

**Los! Hau Bele. Yo! Si Puedo comes to Timor-Leste<sup>1</sup>**  
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Abstract

*In Timor-Leste, which is one of the world's newest countries and Australia's poorest Asia-Pacific neighbour, Cuba is delivering an educational aid program which aims to eradicate illiteracy, currently affecting nearly 50% of the adult population, within a period of less than ten years. The Timor-Leste national literacy campaign, utilising the Cuban-developed Yo! Si Puedo audiovisual teaching method, opened its first classes in the capital Dili in June 2007. Eighteen months later, by December 2008, nearly 18000 adults had completed a course of sixty-five lessons, led by local village monitors who work under the close supervision of thirty-six Cuban education advisers deployed throughout the country. If it continues at this rate, the literacy campaign can be expected to have a major impact on the stabilisation and development of Timor-Leste, providing a model for other Pacific countries struggling to overcome their educational disadvantage. This paper, based on an ongoing evaluation being undertaken as part of a larger Australian Research Council project on adult education in Timor-Leste, describes the origins and development of the program and the work of the Cuban advisers. It reviews the achievements to date, and compares the Cuban's work with education aid projects sponsored by other donor countries and international agencies. The paper concludes by reviewing the challenges the Cubans still face in assisting Timor-Leste to overcome the problem of illiteracy.*

**Introduction**

In September 2004, I was invited to speak at the First National Adult Literacy Conference in the newly-independent country of Timor-Leste. This was my third trip to the tiny island country, which had only recently achieved its independence. Having been an active supporter of the people of East Timor, as we used to call it, since it was invaded and occupied by the Indonesian dictatorship of General Suharto in 1975, I was pleased and honoured to take part in this historic event. At the end of its occupation in 1999, Indonesia left Timor-Leste in ruins, and the problems of nation-building were made all the more difficult by the very high rate of adult illiteracy. My paper drew on international research which demonstrates that adult literacy is an essential foundation for better population health, for economic and social development, and for democratic political participation (Boughton & Durnan 2004).

The newly-elected independent FRETILIN government were already acutely aware of the importance of mass literacy. Some of its leaders who spoke at the Conference had been young high school and university students in 1975, and in the months before the Indonesian invasion, they had taken part in the country's first literacy campaign in the rural districts, led by their student organization, UNETIM (Durnan 2005). Moreover, for nearly three years after that, some of them continued to lead and participate in education classes run by FRETILIN for the population in the rugged mountain areas where it retained control (Cabral & Martin-Jones 2008). In 1978, the fall of FRETILIN's last military base at Matebian forced the surrender of the civilian population, who were herded into towns and strategic hamlets under Indonesian

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control. They left behind a few small guerrilla bands of FRETILIN's armed wing, FALANTIL, who maintained the armed resistance from their mountain hideouts for another two decades, supported by a clandestine movement among the civilian population in the Indonesian-held towns and districts (Rei 2008). The independence movement finally emerged victorious in a UN-supervised ballot conducted in August 1999, and the Indonesian occupying army was forced to withdraw.

One of the other speakers that day was Francisco Medina Feijo, a doctor from Cuba, who gave a compelling presentation on Cuba's national literacy campaign in 1961 and its impact on the subsequent development of Cuba's national education system. The doctor himself was too young to have participated in that campaign, when, like the Timorese students 14 years later, Cuban high school students went to the country side to teach the peasants basic literacy. But he was a beneficiary of that campaign, because his parents had learned to read and write from it, and that was part of what taught them the value of an education, and that even the poorest could aspire for their children to become professionals and leaders in the new Cuba. His speech was received warmly by the Timorese, not only because he offered them a vision of what they too might achieve, but also because of who he was, and where he was from. The relationship of solidarity and friendship between East Timor and Cuba had been forged in difficult times, several decades before. A few weeks prior to the full-scale Indonesian invasion in December 1975, after cross-border incursions had already led to many deaths (including five Australian journalists at the border town of Balibo), the FRETILIN leadership had declared itself the legitimate government. They called upon the international community to recognise their rights and stop the Indonesian invasion. Cuba was one of the first countries to recognise East Timor's independence, its right of self-determination, and had continued to support it since then, unlike Australia, the US the UK and most other western powers. Now in the period since independence, this relationship had begun to develop even greater depth, through the work that this doctor, and many more like him, were now providing in basic primary health care centres across the country.

