before finishing with some suggestions about some fundamental questions which must be faced now and the challenges which lie ahead.

Basic propositions

The following five basic propositions may be useful in framing the discussion:

1. ‘Adult education (like education more generally) is a form of *social policy*, i.e. it is the product of deliberate action by organisations *to influence society*’ (Youngman 2000: 5; my emphasis)
2. The kind of adult education system which a country builds will therefore influence what kind of a society it becomes;
3. This is especially true in societies emerging from a colonial period, during which most adults have received little or no education to prepare them for independence;
4. The fundamental role of adult education in newly-independent post-colonial societies is to support major social transformation;
5. This is rarely the dominant role of adult education in countries of the North; hence we must look elsewhere for models.

These propositions, discussed in more detail below, help to move the analysis beyond case studies of individual adult education programs and providers to a broader discussion about the overall national adult education system. They are based on the work of Professor Frank Youngman, who advised the governments of Botswana and Namibia in Southern Africa in the 1980s and 1990s on the development of their adult education systems, and help set up a university program for adult educators from all over southern Africa.

Youngman was particularly concerned to help national leaders become more aware of the way the development of their national adult education systems is often driven by the agendas of powerful donor countries of the North, and their local allies. To develop a truly independent system, Youngman argues, it is necessary to train the national professional adult education leadership to adopt a political economy approach in their analysis. The most fundamental question is whether the adult education

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system is reducing, reinforcing or even exacerbating social and economic inequalities. He therefore focuses on the relationship between adult education and the class structure of the countries he studied (Youngman 1985; 2000). One of his most important points is about **national independence**. A country needs to develop its own adult education system, and not simply adopt models from other places. This is especially important for what he calls 'peripheral' capitalist countries, countries which are only just entering the international economy and have not yet developed as a so-called modern industrial economy. International agencies and donors, Youngman argues, often use adult education to achieve outcomes which suit their development needs rather than the needs of the recipient countries. In southern Africa, he shows how this happened with various programs, including agricultural extension programs financed by western donors.

Another key adult education concept in countries such as Timor-Leste which are emerging from a long period of colonial rule is **social transformation**. Under colonizing powers, adults are taught dependency and subservience, not independence. Even within the Resistance, while there is opposition to the colonial rulers, there is little democracy and little chance for the majority of people to develop the skills and understanding required for democratic development. So a key question for the national adult education system in a newly independent country is whether it promotes independence and democracy; or whether it is simply reproducing the attitudes and values of the colonial period. This is not only a question for individual programs of adult education, which may well be doing a good job, but still not influencing the overall direction of development, because they are reaching too few people. In other words, whether or not social transformation is being promoted is a question for the adult education system as a whole. One thing we can say with confidence is that the adult education systems in most western countries, including my own country Australia, do NOT promote mass social transformation, because those countries achieved their independence and democracy long ago, and that is no longer the development path they are on. This is why Timor-Leste needs to develop its own model, and resist blueprints imported and promoted by donors.

Timor Leste is not a 'blank slate'

Helen Hill has suggested that some international advisers see Timor-Leste as a 'tabula rasa', a Latin phrase which translates as 'blank slate' ('slate' is an old English word for the small blackboard on which students write in chalk). In other words, people come here not knowing the rich and complex history of the country, including its educational history. They therefore think that everything starts from post 1999, or even post 2002, without having to take account of what has gone before. In order not to repeat this mistake, it is necessary to remind ourselves that adult and popular education in Timor-Leste has a history. Among the key events in this history we can count:

- The traditional adult education of story tellers and village leaders, passing on the wisdom acquired over many generations;
- The Lusophone and Christian education introduced by the Portuguese especially the missionaries over several hundred years;
- the FRETILIN UNETIM literacy campaign of 1975, and the decolonizing political education which built on this in the liberated zones 1975-78;
- the 'official' adult education in Indonesian times; and
- the popular education work which helped build the Resistance and was particularly important in the lead up to the 1999 Referendum.

Today's Timorese adults have learned from these experiences, and what they have learned will influence their attitudes towards adult education, what they take from it, and their ideas about what a new national adult education system should look like. This is therefore the foundation on which the new system must be built.

