

Keynote Address by Kirsty Sword Gusmão

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“Timor-Leste: Language and Identity in Southeast Asia’s Newest Nation”

Bondia, good morning. Thank you for extending the invitation to me and my colleague, Mr Agustinho Caet, to contribute our thoughts and experiences to this Conference.

My name is Kirsty Sword Gusmão. As well as being the wife of Timor-Leste’s Prime Minister, Xanana Gusmao, I have a number of lofty titles to my name, including Goodwill Ambassador for Education, Chair of the Timor-Leste National Commission for UNESCO, Chair of the Alola Foundation and Chair of the National Education Commission. The roles I most cherish, however, are those of a mother and a teacher. And it is as a mother and a teacher that I wish to speak to you today, since more than the others they are the roles that have spurred me on to tackle the issue of language in education in my adopted homeland. You see, it was a love of languages and of language learning that led me to where I am today, contributing to rebuilding our tiny and fragile little nation from the ground up. I majored in Indonesian and Italian studies at Melbourne University in the 1980’s. My knowledge of the Italian language made it fairly easy to acquire Portuguese. I went to live and work in Jakarta in the dying years of Suharto’s oppressive regime in the early 1990’s and from there I was able to put my language skills to good use in the service of Timor-Leste’s struggle for self-determination. I translated reports of human rights abuses coming out of Timor-Leste (then known as Timor Timur), and became the private secretary and English teacher of Indonesia’s then most famous political prisoner, Xanana Gusmao, the man who is now my husband. But that’s another and a long story

Timor-Leste is one of the newest nations in the world, having declared its independence in 2002. For over 500 years, it was a colony of Portugal, and was occupied by Indonesia for a further 24 years, resulting in the annihilation of close to a third of its population. Timor-Leste is one of the poorest nations in Southeast Asia, and a country of tremendous cultural and linguistic diversity. Some 30 languages, in addition to the official languages of Tetun and Portuguese, are spoken across the country. In spite of the fact that the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste obliges the state to value and preserve the local languages of the country, the task of granting mother tongues an official role and status in the life of the nation, including in the education system, is proving to be challenging. Let me tell you why through the lens of my personal experience of language learning and of engaging with efforts to develop our education system.

I took up residence in Timor-Leste some 12 years ago, and since doing so acquired Tetun, the national lingua franca, somewhat by osmosis as the hectic pace of life over that period

hasn't allowed me to take a course or to be more deliberate and systematic about my language learning. The experience of acquiring and using Tetun on a daily basis has, however, taught me a great deal about the attitudes of the East Timorese people to language, their own experiences of learning languages, and their perceptions of the place of their indigenous languages in the nation building process. In spite of the fact that Tetun is the most widely spoken language in all spheres of public and private life across the country and is considered the L2 of the vast majority of the population, very few East Timorese claim to have a good command, particularly in written usage, of this language. This is perhaps not surprising given that Tetun was suppressed as a language of written communication under both Portuguese and Indonesian colonial administrations, with the Church being the only institution to make efforts to document, develop and use the language for liturgical purposes. I find it truly sad that many East Timorese comment that I speak better, more correct Tetun than they do – and believe me my Tetun is far from perfect! What is even more tragic, I believe, is that successive governments in our country have failed to seize upon the opportunity afforded by national independence to actively promote pride in and the teaching of Tetun based on the standard orthography. This has something to do with debates surrounding the legitimacy of the standardized orthography developed by our National Institute of Linguistics, but more than that it is the result of government preoccupation with promotion of our co-official language, Portuguese, a language which enjoys greater status as a developed European language with a proud and prestigious literary tradition.

In spite of being the L3 of the vast majority of East Timorese citizens, Portuguese has been promoted as the principal language of instruction across all levels of education over the past ten years. This has not only compromised the learning of children, but it has also significantly hampered efforts to improve teaching quality and to introduce child-centred teaching methodologies which enable children to engage more actively in their learning. Research conducted between 2007 and 2010 by Australian academic, Marie Quinn, shows that less than 10% of classroom time is spent on student talk, with the remaining instructional time being dominated by teachers talking at students. And all too often that teacher talk is very formal and highly structured due to the teachers' own limited command of Portuguese which requires them to adhere strictly to the curricular content outlined in the scant teaching materials available to them, and deterring them from making connections between subject content and the daily lives and realities of their students through use of anecdotes and other devices which would enhance enjoyment of learning.

The issue of language of instruction in our schools has dominated debate since independence on the question of education quality. Indeed, alongside factors such as distance from home to school, low levels of literacy and education amongst parents, lack of water and adequate hygienic facilities in schools, the question of language use in schools is a major contributor to low rates of school enrolment, high levels of grade repetition and exceedingly high drop-out rates. Close to 80% of students fail to complete primary schooling. The Early Grade Reading Assessment, a study conducted by the World Bank in 2009, revealed that large numbers of primary school age children across Timor-Leste are taking up to 4 years to learn to read and write, with 70% of students in Grade 1 unable to read a single word of a simple text presented to them.

