



Submission No 10

## **Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with Timor-Leste**

Organisation: Victorian Local Governance Association

# Victorian Local Governance Association



*Connecting Communities  
Strengthening Democracy*

## Submission to the Joint Standing Committee of Foreign Affairs, Defence and Trade Inquiry into Australia's Relationship with Timor-Leste

March 2013



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## **About the VLGA**

The Victorian Local Governance Association (VLGA) is a unique peak body for councillors, community leaders and local governments working to build and strengthen their capacity to work together for progressive social change.

Our membership consists of local governments (representing around 80 percent of Victoria's population), community organisations and individuals.

Our Vision is for Victorian communities to be inclusive, sustainable and dynamic, characterised by strong leadership and effective local governance.

We believe that transparent, accountable and democratic governance policies and practices in all settings enable citizens to create their own sustainable futures.

## **Background**

The VLGA is a values-driven organisation concerned with building democratic communities at the local level. In alignment with these values, the VLGA has supported the development of local democracy in Timor-Leste since the Independence Referendum of 1999. This has been done through VLGA local government and community organisation members – many of which have friendship relationships with Districts and towns in Timor-Leste.

More than fifty percent of the total number of friendship groups around Australia are based in Victoria.

Over the past 13 years, the VLGA has hosted a number of conferences, workshops and forums and has auspiced observer missions to successive elections in Timor-Leste.

The current Timor-Leste Ambassador to Australia, H.E. Abel Guterres, has had a long relationship with the VLGA and is currently an honorary member.

The following submission addresses several of the Terms of Reference of the Inquiry, based on the VLGA's involvement with the Timor-Leste Friendship movement over the past 13 years.

## **1. Bilateral relations at the parliamentary and government levels**

Underpinning the Australian Timor-Leste relationship has been the links between Australian local governments and the districts and subdistricts of Timor-Leste.

These relationships are generally embodied in formal 'friendship agreements', which are based on the 'Statement of Principles for Victorian Local Governments Working in East Timor'.

The Statement of Principles was signed in 2000 by the then Victorian Minister for Local Government, the Municipal Association of Victoria, the VLGA, and Xanana Gusmão, the then President of the National Congress for Timorese Reconstruction (refer Attachment 1).

Friendship agreements are designed to be long-term, in contrast to the short-term involvement of international aid organisations. They stress the importance of developing trust and respect for each other's cultures and of local decision-making. Importantly, they include links between community organisations and individuals, as well as the formal relationship between administrations (refer Attachment 2).

The relationships between Australian local governments and local administrations in Timor-Leste have been reinforced by frequent exchanges of personnel. A number of Timor-Leste local officials have visited their counterparts in Victoria on study tours and have attended a range of briefings and training sessions.

With the transition to elected municipal government planned for 2014-15, these exchanges provide useful opportunities for local officials to observe aspects of Australian local government in operation, such as governance processes, community planning, and the conduct of elections (refer Attachment 3).

During a recent visit to Australia, the Timor-Leste Minister for Decentralisation, Sr Tomas Cabral, stressed the importance his government places on the role of Australian local governments in advising and assisting local administrations in Timor-Leste with the transition to elected municipal government.

How Australian local governments can best do this is the prime focus of a conference the VLGA is planning to convene with a number of organisations in March 2014 – subject to funding.

## 2. Aid, including support with governance issues

While the Australian Timor-Leste Friendship relationships are not primarily designed as aid projects, they have given rise to a number of initiatives and activities which can be broadly categorised as ‘development assistance’.

These include scholarship programs for Timorese students, funding for a wide range of training activities and infrastructure projects, assistance for community groups to develop their capacity to become sustainable and a range of material aid.

The majority of funding for this assistance has come from public fundraising by local community groups in Australia, involving the work of a large number of volunteers. It is difficult to put a dollar figure on the value of total assistance provided over the past decade by the friendship groups, but it would run into millions of dollars if all of the volunteer labour and in-kind assistance was included<sup>1</sup>.

Support for these efforts has also been provided by a myriad of church groups, service clubs, local businesses and other Australian non-government organisations. It would be no exaggeration to claim that the friendship movement and its associated support groups have involved thousands of Australian citizens, all linked by their common wish to help Australia’s nearest neighbour.

As described above, a number of the local government friendship groups have organised study tours for local representatives which have included training in aspects of local governance. One of the features of this assistance is that the participants form collegiate relationships with their Australian counterparts, who are able to provide ongoing advice and mentoring to the visitors after they have returned to Timor-Leste. This assistance will continue to expand during the transition to elected local government.

During the recent visit by the Timor-Leste Minister for Decentralisation, the VLGA was asked to outline its capacity to deliver training to support the decentralisation process. The VLGA has offered training opportunities for community members and potential candidates prior to the election, and training for elected officials post the elections, subject to funding being available to support this. Specific training in areas of governance, strategic planning and budget development has also been offered (which would be developed specifically for Timor-Leste).