Cuba's medical aid program in Timor-Leste is becoming better known, as its scale has grown exponentially since 2004. Today, there are 305 Cuban health workers in Timor-Leste, including 230 doctors, 25 nurses and 50 health technicians. Moreover, 600 Timorese medical and allied health students are being trained in Cuba on full scholarships, with the first due to return this year, and a further 105 are being trained through a new medical program established by the Cubans at the national university, UNTL. (Anderson 2008; Leach 2009). This paper deals only in passing with this program. Instead, it focuses on another, less well-known aspect of Cuba's aid to Timor-Leste. In December 2005, while the Prime Minister Mari Alkatiri was in Havana negotiating the expansion of the medical aid program, he obtained a commitment from the Cuban President, Fidel Castro, to provide the technical support for the FRETILIN government's planned national literacy campaign, which the 2004 Conference had called for, and which had been incorporated into the governments Education and Training Sector Investment Plan. Cuba would provide a technical team and the literacy program known as Yo!Si Puedo (Yes! I Can), which at that stage was already running in several other countries. In January 2006, the first group of Cuban education advisors arrived in Dili.

### **Participatory Action-Research and Capacity Building**

The research on which this paper is based is part of a long-term study being undertaken with colleagues at UNE on the role of adult education in the development of an independent Timor-Leste (Boughton & Durnan 2005). Our first exploratory visit to Timor-Leste was in May 2000, after the Indonesians had left, and Timor-Leste was under United Nations rule. The project then took shape over a further eight visits in March and September 2004, February and October 2005 and in July, September, October and December 2006. Since January 2007, we have been supported by a three year Linkage Grant from the Australian Research Council. Our two local project partners are the Ministry of Education and the Ministry of Labour (recently changed to the Secretariat of State for Employment & Training), who share responsibility for post-school education and training. The ARC grant allowed us to spend four of the first six months of 2007 in-country. Since then, we have visited every three to four months, for periods of between one and three weeks. The most recent trip was in November 2008, and the next is planned for April this year.

This project was developed within a participatory action-research framework, adapted from our previous work with Aboriginal community-controlled organizations in Australia (Boughton 2001). The research, which is undertaken collaboratively with our Timorese colleagues, forms a direct input into the adult education policy and program development process in Timor-Leste, as it evolves from the devastation wrought by a twenty-five year war of colonial occupation into a newly-independent state, with its own functioning institutions. The research aims include improving the capacity of our Timorese counterparts to undertake evidence-based policy and program development, and the specific tasks and topics are determined in negotiation with the partners. A major research product has been a draft strategic plan which the Minister of Education asked us to develop for the national adult education system. That same FRETILIN Minister, Senhora Rosaria Corte Real, requested an independent systematic review and evaluation of the national literacy campaign, as part of our capacity building work with staff in the Ministry's Directorate of Adult & Non Formal Education (DANFE). The new minister, Dr Joao Cancio Freitas, has continued to support those projects since the change of government in July 2007. We have also been fortunate to have the complete support and cooperation of the Cuban Ambassador and the Cuban literacy advisers.

Our first contact with the Cuban literacy campaign advisers was in September 2006, when I interviewed the Coordinator and Deputy Coordinator.<sup>2</sup> At that stage, they were piloting the Yo!Si Puedo materials (in Portuguese *Sim Eu Posso*), running 2 classes in Liqueca and 3 in Baucau. Since then, we have had regular meetings, and taken part in a large range of activities with the advisers and their Timorese counterparts. These include:

- National meetings to establish the campaign Commission structure
- Meetings to establish District literacy commissions
- Participation in the initial training sessions for literacy monitors and coordinators, in the capital Dili and in some districts
- Regular review and evaluation meetings of the campaign Secretariat

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<sup>2</sup> Meeting with Jose Manuel Llera Garcia and Rafael Ferrer Ortega, Non-formal Education Centre, Dili 21/9/06. (Fieldnotes Vol 3, pp 16-18). Further meeting 25/9/06 (p.27-29)

- Regular meetings with the Minister of Education to discuss aspects of the campaign
- Attendance at classes in Dili and the districts
- Participation in the ongoing training sessions for monitors and coordinators
- Detailed discussions with individual advisers in the districts
- Interviews with coordinators, monitors and a small number of participants
- Discussions with international advisers, donors, agencies and other stakeholders involved in literacy and education assistance in Timor-Leste

We also have complete access to the monthly reports on the progress of the campaign, prepared by the Cuban advisers, and to a separate database we assisted the Timorese staff in the Campaign Secretariat to establish and maintain. On the basis of the data we collect and analyse, we prepare regular written reports to the Minister, with copies to the Cuban adviser team. Our first report was presented to the Minister in May 2007, before classes began. Since June 2007, we have made four trips back to Timor-Leste to review progress, in September 2007, January 2008, April 2008 and October-November 2008. The most recent report was submitted in December 2008.

