

Timor-Leste Today: What a young nation's women and men can achieve against all odds.

Glenda Lasslett 19 October 2018

(please note, photo slides have not been included in this publication of Glenda's speech)

Thank you for the opportunity to talk with you today about *Timor-Leste Today* or *What a young nation's women and men can achieve against all odds*.

All of us have seen Timor-Leste facing tremendous odds in the course of our lifetimes, many of you here as eye witnesses.

For most Australians news from Timor-Leste is inevitably about war, crisis, injustice or tragedy. An older generation might know about the Timorese who suffered due to their protection of the Australian soldiers who fought in Timor-Leste during world war two.

We remember Indonesia's brutal invasion of Timor-Leste in 1975 and the scorched earth departure of the Indonesians in 1999. Then the crisis of 2006 – 2008 when conflict broke out between Timorese and 150,000 Timorese were displaced from their homes to IDP camps.

More recently you will know of the 2017 and 2018 elections and the problems of government formation. But there is so much more to Timor-Leste' story. So much more about achievement against the odds.

Today I want to talk about what I have seen as someone on the spot – as a witness to the courage, sacrifice and determination - against all the odds – by some of the Timorese activists, politicians, farmers, students and NGO workers that I have known over the past 42 years.

And... I will also mention my work in Timor-Leste, some worries about the present and a wish for the future. Witness, work, worries and a wish.

WITNESS

Four memories from my experience about the odds that Timor-Leste faced.

The first Timorese I met was Jose Ramos Horta, the 25-year old Foreign Minister for the government of the "Democratic Republic of East Timor" newly proclaimed by the pro-independence parties in November 1975.

I was there in early 1976 in the empty gallery of the Security Council in New York when Jose pleaded for the mighty nations of the UN Security Council to take action in the face of the illegal Indonesian occupation. The Australian delegation, the US and so many other nations that talked of human rights and the rule of law were adamant that Indonesian control was a done deal. 'Sorry, but *real politik* is more important than your little island home'. The odds were stacked against Timor-Leste.

As you know, Jose did not give up. He travelled anywhere and everywhere to promote the impossible cause of justice for the Timorese, depending on the help of supporters of the struggle like you. Long hard years of advocacy, diplomacy and lobbying around the world by Jose, Abel and many other Timorese while an estimated 100,000 East Timorese would die because of the invasion, because of starvation, violence and the conflict.

Fast forward to 1992. In 1992 special permission from the Indonesian government was no longer needed to enter Timor-Timur and I was travelling through Indonesia, so I took a boat to Dili to see for myself the situation in Timor.

Timor-Timur in 1992: I have never felt such a palpable atmosphere of fear. Indonesian police and military were everywhere. On a long hot bus ride from Ermera, packed in with Timorese heading to Dili with goods to sell in the markets, the Indonesian military stopped the bus and ordered everyone off. The bus went deathly quiet. No-one moved. It was as if we all stopped breathing. Anyone could be taken away on suspicion of opposition to the Indonesians. Including me. The military checked all IDs. Two people were taken away. I could do nothing. I was just a witness. Powerless. Angry. Scared. And silent. I got back to Dili and there people would come up to me in the street and whisper, 'Australia please help us, don't forget us Australia. Australia please help us'. I had to be more than a witness.

Fast forward to 2004. In 2004 I finally returned to a free and independent Timor-Leste, now as a worker with Australian Volunteers International. I remember coming down Comoro road, the main road from the airport, and seeing burnt out building after burnt out building. No glass in the few buildings that remained. The smell of smoke and destruction somehow still was there in the air. The Indonesians had taken everything they could with them in 1999 and the rest they burned. Timor-Leste had almost gone back to ground zero.

What I remember from that time is the sound of generators, living in a container in Dili, sleeping in a mozzie dome on an office floor in Oecusse, the incredible international support for Timor-Leste and the huge challenge facing the Timorese who suddenly were faced with the reality of government and development - with limited human resources. How do you rebuild a nation from the ashes?

I also remember the trauma that was just below the surface: it was estimated that 97 percent of Timorese or someone in their immediate family had suffered major trauma personally during the period of Indonesian control.

But in 2004 there was also pride that Timor-Leste had won against all the odds. Life was still difficult but there was a belief that all would benefit from independence and that the future would be better for their children. The struggle was worth it.

Fast forward to 2006. I'm back in Dili to set up a local office as the in-country manager for AVI. It's April 2006. Just when the World Bank and UN were proudly congratulating themselves and the Timorese government on a successful transition to nationhood, the crisis broke out.

