

SWAP Conference

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*Enhancing child and adolescent wellbeing and preventing violence in  
schools and early childhood settings*

Keynote Address

Minister of State Agio Pereira

## Supporting the wellbeing of *young* people in a *young* State

Ladies and Gentlemen

On behalf of the people of Timor-Leste I pass on our greetings to the *Kaurna* people and pay respects to the elders, past and present. I am honored to speak at this Inaugural 2016 Student Wellbeing and Prevention of Violence Conference, and allow me to congratulate the organizers for this initiative. I acknowledge the role of all the stakeholders and particularly thank our friends from Flinders University.

Flinders have developed an excellent partnership with Timor-Leste. Many of our students come here to Adelaide to study. The launch of Timor-Leste Project on youth wellbeing and demographic dividend later today is another evidence of this strong cooperation between Flinders and Timor-Leste. We do value this long and fruitful partnership.

Our Government understands that we, as a nation-state has to deal with many issues that are cross cutting in their nature. Youth wellbeing is one and, in my view, the most important one, because the future of our country and its sovereignty rests on the wellbeing of our younger

generation.

In the short time that we have today I will touch on the primary elements of the programs of Timor-Leste that focus on the youth and wellbeing. I thank the organisers for outlining the key points as the focus of my presentation; and I will try to stay within this realm.

Our people lived through a violent 24-year struggle for independence after an occupation beginning in December 1975 by Indonesia. Almost a third of our population either was killed, made to disappear or died as a result of starvation caused by this war. It was a violent and traumatic period of our history.

Prior to that, we endured Japanese occupation in World War II. It was another dark era of our history; but also where some of our strongest people-to-people links with Australia were born. This was demonstrated on a cold and wet Anzac Day earlier this year in Perth, when Timor-Leste's former President and Prime Minister, Xanana Gusmão, marched the streets of Perth with alongside a very special gentleman, Mr. Keith Hayes.

Keith, now in his 90's, is one of the last surviving veterans of the World War II commando campaign in East Timor. In an ABC special aired that evening, Keith declared the Aussies would not have lasted a week without the support and friendship of the Timorese people. He and many of his fellow World War II commandos referred to *a debt of honor* they felt was owed to the Timorese people. Five hundred years of colonization by Portugal was also a key part of our history and the development of our culture and national identity.

In 1999 a referendum sponsored by the United Nations put us firmly on the path of restoration of our independence, which was declared on 28 November, 1975. In the 1999 referendum, twenty four years later, 78.5 percent of our people voted for independence. Sadly, as Indonesian forces left the country, an estimated 70 percent of our infrastructure was destroyed in acts of violence. So, in 1999 East Timor literally rose from the ashes.

Independence could not have happened without the extraordinary resilience and determination of our people; and the intelligence and the smart diplomacy pursued by our historical leaders. It also could not happen without the active and sustained solidarity of the Australian people and thousands of citizens of various countries around the world.

With the restoration of independence officially declared in 2002, today we can say the State itself is now a “teenager”. We are 14 years old as a sovereign Nation-State. That is why my presentation today is entitled *Supporting the wellbeing of young people in a young State*.

Since 2002 and, particularly in recent years, our development has been positive and steady, helped along by targeted spending of oil and gas revenues. After independence, our birth rate rose rapidly and although it has begun to moderate a little now, we have a vastly different population profile to that of Australia.

The current population of Timor-Leste is about 1.2 million. It is one of the youngest countries in the world with a mean age around 17 years. Nearly 70 percent of our population is under the age of 25; and 42 percent are under the age of 15. That is over four out of ten people.

(In Australia only 19 percent of the population is under 15)

*Clearly the wellbeing and success of our young people is pivotal to the success of the young Nation of Timor-Leste.*

This is foundational to our Strategic Development Plan (SDP), which guides the actions of our Governments up until 2030 and has determined the current Government's program, which runs through till July next year, when we will have our next legislative election.

The Strategic Development Plan, released in 2011, recognizes that “The true wealth of any nation is in the strength of its people” and that “Maximising the overall health, education and quality of life of the Timorese people is central to building a fair and progressive nation.” It also recognises the potential of youth bulge to become a greater part of Timor-Leste's work force which will respond to *new opportunities with dynamism, creativity and enthusiasm* resulting in economic growth and development. Hence, the importance of the wellbeing of the younger generation can never be underestimated.

The program of our Government states that:

“Timor-Leste's young people are the future leaders of our Nation. They, both boys and girls, will reshape Timor-Leste and contribute to the transformation of our society and economy”, adding that “We must do all we can to support our youth and provide them with the opportunities

they need to gain the experience, skills and values to participate fully in the future of our Nation.”