Because ongoing monitoring and evaluation is a key function of the Campaign Secretariat, this evaluation work is done in close co-operation with the Ministry of Education's Timorese staff who work there, the majority of whom are young university students studying education and community development. By assisting the Secretariat staff to systematise what is being learned from each stage of the campaign, and then draw up workplans for the following period, our aim is to develop a national Timorese adult education leadership alongside and as part of the roll-out of the campaign.

### **The Origins of Yo! Si Puedo**

In the pantheon of national literacy campaigns, Cuba's 1961 literacy crusade holds a special place. In that year, Fidel Castro's new revolutionary government sent thousands of young high school students to the country side, to teach the peasants to read and write (Leiner 1986). Cuba's experience with this campaign, which reduced illiteracy from 24% to 4%, as well as its long tradition of supporting pre- and post-independence adult education in developing countries has aroused significant interest around the world (Hickling-Hudson et al 2006). Responding to this interest, especially from other Latin American countries, the Cuban government established an agency in September 2000 to support the dissemination of its work, a Research Department for Youth and Adult Literacy and Education within the Pedagogical Institute for Latin America and the Caribbean (IPLAC) in Havana.<sup>3</sup> Building on experience in a radio-based literacy campaign in Haiti in 1999, the IPLAC researchers developed *Yo! Si Puedo*, a unique method of teaching literacy via audiovisual lessons. The method is in some ways fairly traditional, according to current international adult literacy thinking, in that it is based on learning the letters of the alphabet, followed by words, followed by sentences. However, the Cuban's have introduced their own innovation, which they call alphanumeric. This involves the learners in first associating each letter of the alphabet with a specific numeral. The rationale for this is that many non-literate people do in fact have basic numeracy, and will thus learn their letters more easily by

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<sup>3</sup> IPLAC's website is at [www.iplac.rimed.cu](http://www.iplac.rimed.cu). See also a website (in Spanish) established by international supporters of Yo! Si Puedo, following the 2005 World Conference on Literacy in Havana, at [www.frenteinternacional.yosipuedo.com.ar](http://www.frenteinternacional.yosipuedo.com.ar)

this associative method. By December 2005, when Alkatiri visited Cuba, the IPLAC program had been adopted in fifteen countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guinéa Bissau, Haïti, Honduras, Mexico, Mozambique, New Zealand, Nicaragua, Paraguay, Peru, and Venezuela (Torres 2005; Lind et al 2006). The number of countries employing the method has now almost doubled, to twenty-eight (Pers.com, Cuban Consulate Australia, 10/4/08).

IPLAC understood that it is not possible to lower illiteracy rates on a national scale in most countries where the need is greatest without a low cost simple mass method, capable of reaching very large numbers of illiterate adults in a short space of time. Its central feature is a set of sixty-five one hour lessons on DVD/videotape, which students watch under the supervision of local monitors. Each lesson shows on screen a class on non-literates (played by actors) being taught by an experienced teacher. Under supervision, the local monitors are able to help their students follow the video teachers instructions, and, using printed manuals and workbooks, complete oral and written exercises being modelled for them on the screen. The method combines this distance education technology with a national system of political mobilisation, control and coordination, allowing the use of relatively untrained local ‘monitors’, backed up by highly-skilled technical advisers. Importantly, the method is adapted and modified to suit the local conditions in the country it is running. The brief account below of the advisers who have come to Timor-Leste and the work they are doing illustrates this well.