The Timorese had no other word for it – the crisis or *krize*. From the trigger of a petition of soldiers from the west of Timor asking for better conditions, an east versus west conflict broke out that escalated sharply and shattered the peace. 150,000 people lost their homes. I will not talk about the causes but simply note what I saw and heard: the tears of Timorese experiencing violence again, memories of past trauma just underneath the surface. I remember the bullets too close, the flames too near, the burning tyres on the road, the crunch of huge ISF armed vehicles patrolling the streets at night, the sound of breaking glass, the sight of large groups of young men armed with machetes, *ramaambon* and knives roaming the streets to protect their territory or take revenge on rival gangs. There were so many youth throwing rocks at cars that you could get a t-shirt that said 'I got rocked in Dili...' I got rocked in Dili. Now I can laugh.

Just before the second evacuation of the volunteer program I remember looking down on Dili from Dare up in the hills and seeing scores and scores of fires lighting up the night. There was the Ministry of Education on fire, there were houses or vehicles on fire, there was a line of tyres

burning along Comoro road. We evacuated a couple of days later. The odds for peace for Timor-Leste were not great.

The Timor-Leste government called for international assistance and the Australian army led International Stabilisation Force arrived. The UN peacekeeping mission provided additional civil support. And... some months later as the security situation improved, AVI went back.

Work.

I got back to work. The AVI volunteers usually worked with inspiring and hardworking Timorese – but in poorly resourced district administrations and NGOs often out in the districts with the usual problems of funds that never arrive, erratic electricity and water, shocking roads and iffy internet, and everywhere we battled bureaucracy, lack of budget and lack of human resource capacity, in a situation where the international NGOs and the UN were still dominant.

After AVI I worked with IWDA, then with UNDP and UNMIT.

From 2014 to 2016 I was the Country Director for Oxfam in Timor-Leste and there was something new to witness.

- Stability and much less violence
- Government and private expenditure: Construction of roads, shops, apartments, malls
- Social transfers and pensions for vulnerable groups including veterans, the elderly, the disabled, widows and single parents were making a difference
- Growing gender awareness and dynamic leadership programs for women
- Suco elections were held with more women standing as candidates for *xefe de suco* - and 13 actually winning
- INGO were creating partnership with local NGOs
- Timorese NGOs were more regularly leading direct delivery of programs in Dili and rural areas
- More local produce was being sold in Dili supermarkets
- More localisation of senior roles in NGOs was seen – including at Oxfam
- INGO trained and Australian-educated government officials were taking on more senior government positions.

Lots of achievements after just 16 years of independence.

WORRIES

The struggle is not over. Timor-Leste still is up against the odds – not for independence but for sustainable development and peace, prosperity and justice for all its people. There are some significant worries about the present and future in Timor-Leste.

The odds for newly independent countries are not great. Too often the initial cycle of free and fair elections changes to dictatorship or dynastic succession. So far Timor-Leste is doing better than most Asian countries in this regard.

For countries like Timor-Leste with oil resources there is also something called the Resource Curse. Timor-Leste is one of the world's most petroleum export- dependent countries. The phrase 'resource curse' is often used to describe how people in nearly every nation which depends on exporting non-renewable resources become worse off than people not 'blessed' with mineral and oil wealth.

In so many ways Timorese politics is run by rotating elites whose relationships fluctuate as the opportunities demand. Is the CNRT/FRETILIN hegemony now over? Are new

players emerging? Are we finally seeing generational change in the political elite of Timor-Leste?

Political stability is an issue for Timor-Leste. I am not going to go into the details, but I predict that there may be more change and challenge for Timor-Leste in coming months. They have had three prime ministers in just over one year. Possibly learning from Australia.

Whoever is PM, whatever the **politics**, the government will face some pressing **policy** challenges.

Number one is decreasing government income. Existing petroleum reserves are the major source of government revenue, but the reserves are depleting and prospective revenue from new developments is still many years away. Levels of current expenditure cannot continue. Already the government's Petroleum Fund withdrawals have cut into the fund capital rather than being confined to dividends, and much more is planned to buy out US energy giant ConocoPhillips' 30 per cent share in the Greater Sunrise gas consortium for \$US350 million. The Fund that was supposed to last forever has only a few years left. Going fast.

Number two is that the inevitable cutting of government expenditure will deeply impact on poverty levels and the Timorese economy. Large segments of the population – veterans, the elderly, vulnerable women and the large public sector depend on social transfers, pensions and government salaries. Construction companies depend on government contracts for roads and government buildings or the mega projects in Oecusse and Covalima.

