

**The Secretary of State for the Council of Ministers and
Official Spokesperson for the Government of Timor-Leste
Ágio Pereira**

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Dili, Timor-Leste**



Prime Minister explains Government's policy on Mother Tongue in Parliament

Last Wednesday, February 8, the Prime Minister together with the Minister and Vice Minister for Education took part in a special session of Parliament called by the Fretilin Parliamentary Members to explain the Government's policy on Mother Tongue to the distinguished Members of Parliament.

In April 2010 the National Education Board established a Task Force to begin drafting a study on the use of mother tongue in Basic Education. Complementing this study are the results of a survey conducted by a team of Timorese specialists, through the NGO BELUN, which reflect the difficulties in the learning process of children, particularly in the rural areas of the country where children do not speak any of the official languages.

Considering that one of the universal rules of pedagogy is to place the student at the centre of the learning process, and that most Timorese children starting their school journey have great difficulty in assimilating the material taught and continue not to know how to read and write, the recommendations of that study were used to develop the "Programme on Mother Tongue". This programme will cover children who do not speak any of the official languages as part of the systematic transition towards the learning of Tetum and Portuguese.

The Prime Minister underlined the advantages of using mother tongue to facilitate the interaction between teachers and students during the teaching and learning processes, particularly in the prompt assimilation of literacy and numeracy skills, thus avoiding the need for translations to explain programme contents. This enables more class time to be used for the effective assimilation of school curricula.

"When we use mother tongue we are enabling children to learn better and we are facilitating the interaction between students and teachers, students and students and students and the community", explained the Prime Minister, who added: "Mother Tongue will now be used in the areas of the country where Tetum or Portuguese are not spoken so that children may participate more actively in school – as subjects of the learning process and not merely the objects of learning".

On the other hand, the programme seeks to combat school drop out rates and to develop the cognitive capability of children as well as enhance their participation and creativity. The Prime Minister added that "Children who do not speak another language other than their mother tongue have too much information to absorb and have demonstrated learning difficulties. In the nine years of mandatory schooling, students during the first four years still do not know how to write! This is a serious problem in our education system that we need to address".

The Project to use national languages (mother tongue) to acquire minimum literacy and numeracy skills is a pilot project that seeks to develop a solution to the issue of the learning and scholastic success of the students at the start of the education system. This project is aligned with the 2011-2015 National Education Strategic Plan, which reiterates the need to

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ensure that the education system removes all barriers and enables children to be part of the education system.

The implementation of this Pilot Project in 12 Timorese schools in the districts of Oecusse, Lautem and Manatuto is currently being put through a broad consultation process. This includes a careful evaluation to determine whether it promotes the capability of children to assimilate curricular contents and to subsequently learn using official languages. The Ministry of Education, along with other partner entities, will be coordinating and reviewing the results of this programme as well as providing technical support for its implementation, which is the responsibility of UNESCO's National Commission in Timor-Leste. **ENDS**

Ágio Pereira +670 723 0011

agio.pereira@cdm.gov.tl

govtlmedia@gmail.com

Website:

www.timor-leste.gov.tl