### **The Cuban Adviser Team and Their Work**

In 1961, Jose Manuel ‘Llera’ Garcia, known to his colleagues as Llera, was one of the young Cuban students who went to the countryside to teach literacy. Now sixty years old, he works as a senior administrator in a regional education department in Cuba. In January 2006, he, along with ten other Cuban educators, took two years leave from their jobs to work in Timor-Leste. Having first completed a period of training at IPLAC. Llera, who is the Coordinator, is not just a veteran of the literacy campaign, but also of Cuban internationalism, having fought in Angola with the Cubans sent there to reinforce the independence army of the MPLA (Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola), who were fighting their Portuguese occupiers. This is where he learned Portuguese, one of the official languages of Timor-Leste. His assistant Coordinator during the first two years, Rafael Ferrer Ortega, somewhat younger, had also been in Angola during the 1980s and 1990s, working on a literacy campaign there which was run via radio. Together with nine others, all of whom were school or university teachers in Cuba, they formed the first technical adviser team. In February 2009, these eleven finished their tour of duty and returned to Cuba, and were replaced by a new larger group thirty-five, who arrived in April 2008. Llera was re-appointed as Coordinator, but his term will end in March this year. This means that there are now 36 advisers, of whom 24 are men and 12 women. The oldest (Llera) is 60, the youngest 37; and their average age is 51, making them an experienced team of educators. Just as importantly, all but the youngest are ‘children of the revolution’, people who were born before 1959, or soon after, and who grew up in the first decades of Castro’s rule. Many come from working class and peasant family backgrounds, and are thus themselves beneficiaries, like many of the doctors, of Cuba’s own progressive educational policies.

The Cubans bring to their work a style which is distinctive in the context of

international development work. Characteristically, when violence broke out in Dili in mid-2006, and a group of rebel soldiers attempted to overthrow the FRETILIN government, almost all international personnel were evacuated, but not the Cubans. Like the doctors and health workers, the Cuban 'professors' as they are known to the locals, remained at work. This was despite the fact that they were specifically targeted by some of the anti-government forces, who claimed their presence was evidence of FRETILIN's communist links. At the time, Leira, Rafael and the first team were piloting the materials in classes in Dili and two nearby districts. The violence forced them to abandon the Dili classes, but they simply opened more in the other districts.

Another distinctive feature of the Cubans is their remuneration. In Timor-Leste, most internationals working for UN agencies, international NGOs, or as international advisers in government Ministries earn between US\$5000 and US\$15000 per month, in salaries and living allowances. Internationals also often enjoy generous leave arrangements, spending time out-of-country every few months. Local wages, by comparison, are very low. Each Cuban receives a basic living allowance, paid by the government of Timor-Leste from its education budget. In 2006-7, it was US \$170 per month. The following year, when some of Timor's oil revenue began to flow into its state budget, the subsidy was raised to \$250 per month. They also receive a rental subsidy, up to \$250 per month per house (sometimes shared with another adviser or a Cuban doctor), and assistance with furnishing their houses, and paying for gas, electricity and mobile phonecards. All told, each of the team receives approximately \$750- \$1000 per month, or \$12000 per year, less than some international advisers earn in one month. For 35 advisers, this runs out at \$420000 per year. The TL government also pays their return tickets from Cuba, at \$6000 per adviser per two years.

All but three advisers, who are based in Dili, are posted to the rural towns and districts, where infrastructure is almost always limited and conditions very harsh. Their accommodation is usually a house or part of a house rented to them by a local. Living on not much more than local wages, the Cubans have a lifestyle much closer to the locals than most international advisers, a fact recognised and commented on by many of our local informants. Only the Co-ordinator has access to a car, a second-hand 4WD Pajero owned by the Ministry of Education. The others travel around their districts and back and forth to Dili on local public buses and microlets, or on the back of the motorcycles which have been issued by the government to each of the district and sub-district literacy campaign co-ordinators.

The work of the Cuban educators in Timor-Leste can be divided into four phases. The first, from January until December 2006 was the pilot phase, during which time the materials brought from Cuba, which had originally been developed for Brazil, were tested and refined through a series of classes taught mainly by the advisers themselves, with some assistance from the adult education staff in Dili and local literacy monitors employed by the Ministry of Education. As these classes progressed, all of them in Portuguese, one of two official languages, the advisers developed a new manual for local conditions and adapted some of the exercises to better reflect Timorese reality.

The second phase ran from January 2007 until the first class opened in June that year. During this period, over 400 local monitors and coordinators were recruited and

trained, and a national Secretariat established in Dili. In March 2007, the Vice Prime Minister and Minister for Education officially launched the campaign. Seventy students from the national university were also recruited and trained to work in the campaign, as local monitors or as assistants to the Cuban advisers. A budget was negotiated with the Minister of Education and her officials, and approved by the Council of ministers. Resources were printed, and equipment and materials were purchased in sufficient quantities to open a class in one of the country's four hundred and forty two administrative districts, called *sucos*. The complex logistical task of transporting all the materials equipment and the Cubans themselves to the district began, helped on at least one occasion by the Timorese defence force. Houses were also acquired for the advisers, and the first meetings held to establish a National Campaign Commission.