Number three is the growing number of young people with no hope of finding paid employment in the labour market. Each year 15-20000 young people finish high school or university but only a tiny proportion actually gain paid employment. One option for some young people is to leave home to work overseas in Australia, South Korea, UK and Portugal.

The labor market just cannot absorb the numbers of young people seeking work. Government investment in education, training, small business development, health and agriculture has been far outweighed by the focus on infrastructure programs.

A fourth challenge is women and children's health - maternal and child mortality, malnutrition and violence against women and children is unacceptable. As supporters of Alola you probably know this too well.

The fifth and final challenge is less about policy and more about poor leadership and administration. It's the limited delivery of government services - especially outside of Dili. This is a result of ineffective logistics, haphazard supply chains, a lack of facilities, lack of standardisation, poor maintenance, top-down budgeting that does not take into account local conditions, centralisation of procurement and decision making, multiple signature/sign off requirements, lengthy delays in payments and financial acquittals, KKN- and I could go on.

How will the government deal with declining income, the need to cut the budget and yet support politically important groups such as the veterans and vulnerable groups such as the elderly, women and children and people living with disability? The social contract between the government of Timor-Leste and the people has been honoured up to now through increasing stability, social transfers that have reduced political and social conflict and improvements in levels of poverty. What will happen if the government cannot deliver on the contract in future?

The role of the private sector and civil society - community associations and non-government organisations- is likely to be crucial now and in the future for welfare, poverty alleviation, economic development, protection of rights and promotion of equality.

NGOs will have a crucial role but the situation for NGOs in Timor-Leste is not easy.

One reason is that there just is not a lot of funding available. Bilateral programs have reduced, there are fewer donors focusing on Timor-Leste, the government Civil Society Fund has limited funds and does not have perhaps the most transparent process. Some NGOs refuse to take government funds as they argue that they would be unable to speak against the government. Some NGOs have been able to win contracts with government for delivery of services, e.g. health, but the government is slow to pay and NGOs do not usually have reserves to tide them over until the money comes in. Some work with international NGOs or bilateral programs. There is very little local philanthropy.

Yet against all the odds there are some standout NGOs who are delivering services or advocacy on issues that matter. Local women's NGOs, including Alola, Rede Feto and Alfela, are developing a powerful program to promote women's participation in government and leadership, with funding from IWDA and other funders such as PLAN. I should add that there are some impressive women in NGOs and civil society. Sabina Fernandes (Rede Feto), Laura Pina (Patria), Alzira dos Reis (Alola), Dillyana Ximenes (first local leader of PLAN International), Herminia Pinto (Permatil), Bella Galhos (former adviser to President TMR, now founder of the Green School), Rosaria Martins (HIAM Health), Gizela da Carvalho (FKSH and Rede Feto board member) and nuns such as Sr Angelita in Venilale. And there are more. The emergence of women as leaders in the past few years and the support for young women to learn how to be leaders and participate in politics has been outstanding.

There are other local NGOs that are emerging and at Oxfam we worked with over 20 local organisations focused on disaster risk reduction, sustainable rural development and land rights. We worked in partnership to deepen their technical skills, M&E, reporting and organisational development. Local NGOs are not perfect – and neither is Oxfam – but we are making progress.

If the government budget reduces, if the government is not able to provide the social transfers and services that it currently provides, if the economy goes backwards, if youth are left without a future, if women and children are even more vulnerable, then it will be up to the NGOs to step up.

They cannot do this without funds. I congratulate Alola Australia on the fantastic support you provide to Fundasaun Alola.

At the beginning of my presentation I recalled Jose Ramos Horta calling on the UN to stop the invasion of Timor-Leste. Against all the odds there have been some small achievements since then – a Nobel Peace Prize, roles as Foreign Minister, PM and President of an independent Timor-Leste and a position as a Special Representative to the UN Secretary-General. But even better from my perspective is that sitting at the table in the UN for Timor-Leste now is a young woman – Milena Pires. A former refugee, representing her own country at the biggest international forum - against all the odds.

A WISH

Finally, I have a wish – not for Timor-Leste but for you. I wish that all of you who have not visited Timor-Leste yet will take the opportunity to be witnesses as well. Visit beautiful Timor-Leste and see for yourself how this amazing young nation is progressing. It may be hot and dusty and basic, and things will go wrong. It is not perfect. But go and see for yourself what has been achieved – against all the odds.