The 1975 Literacy Campaign

We can illustrate this with the example of the FRETILIN UNETIM literacy campaign of 1975. In late 1974, a group of young Timorese students studying in Lisbon produced a literacy manual in Tetum, *Rai Timor. Rai Ita Niang* (Timor is Our Country) (Anon 1975). The manual was based on the idea of 'conciatisation', developed by the great Brazilian adult educator, Paulo Freire. It was illustrated with

drawings designed to encourage discussion about colonialism and independence, and it included the words of the independence anthem *Foho Ramelau*. In January 1975, the students returned and mobilised the FRETILIN student organization UNETIM to go to the countryside and begin the work of literacy teaching, using (Basurewan 2004). The leaders of this work included Antonio Cavarinho (Mau Lear), Vicente and Becky Sahe and Rosa Muki Bonaparte, all later killed by the Indonesians. Australian journalists who visited one of the classes in the village of Namuleco in Aileu in 1975 found that not only had all the villagers learned *Foho Ramelau*, but they had ‘shown no hesitation about grasping the essential political facts about the decisions (regarding independence) which will plunge them headfirst into the 20th Century or perhaps see them battling the Indonesians’ (Stannard 1975). After the Indonesian invasion in December 1975, this work continued in the areas controlled by FALANTIL. A media release from Nicolau Lobato distributed in New York in March 1976, now on exhibit at the Resistance Museum in Dili, says:

In our liberated areas, our people are working enthusiastically for national reconstruction under the correct leadership of FRETILIN. In Same, revolutionary brigades of young students and FRETILIN cadres work among the masses to increase food production, to implement literacy programs and health and hygiene programs. We rely on ourselves. We do not have any outside help. But, in the short period of three months since December, we have set up 90 schools with more than 9000 people learning to read and write through a genuine method which develops political awareness (my emphasis).

This work continued until the fall of Matebian in 1978; but also, after that, through the networks of the Resistance (Cabral & Martin-Jones 2008; Pers.com, Ildha Da Concecao 2006). In the next session of this conference, two veterans of this work from OPMT and UNETIM will speak about their experiences.

This history remains relevant today, as we consider how to address the problems of illiteracy. There are many people still alive today in Timor-Leste who had direct experience of a successful literacy campaign. This is important background information when overseas models are being introduced, as they have been, from countries such as Brazil and, more recently, Cuba; or when internationals are chosen by agencies like UNICEF and UNESCO to advise on how to develop literacy materials. There is an urgent need to tap into the rich experiences that people have already had, and to seek *their* advice about what they learned about how to do this work. It is also worth considering whether a similar model should be applied now, and high school and university students mobilized more effectively to take part in the literacy campaign. One of the things that the people who did this work in 1975 say is that they learned as much from the people in the rural areas as the people learned from them. The campaign therefore taught a whole generation of young leaders about the condition of the people in the rural areas, which was important in their own education and political development.

The problem of mass illiteracy

No discussion about adult education, or, indeed, about almost any issue, can avoid the challenges posed by mass illiteracy. An appalling legacy of the colonial period, mass illiteracy puts a significant brake on almost every effort to engage the majority of people as active participants in democratic development. The table below, showing the number of illiterate people in each district, illustrates the scale of the problem:

Districts	Popn	Adults	Illiterates	Percent
Ermera	103322	54737	37210	68.0
Bobonaro	83579	47930	30360	63.3
Baucau	100748	56708	29783	52.5
Dili	175730	106446	21762	20.4
Viqueque	65449	36960	21663	58.6
Oecusse	57616	33406	19390	58.0
Liquica	54973	30563	17972	58.8
Ainaro	52480	28211	16877	59.8
Lautem	56293	30031	15923	53.0

Covalima	53063	29340	15182	51.7
Maufahi	45081	24950	12015	48.2
Manatuto	36897	20697	11889	57.4
Aileu	37967	20286	11278	55.6
TOTAL Timor-Leste	923198	520265	261304	50.23

Source: 2004 Census Tables

In Ermera, for example, which is significant because it was a site of major violence in 2006, nearly 70% of the adult population say they are illiterate. In the more isolated areas, the figure would be even higher. This means that almost all efforts to mobilise people, around health issues, around improving agriculture, around getting children to attend school, or even to exercise their basic rights to cast an informed vote, face huge obstacles. Many writers have shown that there is no point waiting for the school system to overcome this problem, because it never does (eg Lind 2008). The children of illiterate parents rarely finish even basic education, and so the problem continues from one generation to the next. This table is therefore a dramatic illustration of why Timor-Leste cannot afford not to have a comprehensive national system of adult education.