The third phase, which ran from June 2007 until the end of 2008 saw classes open in every district, all of them in Portuguese; and around 10000 non-literates completed their first course. During this phase, and the next, the advisers continued to provide training to the local monitors and coordinators, and the oversight a strict regime of continuous assessment as the classes progress. They also assist the local coordinators to mobilise local officials and community leaders to participate in the campaign, in official ceremonies to welcome the new participants into the program, in local graduations, and in training and 'socialisation' activities with local staff. The fourth phase, which began while the third stage was still underway in most districts, saw a second round of classes opening where the first had finished, or, in some cases, in new locations. A significant characteristic of this current phase has been the introduction of a new set of learning materials in Tetum, the country's second official language.

### **Los! Hau Bele: Yo! Si Puedo Goes Local**

The language ecology of Timor-Leste is highly complex, and the subject of much national and international attention and debate (Hajek 2000). Many English-speaking commentators, and many English-speaking international advisers, have openly challenged the wisdom of the Timore independence leadership in adopting Portuguese as one of the two official languages. When they first arrived, the Cuban advisers expected that Portuguese would be the preferred language for the literacy classes, but they also based their choice of Portuguese on the practical reality that they already had materials in this language, and until the program had got underway, they had no guarantee that it would actually succeed in gaining the official and community support required for a successful national campaign. Given the high cost of producing a program in another language, and the lack of facilities and educators in Timor-Leste to assist with this work, the decision made good sense. Nevertheless, it was often criticised by international advisers and some locals, including some of the campaign's strongest supporters, students and young activists who wanted Tetum to be the preferred official language. This latter group could also point to the first FRETILIN literacy campaign, which had been conducted in Tetum, the language the leadership had then believed appropriate for a popular mass education campaign.

As the pilot phase progressed during 2006, the Cuban advisers became more aware of the challenges of teaching in Portuguese. Not only was it not the people's first language. During the period of Indonesian occupation, Portuguese was brutally repressed, because it was the language of the Resistance, and this had left insufficient

people in the local villages and towns able to speak and write it with enough proficiency to work as monitors. It should be added, however, that a similar problem existed in relation to Tetum in some districts, where it is not the first language and not widely spoken.

The Cuban advisers adopted a two-stage strategy to deal with this challenge. Firstly, they produced local manuals which included Tetum translations of most of the Portuguese language words used in the DVDs and exercise books, and they used the training sessions for monitors and co-ordinators to develop their Portuguese language skills. Realising, however, that this would not be sufficient for many non-literates, they also set about producing a Tetum version of *Yo! Si Puedo*, once they had confirmed that the required political support existed across the political leadership in Timor-Leste to ensure the campaign would continue beyond the first year.

The process to produce this was both complex and ingenious. Firstly, Rafael Ortega, the Deputy Coordinator, utilised a Cuban doctor with some film experience to shoot footage around Dili and the districts which could be incorporated into the new program. She then recruited a multi-lingual Timorese woman to travel to Cuba, where she worked with the IPLAC staff to translate the basic script for the DVD and exercise books and manuals. Finally, still in Cuba, the Timorese medical students were recruited to be the actors in the new Tetum version of the classes on the DVDs. The new set of master tapes, in Tetum, were then flown back to Timor-Leste, where the Ministry of Education arranged for their duplication and distribution, along with the printing of new exercise books and manuals.

The arrival of the Tetum DVDs and materials coincided with the start of the new adviser mission, and both events gave new impetus to the campaign which some months before had begun to flag. This loss of momentum had resulted from the change of government in July 2007, which was followed by a period of re-organisation and restructuring of the Ministry of Education, and a shift of priorities away from the national literacy campaign. In fact, by April 2008, the number of *sucos* with active classes had shrunk from a high in December 2007 of over two hundred down to a mere thirty. At that stage it appeared that some of the forces which had opposed the Cuban campaign would prevail, as the political leadership of the new government seemed to lack the commitment which FRETILIN had shown to this work (Boughton 2008). However, despite the strength of the historic ties between FRETILIN and Cuba, the Cubans insisted on maintaining a strictly neutral stance in relation to Timor-Leste's internal politics, and their patient diplomacy now appears to be paying off. In January this year, the Minister for Education Dr. Joao Cancio Freitas made his second visit to Cuba, to attend the Pedagogy Congress in Havana. There he publicly acknowledged the Cuban team's work, affirming that more than 15,000 people had learned to read and write in his country, thanks to the collaboration of Cuban teachers.