One may ask: but how does our Government ‘support and provide’? - The broad answer is that our entire Government Program supports youth wellbeing. Therefore, the development of all four pillars of the program is critical.

The first pillar of the Government Program is *Social Development*, which has the most obvious connection to youth wellbeing. Improvements in health and access to *quality education* are essential ingredients for the wellbeing of our young people. Professional training and employment is also critical for their future, the future of the country as a whole.

The last survey conducted by the Secretariat of State for Youth and Sport in 2014 found that 24 percent of young people living in rural areas and 15 percent of young people in urban areas were unemployed.

Our experience is that when we have large groups of unemployed youth they can easily find themselves drawn into conflict and violence. So while we have specific programs in place to teach youth conflict resolution, we also know that employment, training and participation in meaningful work for the young generation are major drivers of national stability.

Also under the pillar *Social Development* is welfare protection and solidarity, including youth protection and the development of social cohesion. Promotion of gender equality and minimization of domestic violence are top priorities. We have a domestic violence law that is considered one of the most advanced in the world. The law declares domestic violence a public crime, meaning that the actor can be arrested without requiring a report from the victim. Our national budget planning process considers gender sensitivity as a very important component - central element to an inclusive social development.

These all have associated policies and active programs in place. The empowerment of young women and girls is a policy priority for a Government committed to the participation of *all* in national development. That is why equal access to opportunities for *all* young people is seen as a vital policy.

The second pillar is *Infrastructure Development*. Although this may seem less important from youth wellbeing perspective, a closer look in the context of Timor-Leste reveals this to be closely linked to the development of health, education and safety. Roads and bridges connect young people to markets, schools and health posts. Electricity provides lighting, increase safety, assisting night time study, and providing a cleaner way to cook food. Both, in turn, contribute to boosting private sector development, job creation and a healthier economy.

Hence, the third pillar of our Government Program is *Economic Development*, where we have programs and policies to promote the development of our priority sectors such as Agriculture, Fisheries, Oil and Gas, Tourism and Manufacturing. It is also where we have incentives to attract foreign investment and create a business friendly environment. It is about creating a sustainable diversified economy; and in the context of the wellbeing of the youth, it is about opportunities for employment, business development, income generation and a meaningful participation in the process of national development.

The fourth pillar is *Governance Development*. This is about the connectedness of policies around peace and stability, accountability and transparency to youth wellbeing. It is all about trust. If young people

have no confidence in their Government, we will struggle in our policy to work together to move the nation forward. In other words, without Peace and Stability we cannot lift the wellbeing of our people.

That is why Timor-Leste was a strong advocate of goal 16 when the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) were being formulated; the goal to do with justice and peaceful societies. Our experience taught us that for our nation, *development is not possible without peace and peace is not possible without development.*

Amongst these big program pillars - all essential to the development of youth wellbeing - are specific programs targeting youth.

The first example is a program that goes directly to the goal of *reducing youth conflict and violence*. One of the objectives of our Ministry of Social Solidarity is precisely to provide protection to individuals and families facing vulnerability. One program underway to “Guarantee Stability” seeks to increase the number of youth with capacity to prevent and resolve conflict.

So this year conflict resolution trainers sent out by the Ministry have provided courses to young men and women in four of our thirteen municipalities. They have used community dialogues, community safety meetings and community sport gatherings to teach principles of conflict settlement and prevention. Young men and women have been taught about the use of consultation and dialogue to avoid conflict and violence. Reports are that some of the most effective training has occurred with the use of role-play for participants; and in two municipalities the training incorporated presentations in a theatre forum.

The second example is a program that concerns adolescent reproductive health and *the goal to reduce the number of teenage pregnancies.*

Although teenage pregnancy dropped from 78 per 1,000 women in 2003 to 51 in 2009, it remains an important issue. A 2010 study found that 99 percent of adolescent mothers in Timor-Leste dropped out of school. Our ministry of education is developing special programs, with flexible school hours and teaching methods to accommodate the needs of those who drop out from the normal school system. This is also a way to reintegrate them back into the system, enhancing self-esteem but with minimal disruption to their life routine and social responsibilities.

The Ministry of Health under *the Program to Strengthen Primary Health Care* is aiming this year to have 40 percent of women aged 15 - 49 registered for Family Planning. The Ministry of Health is also incorporating a youth focus in their National Strategic Plan for Reproductive Health 2015-2019. This plan draws on National Guidelines for *the Provision of Youth Friendly Health Services* in Timor-Leste, developed in 2012, which recognized barriers to the use of health services by youth.