Achievements since 2002

Since formal independence was declared on 25th May 2002, some significant progress has been made towards the development of a national adult and popular education system. The basic institutional framework has been laid, in the education and human rights provisions of the Constitution. Some policy development occurred through the National Development Plan, the Sector Investment Plan for education and training, the Education Policy, and, most recently, a new Basic Law on Education. At a national level, the Ministry of Education has a Adult and Non-Formal Education Directorate, employing several hundred local people, mainly on short-term contracts. It is responsible for literacy and equivalence programs, and runs Portuguese and English language classes. With support from UNESCO, this Directorate has established three community learning centres, and with funding from UNICEF, UNDP, and a range of donors, it developed new resources for Tetum and Portuguese literacy classes, and trained over two hundred literacy teachers. It has developed a primary school equivalence curriculum, currently being trialed in 43 sites. The CLC, literacy and equivalence programs have been led by donor-supported international advisers. Most importantly, the NFE Directorate has been home to the national literacy campaign secretariat, and the Cuban adviser team. This campaign employs over five hundred local staff, including a literacy ‘monitor’ in every suco. Since classes began in June 2007, **27,000** previously illiterate adults have completed the first basic course of classes.

There have also been significant achievements in other Ministries. The programs of the Secretariat of Employment and Training will be covered by Ismenio da Silva as part of this panel. There is an extensive agricultural extension program run through the Ministry of Agriculture, civic education programs run through State Administration and health education programs run through the Ministry of Health. Added to this is the considerable effort of NGOs and CSOs, who are delivering literacy, human rights, women’s empowerment and other education programs to youth and adults throughout Timor-Leste. This entire effort engages a significant local adult education workforce, numbering more than 1500 people. Most have received only minimal education in the theory and practice of adult education. Nevertheless, there are some adult educators with Certificate-level qualifications, some university graduates, both from UNTL and from universities overseas, and a very small number engaged in postgraduate study.

Adult education for what?

In his address to the First World Congress on Adult Education in 1976, Tanzania’s President Julius Nyerere outlined a powerful vision of the role of adult education in relation to the development of countries emerging from colonial rule:

Development has a purpose. That purpose is the liberation of Man (sic). But Man can only liberate or develop himself. He cannot be liberated or developed by another. For Man

makes himself. The expansion of his own consciousness, and therefore his power over himself, his environment, and his society, must therefore ultimately be what we mean by development. Adult education has to be directed at helping men to develop themselves.. (and) in particular to decide for themselves – in cooperation – what development is (Nyere 2006:78).

So, if adult education is in part about people deciding what kind of development they want in their country, then it is important to understand how different kinds of adult education will produce different development outcomes. In discussing this question at the Conference, it may be useful to think in terms of two ‘ideal types’, or models.

Type 1. Socialist/social democratic popular education	Type 2. Neo-liberal capitalist human resource development
Focus on mass of population	Priority focus on youth & formal education
Education for democratic mobilisation & participation	Citizenship education for pluralist democracy
Sustainable livelihood education	Education for international labour market
Slow growth model eg Kerala	Competitive individual ‘human capital’ model, with focus on rapid economic growth

These are ‘ideal types’, in that neither model exists in its ‘pure’ form, and most national systems would include elements of both. However, it may prove a useful framework for assessing what kind of system is currently being developed here.

Major challenges beyond 2009

In coming years, the most important priority of the emerging national adult education system will need to be the eradication of illiteracy. This has been accepted by government, but it will need strong political leadership to maintain the momentum of the national literacy campaign. Many Ministry officials still do not grasp the difference between a mass popular education literacy campaign, and the literacy programs which have run previously out of the Ministry. It is of particular concern that the National Commission which was established to lead the campaign has been abandoned, since experience in other countries eg Zimbabwe, has demonstrated that an Education Ministry alone cannot maintain the social mobilisation required for a successful mass campaign (Mudariki 1996). Another major concern is that, to date, post-literacy activities have not yet been organised to reach the majority of people who finish the initial basic classes. Within the campaign, it is also important to address the gender imbalance in the employment of monitors and coordinators, who are overwhelmingly male, although the majority of participants are female.

The national adult education system will need to provide pathways for the people who become literate so they can continue to develop their literacy and undertake other adult education programs. Post-literacy activities as part of the initial campaign are the first stage, but beyond that, there needs to be a coordinated effort between different government departments and NGOs to ensure every adult is able to continue their education. To achieve the required level of national coordination, it will also be necessary to manage competing donor agendas, and to seek as much bipartisan agreement as possible among different political parties. None of this can be achieved, of course, unless Timor-Leste develops its own workforce of adult educators, not just at the level of program delivery, but at a level where people are able to do detailed national planning and negotiations with donors and other stakeholders. This leadership needs not just to have the adult education theory and an understanding of how adults learn, but it also needs a clear political vision, a passion even, about the place that adult education plays in post-independence development.

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