

East Timor: The Way Ahead National Human Development Report 2002 The education horizon

Education is one of the most critical components of human development. Unless people have at least a basic education, many of the other choices remain closed to them. East Timor has a lot of ground to make up, not just in terms of dealing with illiteracy but also coping with a multiplicity of languages.

Establishing the education system on the right track is critical. Better-educated people are in a position to innovate and improve not just their own lives but also the lives of others. Better-educated women are in stronger position to look after their own health and that of their children as well as participate actively in building the new East Timor.

One consequence of lack of education is illiteracy, which deprives the people of East Timor of opportunities to participate fully in social and political life. It also hampers development, since basic literacy and numeracy are the keys to more productive employment, in both national and international enterprises.

While the overall literacy rate is 43%, there are striking differences between urban areas where the rate is 82% to rural areas where it only 37%. Most of the older generation will never learn to read but the situation should be better for the future generation, since most children do at least attend primary school.

The number of children going to school still falls far short of global standards. Poverty remains one of the obstacles to school attendance. Although there are no enrolment fees, there are still costs of sending children to school. In very poor families, children need to spend at least part of their time working on the family farm or on household tasks. Some 10% of children aged 10 and 11 are employed, mostly in agriculture -though about half also manage to attend school.

In the years ahead, both teachers and educational administrators will need a strong grounding in Portuguese. At the same time, experience from other countries shows that children learn more quickly if they first become literate in their mother tongue and then acquire the national language, in this case Portuguese or Tetun, as a second language. Printing educational materials in all of East Timor's mother tongue languages would be expensive. However, it is possible to produce materials without text, which teachers can then adapt to the various local languages.

Currently, the majority of teachers are men (70%). Again, experience from other countries show that female teachers can serve as good role models for girls, encouraging them to stay in school and go on to further education. For the future, there are two main issues for the teaching profession. The first is to reduce the very high student/teacher ratio, which averages 60 in primary schools. The second is to upgrade the skills of teachers, not just in language but also in modern methods of teaching.

Curriculum development will be important -not only in schools but also in vocational training and in university education. East Timor's education system will need to produce people with the skills to match the needs of the country. While more people with basic skills are required, there is also a need is to train the next generation of secondary and primary teachers.