### **Current status of campaign**

During October-November 2008, I undertook further fieldwork with my Australian and Timorese colleagues to review the state of the national campaign. At that stage, according to the data provided to us by the Cuban advisers, classes were running in three hundred and ninety seven of Timor-Leste's four hundred and forty four *sucos*. (A *suco* is a small administrative unit, consisting of up to six *aldeias* which are

villages). Some sucos were already up to their third intake of students (*Etape III*); while others have had two intakes, and some only one. There were, at the time of our visit, 9849 graduates to date. Current enrolments were nearly 9500, of whom 8640 were actually attending. By 31 December 2008, the total number of graduates was set to reach 17800, a very impressive achievement within 18 months of the first class starting. We validated the Cubans' data on classes and enrolments, using the independent database which is now maintained by the Timorese Ministry staff in the office of the National Secretariat. It was important to have this validation, as these levels of participation and completion are very high, and no other literacy intervention in Timor-Leste has achieved results on anything like this scale before. Indeed, the results are also very high by international standards.

In addition to analysing the aggregate data, we visited several districts, to observe classes and hold discussions with advisers, sub-district and district coordinators, monitors, participants, and graduates. Working closely with Adalfredo De Almeida, our Timor-Leste counterpart from the Ministry, who interpreted for us, we observed three classes in progress, all in Tetum, and held discussions with the participants, numbering forty nine in total. We interviewed one graduate at length, in Manatuto, and observed three more at work in a trial 'post-literacy' class at the DANFE Centre in Dili. We spoke with eight(8) monitors about the campaign, six men and two women, and interviewed one woman monitor at length (in Manatuto). We met with the *Chefe do Suco* and the Suco Council in Bucoli, to discuss the campaign, and spoke briefly with three other *Chefes dos Sucos*, several District and Subdistrict Campaign Coordinators, and several Sub-district Administrators. We held detailed discussions with the Cuban Coordinator and five of the Cuban advisers. Table 1, below, summarises our fieldwork.

**Table 1. Evaluation sites, October-November 2008**

District	Sub-district	Sucos	Class observed	Discussions with:
Dili	Nain Feto	Lahane Oriental	x	As, Ps, M, SDC
Bobonaro	Balibo	Balibo		A, SDC, SDA, Ms
	Malliana	Raifun	x	A, SDC, M, Ps
Baucau	Baucau	Bucoli		CS, CAs, SDC
	Venilale	Bada Ho'o	x	As, DC, SDC, CS, SDA, M, Ps
Manatuto	Manatuto	Sau		A, M, P

Key

A = Cuban adviser (*assessor*);                      P = Participant (*aluna*);  
M = Monitor;                                              CS = *Chefe do Suco*;  
CA = *Chefe de Aldeia*;                                SDA = Sub-district administrator;  
DC = District literacy coordinator;              SDC = Sub-district literacy coordinator

Prior to completing our report to the Minister, we discussed our preliminary findings with the Director of Adult & Non-Formal Education, with our counterpart, and with the Coordinator of the Cuban advisers. Finally, we held a report-back meeting with ten Timorese staff in the Secretariat and Department of Literacy, to obtain their responses to our field work findings. While this represents a relatively

comprehensive review of the campaign, there are three important limitations. Firstly, we saw only a small number of classes actually in progress, all of them in places where the campaign was achieving good results, according to the Cuban advisers reports. All the *sucos* which we visited, or whose monitors we spoke with, were up to Stage III. In other words, we have not visited places where things may not be working so well. Secondly, the classes were all in large towns or nearby, and we did not get to any very remote locations, where conditions may be very different. Thirdly, we have so far been unable to access 'unit record data', i.e. data on individual participants by name, nor did we undertake any individual literacy-level testing of our own.

### **Some qualitative findings**

Some of our specific findings add some qualitative texture to the bald facts of the official statistics. Most significantly, every student, every class, and every coordinator we spoke to, without exception, expressed great satisfaction with the campaign and the classes. The participants clearly liked their monitors, coordinators and the advisers, and the coordinators, advisers and monitors respected and were proud of their students. On this measure alone, it is possible to understand some of the campaign's success, since the acquisition of literacy by previously illiterate and marginalised people is only possible in conditions where people's self-esteem is nourished and they gain respect. Relationships of solidarity and support between campaign workers and participants are therefore one of the most important factors determining whether or not the campaign goals will be achieved. Our observations conform that the campaign is having many beneficial effects on the people involved, not only improving their skills, but, most critically, also raising both their individual self-esteem and their sense of participation in the development of the country. The pride in their achievements which was shown both by the participants but also by everyone else involved in the national campaign was very moving. The effect of this campaign on building and consolidating national unity around the goal of national development through education should not be underestimated, especially in a 'post-conflict country such as Timor-Leste, where the social fabric has been torn apart by nearly three decades of brutal military occupation.