Confidentiality and privacy and the quality of services were raised as issues along with potential cultural barriers. The guidelines for youth friendly health services will be applied to Health Services for Youth Centers, Clinic and Schools. There are many other factors involved in keeping teenage girls in school. The Government is responding across Ministries to ensure that impediments are removed. These responses include school feeding programs and providing reintegration pathways for young mothers.

The third and final example goes to the health habits of young men and is a *part of a broad campaign to reduce tobacco use*. In Timor-Leste, 52 percent of boys and 1.1 percent of girls aged 15 to 24 smoke cigarettes or consume tobacco. The figure for the age group 13 to 15 is 42 percent. These figures have massive implications for the health of our young men

and boys and foreshadow a huge burden for the national health system in the years to come.

Our Prime Minister, Dr. Rui Maria de Araújo, a medical doctor, came to his post in February 2015 and made it his mission to overcome this national problem. And the actions since then have been comprehensive. The Government has enacted legislation this year that prohibits the sale of tobacco products to under age children, restricts advertising and bans smoking in enclosed public spaces. There has been a comprehensive social campaign to warn youth of the dangers.

We have an opportunity to reshape our culture for the benefit of the youth. There are no illusions that it will succeed overnight, but we know from other countries, including Australia, that change is possible.

So what are some of the politics involved and challenges of implementation? - There is clear national commitment to build a supportive structure that protects young people against dangers, and helps them to build knowledge, skills and confidence.

Lastly, on the challenge of implementation, beyond the need to ensure local ownership, adequate funds and adequate human capacity to deliver programs are always critical factors. Certainly our human capacity levels are rising as we train more and more people and improve the quality of the education system. Nevertheless, having local people trained up to deliver services, continues to be something that we strive to achieve – an ongoing challenge, as the population increases and new demands emerge.

Ladies and Gentlemen

I would like to conclude by giving you some insight into development journey of Timor-Leste in the years ahead.

We have come a long way since the time of rising from the ashes. In 14 years Timor-Leste achieved substantial results in education enrollment, dropping the rates of infant and child mortality, and combating infectious diseases such as tuberculosis and malaria.

As a young nation, we have maintained peace, stability and growth; and steadily built the institutions of the State literally “from scratch”.

A Petroleum Fund was established in 2005 and it has been managed with transparency for the benefit of national development and future generations. Our Government has been able to provide basic income support for veterans and the most vulnerable citizens, including mothers, widows, the elderly, the disabled and children.

Timor-Leste has committed energy and effort to establishing friendships with virtually every country in the world and through regional organizations such as the Portuguese Speaking Countries, ASEAN, the g7+ and other multilateral forums.

Thinking of the new Sustainable Development Goals, Timor-Leste can be proud because, through our leadership in the g7+ group, the work of our talented team in New York, and a presence amongst members of the High Level Panel, was able to contribute to the development of the goals. We pushed hard to have goal 16 included because of our view that peace and development are the two faces of the same coin. In fact the g7+ which we chaired until 2014 was a rallying point for countries

unable to reach the old MDGs. The g7+ made the point that the MDGs were not so helpful for countries emerging from conflict and dealing with fragility, because they did not recognise the main impediments to development.

Without going through all the 17 SDGs I will point to what I consider four key challenges for the future development pathway of Timor-Leste - to achieve those goals.

First *maintaining peace*.

As I said, peace is necessary to enhance national development. With 70 percent of people under the age of 25, this means we need to attend to the wellbeing of our youth so they are engaged in development with meaningful work and reward.

Second we must *create a diversified economy*.

Oil and gas and mineral resources do help the country for some years to come, but these resources will not last forever. As mentioned before,

there is the urgent need to provide job opportunities for our young people.

This means smartly developing the five priority sectors: oil and gas, agriculture, fisheries, tourism and manufacturing. This means lifting the nation's know-how, including training and the development of language skills. Our accession to ASEAN, as full member, will be both a challenge as well as an opportunity to further these national goals.

### *Thirdly boosting private investment*

We need foreign investment; and to attract investment in a competitive business environment, we need to reduce perceived risks and increase confidence. Apart from successfully connecting the country through an electricity grid (without electricity no investment is viable), we have big investment projects underway with a Heineken beverage plant, major cement exporting facility and a world class shipping Port.

### *Fourthly Empowering Women and Girls*

We cannot achieve our development goals without the full participation of women and young girls. This means ensuring opportunity for quality education, business and political leadership, and developing an environment with safety and confidence.

Ladies and Gentlemen

What I have outlined here simply means nationbuilding and Statebuilding in progress. If what we build today is to be meaningful, the test certainly will be that our youth, our young people and generations to come, can live in peace and harmony, enjoying happiness and prosperity. That was precisely the reason Timor-Leste pushed for peace and development to be considered as intertwined factors of sustainability.

Thank you.