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<sup>1</sup> For example: Rotary Donations-In-Kind has transported many containers to Timor-Leste, and estimates it has handled \$34 million worth of material aid in the past ten years through its Footscray warehouse – much of it for East Timor friendship groups.

### **3. Economic issues, including trade and investment**

While the local government friendship relationships have not focused on aid, a range of economic benefits for local communities have resulted. These include vocational training for local people to enable them to find employment or establish their own businesses, direct funding of local enterprises to help them become sustainable, purchase of local products for re-sale in Australia and support for local tourism.

Vocational training assistance has been provided through a range of scholarship programs which have seen trainees go on to establish their own businesses after graduation.

In some cases, the friendship groups have assisted local enterprises to expand their capacity. For example, the Friends of Aileu has funded the manufacture of disability aids and portable, folding dental chairs at the St Francis of Assisi Disability Workshop in Aileu, which trains and employs people with a disability.

In August 2013, the VLGA – in association with an Australian tour company, Timor Adventures – is auspicing a study tour of Timor-Leste during which members of friendship groups will travel to several districts. The VLGA also hosted a forum in March 2013 to encourage the development of the tourist industry in Timor-Leste.

Consistent with their commitment to long-term friendship relationships, it is clear that the Australian local government friendship groups have played an important role in the establishment and development of local tourism in Timor-Leste, both through study tours and by promoting Timor-Leste as a travel destination in Australia. This activity will only expand in the future.

#### 4. Cultural, educational and scientific relations and exchanges

Australian local government friendship groups have had cultural interchange between Australia and Timor-Leste as one of their key objectives. This has been achieved through a range of initiatives, visits, study tours, purchase and exchange of cultural artefacts and support for the activities of other organisations, such as the successful 2012 tour by the East Timorese community choir, Koro Loriko, which was organised through The Boîte.

Friendship groups have also directly funded cultural activity in Timor-Leste, such as the *Fuann Nabilan* blind choir, which is supported by the Boroondara Friends of Same and the *Suai Media* website supported by the Port Phillip Friends of Suai. A number of friendship groups also support friendship relationships between schools in Australia and Timor-Leste.

The Ballarat Friends of Ainaro supports around twenty local primary and secondary schools which are linked with schools in the Ainaro District of Timor-Leste. Some schools have organised regular visits to their Timorese friendship schools, such as St Joseph's College in Echuca which holds annual 'immersion visits' for its Year 11 students. On these visits, students spend two weeks with their counterparts at the Sao Paolo Catholic College in Aileu District. Local schools supported by friendship groups, also regularly exchange photos, letters and other information with their Timorese counterparts.

In 2012, with support from friendship groups and the VLGA's Timor-Leste Advisory Group, the Australia- Timor-Leste Friendship Schools Network was launched by the VLGA's then Vice-President, Richard Brown.

A number of Friendship groups have scholarship programs which assist students in Timor-Leste to attend secondary, tertiary and vocational training institutions. The Moreland and Hume Councils' Friends of Aileu, for example, funded 36 scholarships for tertiary students from Aileu District and thirty six scholarships for secondary students.

Friendship groups have also organised exchanges of teachers between Timor-Leste and Australia. Groups such as the City of Casey's Friends of Ermera have supported training for kindergarten teachers and developed a teacher training program for teachers of English in the Ermera subdistrict.

The friendship groups have also provided an important hosting and socio-cultural support service for Timorese students studying in Australia. They participate in the welcoming ceremonies for newly-arrived students, such as those regularly organised in Melbourne by Victoria University and they offer social support for students from the district where they have the friendship relationship.



## 5. People to people links

The essence of Australian local government friendship relationships with Timor-Leste is people-to-people contacts. As outlined previously, this has been accomplished by frequent visits and exchanges of personnel, as well as the ongoing communication between members of the friendship groups and their counterparts in the districts.

This had led to strong bonds of trust being established between the communities in Australia and Timor-Leste, and a level of mutual understanding which has enabled the successful implementation of many joint development projects.

An outstanding example is the support by the Port Phillip Friends of Suai for the establishment and growth of the Suai-Cova Lima Community Centre, which is now a major employer in the district, supporting a range of training programs and local enterprises. In addition, an internet cafe with the fastest, satellite-based broadband service in Timor-Leste is also self-funding.

It was notable that during the disturbances of 2006, which brought massive social dislocation to all parts of Timor-Leste, one district official assured his Australian counterpart in the friendship group that 'whatever happens here, we know we can rely on our friends in Australia to be there for us when this is all over.'

The Australian friendship relationships continue to expand and grow, twelve years after they were first established, even as the UN and other international organisations depart from Timor-Leste.

## **Recommendations**

The VLGA believes that friendship groups provide a unique and valuable model for future relations between Australia and Timor-Leste.

Therefore we recommend that the Australian Government:

- Recognises the importance of the Australia - Timor-Leste friendship relationships in building links between individuals, organisations and communities in the two countries
- Makes funds available through AusAID to support existing friendship relationships, and the development of new relationships.