Secondly, The Cuban advisers are doing an exemplary job, often in very demanding circumstances, and they are well-respected by their Timorese colleagues and the participants. There is no doubt that their expertise and extraordinary energy and commitment is the essential ingredient which keeps the campaign moving, even when many of the other components are not working. They are teaching their Timorese counterparts, the district and sub-district coordinators and the monitors, some very important skills, including teaching methods and how to coordinate and control large scale programs. These skills are vital for Timor, as it sets out to build its own national adult education system. The campaign's Timorese workforce, which now numbers of 500 people, could become the core component of the Timorese national non-formal adult education system in the future.

Thirdly, there is great diversity in the size and composition of the classes. Numbers attending can vary from as few as 8 to as many as 26. While classes only begin once the minimum 12 participants have enrolled, some drop out and others participate irregularly. This is consistent with experience in other countries, and results from the many other pressures on the lives of people in situations such as these. Work is demanding, and daylight hours are limited. Significantly, there are many more women

attending classes than men, and the men that do attend are predominantly from older age groups. The absence of young men in classes is of particular concern, because young people are a priority group in the National Development Plan. Some classes include illiterate children and young people under 15, often accompanying their mothers or older siblings.

Fourthly, an interesting synergy has developed between the literacy campaign and the Cuban medical aid program. In a significant number of sucos, Cuban doctors and their Timorese trainees are visiting the literacy classes to undertake health checks and do basic health promotion work. These visits are being recorded as part of the central monitoring of the campaign. It is to be expected that this will help reinforce the internationally-recognised beneficial effects of rising adult literacy rates on population health, and especially on mortality and morbidity among mothers and young children.

Turning to the actual conduct of the classes, it appears most classes are now held in Tetum, using the Tetum materials, though some are still running in Portuguese. The level of literacy which we observed among participants varied greatly, within and between classes, with some participants already working well after only a few sessions, while others are still struggling e.g. to form letters, well into the thirteen week program. Our observations suggest some people who join the classes already have a basic level of literacy when they begin. A significant number of participants reported problems with their eyesight, making it hard to see the blackboards, DVD screens and exercise books. The understanding and skill of the monitors also varies. Some are excellent, demonstrating great technique and attention to the student learning, even without power to run the equipment; while others appear not yet to fully understand their role. However, all show great respect to the participants, and appear to relate well to them. In the places we visited, there had been a relatively high turnover; with 3 of the 8 we spoke with directly were new to the job. Most monitors we spoke to had little Portuguese; but again, this may have been reflected the specific history of locations we visited. On a previous trip to Viqueque, for instance, the demand for Portuguese classes was very high. There are continuing problems with lack of access to power, both to run the DVD players, but also for light in late afternoon and evening classes. In some cases, this is due to blackouts (Dili), in others to lack of fuel for generators, in others to not having generators, because they have broken down and not been repaired. In Dili and Balibo, classes were running without the necessary audiovisual equipment, putting much bigger demands on monitors and participants. The reports from the Secretariat and the Cuban advisers indicate there are 40-43 sucos which have still not had their equipment delivered; and an additional number where equipment is broken or lost, and awaiting repairs or replacement.

Whatever shortcomings which can be identified, these should be set against what is a remarkable achievement in a very short space of time in conditions which are among the most challenging in the region.

### **Challenges for the future**

The two Cuban technical teams have demonstrated through their work over the last three years that the problem of illiteracy within Timor-Leste can be addressed effectively through a large-scale but relatively low cost national campaign, utilising local staff with relatively low levels of education themselves and minimal

professional preparation. However, Timor-Leste is not post-revolutionary Cuba, nor should it be forgotten that the Cuban literacy crusade was only one part of a total educational strategy. Timor-Leste also differs greatly from Venezuela, where Yo! Si Puedo has been deployed to greatest effect. Most importantly, Timor-Leste's illiteracy rate is among the highest in Asia, especially in the rural areas where it is as many as 80% of the population is not only not literate, but is dependent on highly labour intensive subsistence agriculture to eke out an extremely impoverished existence.