Whilst language of instruction has long been acknowledged, particularly by key international stakeholders such as the World Bank and UNICEF, as a key issue in

determining quality of education, the question was been conveniently sidestepped by successive Ministers of Education due to perceptions that the issue of language generally in Timor-Leste, and particularly language of instruction, was steeped in politics and too sensitive to broach in a head-on manner. In 2009 the National Education Commission which I chair offered to lead the process of consultations and deliberations which would lead to the drafting of a national Language in Education policy. A visit to Timor-Leste in November 2009 of four Portuguese officials from the Ministry of Education in Lisbon and two Australian language in education specialists resulted in a recommendation to Timor-Leste's education authorities in favour of the use of local languages in the first cycle (grades 1 to 4) of basic education. As a follow-up measure, the National Education Commission launched a Language in Education Working Group in Dili in April 2010. Consisting of some 18 members representing civil society organizations, the government, Church and academics, the Working Group spent close to one year conducting consultations and workshops with teachers, students, Ministry of Education officials, NGOs and UN agencies to assess the situation of language use in classrooms and to formulate a policy. In this work, it had the invaluable technical expertise, vast experience and wisdom of Dr Carol Benson of the University of Stockholm and Professor Joe Lo Bianco of Melbourne University.

The Mother Tongue-Based Multilingual Education policy¹ was launched on International Mother Language Day in Dili on 21 February 2011 in the presence of President José Ramos-Horta, senior officials of the Ministry of Education and other key stakeholders. The policy's presentation to the public was accompanied by a "national debate" at which all those present were invited to comment, raise doubts and propose solutions. The overwhelming response was positive, with some educators present raising some good questions in relation to the implementation plan, i.e. what language will be taken to be the mother tongue of students in schools with significant linguistic heterogeneity.

My colleague, Agustinho Caet, will share with you in the course of this conference details of the policy and plans to pilot it in three districts in 2012.

Two other significant events drawing attention to the role of local languages in nation-building, development and identity took place in 2010. One was the first conference on the National Languages of Timor-Leste, a gathering organized jointly by the Timor-Leste National Commission for UNESCO, the National Institute of Linguistics, the Secretariat of State for Culture and the Timor Lorosa'e Nippon Culture Centre. 200 individuals from across the country came together over two days in August 2010 to debate issues such as orthography development and design and the importance of the use of local languages in early grade classrooms. On the final day of the Conference, President Ramos-Horta launched the "Ha'u Nia Lian, Ha'u Nia Rai" (My Language, My Country) national languages writing competition. The competition attracted some 600 entries in 21 languages, with contributors ranging in age from 6 to 60, and was significant in that it conferred value upon literary production (music, poetry and short stories) in languages with no significant tradition of being recorded in a written form.

In June this year, our Council of Ministers debated an historic Decree Law on the Curriculum Framework of Basic Education (grades 1 to 9) which, for the first time in

¹ The policy in Portuguese, English and Tetun is available at this site:
http://www.scribd.com/my_document_collections/3046404

history, grants an official role in the early years of primary education to the nation's mother tongues based on the recommendations of the MTB-MLE policy. Sadly, rather than being embraced and celebrated as a significant step forward for children's learning, for consolidation of Timorese identity, and preservation of our indigenous languages, however, it triggered a national debate which tended to view the issue of mother tongue as a threat to national cohesion and unity as well as to the teaching and learning of the official languages. With general and presidential elections looming next year, the opposition party Fretilin immediately declared that, should it win government in 2012, it would do away with the nonsense of MTB-MLE at once.

Responding to what it perceived as a threat to the role of the official languages in the life of the nation, Timor-Leste's National Parliament issued a resolution in August 2011, recalling "the importance of promoting and teaching the official languages towards national unity and cohesion and to consolidate (Timor-Leste's) own original identity in the world". It is of concern that our law-makers seem to view linguistic diversity as a threat to national unity, and the defence of Timor-Leste's unique cultural heritage in terms of the majority national culture (Tetun) only.

Nevertheless, we are moving forward undeterred and with tremendous support at the grassroots level. Since it is clear that we still have a good deal of work to do in educating our leaders, government officials and the general populace as to the important role of mother tongue education in improving access to and quality of education, our UNESCO National Commission launched on 10 October a Network for the Promotion of Multilingual Education which draws members from some 20 national and international organizations working in the education field in Timor-Leste.

As we move forward in the important work that lies before us, we very much hope to have the ongoing support and inputs from the participants at this conference. As a young nation, Timor-Leste is, I believe, ideally placed to get things right early on in our process of national development, to avoid the mistakes made by other post-colonial nations and indeed to set an example of good educational practice in the service of equitable development, social cohesion and national pride in our unique East Timorese identity.

In closing, I would like to share with you a short film² that we made to publicise the "Ha'u Nia Lian, Ha'u Nia Rai" ("My Language, My Country") national languages writing competition organized last year. It features our President, Dr Jose Ramos-Horta, and some other key figures on the political stage – we hope you enjoy it.

Thank you.

² The commercial/public service announcement can be viewed here: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4BMwo2Zm4k>