To maintain the campaigns momentum in these circumstances will prove extremely difficult. International experience has shown that the eradication of illiteracy is a whole-of-government whole-of-society undertaking, and requires the mobilisation of all government agencies under clear national leadership to reach the objective (Arnove & Graff 1987; Lind 2008). The new Minister has decided to dispense with the structure which the FRETILIN-led government established to lead and coordinate the campaign, what was based on recommendations from the Cuban advisers. This included a National Commission, a Campaign Secretariat reporting to the Minister, who was the Chair of the Commission, and a series of functional and district and subdistrict Subcommissions. At each level, the Commissions included all government agencies, along with representatives of civil society and the churches. Under the new government, national campaign coordination has become the responsibility of the Non-formal Education Director who reports to the Minister, via the normal bureaucratic processes of the Ministry. While some subcommissions continue to operate at district and subdistrict level, and the Cuban advisers and Ambassador still have direct access to the Minister, officials in the Education Ministry have neither the authority nor the organizational culture necessary to lead the social mobilisation demanded in a campaign. The National Commission also helped to ensure Timorese ownership and control of the campaign. Most importantly, it was helping build and maintain the political will (*vontade politica*) which has been the hallmark of every successful literacy campaign for the last sixty years:

The success or failure of a literacy activity does not ultimately derive from economic or technical issues, but rather from the existence or not of **a firm political will** with the capacity to organize and mobilize the people around a literacy project." (Maria Torres, ex-Education Minister, Ecuador, quoted Lind 1988:21)

Secondly, the lack of any literate culture in many of the smaller rural communities is another major impediment to the eradication of illiteracy, and underlines the need for a fully-developed follow-up post-literacy stage following completion of the Cuban-designed initial literacy classes. It is of serious concern that there are no post-literacy activities or classes being organised in any coordinated way for graduates of Sim Eu Posso/Los Hau Bele, either by government or by civil society organizations. Without a well-developed system of post-literacy activities, the international evidence demonstrates that that most of the neo-literates will 'fall back' into illiteracy within 6-12 months, putting all the gains made to date at risk (Lind 2008). The most urgent priority therefore is to establish a sub-commission to coordinate the planning and delivery of post-literacy activities to the neo-literates. This should involve NGOs who are already working in literacy, as well as other Ministries such as Agriculture and Health where there is a clear link between literacy and their own programs.

Underlying both of these major challenges is the continuing lack of a qualified group of Timorese adult education specialists with a knowledge of the international

experience of literacy campaigns and a capacity to provide leadership and advice at the highest levels of the Timorese government. In my view, this reveals a flaw within the Cuban model. While the level of support and training which the Cuban advisers provide to their Timorese counterparts at sub-district and suco level is exemplary, this is not matched at higher levels of the campaign leadership. At this level, there is a tendency for the Cuban technical team to take responsibility for the overall coordination and control, and to expect the Timorese political and administrative leaders simply to 'get behind' them, and direct the rest of the country to follow. We suspect this is related to the Cuban's own experience of a more 'command-style' political system, where one political party and its leadership have the undisputed historic and political authority to pursue national development objectives. But it is also related to the specific experience in Timor, where despite the maintenance of a strong underground resistance movement, the population as a whole have lived for more than a generation under an arbitrary colonial authority, and has grown used to having almost no power to affect the course of events. The Cuban technical advisers have developed a sense of acceptance of this situation, which expresses itself in a lack of cooperation, a lack of a comparable work ethic to their own, and almost universal petty corruption amongst officialdom. In our experience, the Cuban advisers respond to these problems simply by re-doubling their own efforts, driven by their strong commitment and political will to achieve the campaign objectives. While this certainly demonstrates the superiority of the Cuban form of aid to most other efforts to address the adult literacy problem, we must ask how sustainable this is. The *Chefe do Suco* in one district, and experienced resistance leader from Indonesian times, made this point on our most recent trip. It does not matter how well people who are not from here do their work, he said. The only way we will free ourselves is if the Timorese are in charge.

### **Conclusion**

The campaign to eradicate adult illiteracy in Timor-Leste is an essential element in building genuine national unity and an effective participatory democracy, one in which the whole population is actively engaged in driving the process of development. The formal education system on its own will never achieve this outcome, not in a country with such a low level of adult illiteracy. Unless adult illiteracy is significantly reduced, and preferably eradicated, over the next decade, Timor-Leste will follow the pattern of many other countries of the South, developing into a more unequal society where the majority of the people are excluded from their rightful share in the benefits of the independence they fought so hard to achieve. The Cuban education aid team is perhaps the only international group operating in Timor-Leste with both the political and technical understanding and experience to help the country's leadership avoid this outcome. Their work therefore deserves the strong support of other international educators who share the vision of a more equal world.

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