



**P R I M E
M I N I S T E R**

**SPEECH BY HIS EXCELLENCY
THE PRIME MINISTER OF THE DEMOCRATIC REPUBLIC OF TIMOR-LESTE,
DR RUI MARIA DE ARAÚJO,
AT THE OPENING SESSION OF THE
3RD NATIONAL CONGRESS ON EDUCATION**

**“Education as a cornerstone for consolidating our Identity and
developing our Nation”**

Dili
15 May 2017

Your Excellencies

The Former President of the Republic and Nobel Peace Prize Laureate, Dr José Ramos-Horta

The Former Prime Minister and President of the Special Administrative Region of Oecusse Ambeno, Dr Mari Alkatiri

The Minister of State, Coordinator of Social Affairs and Minister of Education

The Vice Ministers of Education

Members of Parliament and fellow Government members

The Former Ministers of Education of Timor-Leste and the Former Minister of Higher Education of Cape Verde

Reverend Father and Reverend Mothers

Dear Sirs and Madams

Representatives from the Diplomatic Corps and development partners

Representatives from Churches and the Civil Society

Illustrious Vice-Rectors of the Universities of Timor-Leste

Teachers, parents, education professionals and students

Lecturers and moderators

Ladies and gentlemen,

I am very happy to address such an illustrious and representative audience. It is always a pleasure to have a “full house”, particularly when that house fills in order to discuss concepts, ideas and perspectives on Education – a national priority of common interest that is undoubtedly the cornerstone for consolidating our identity and developing our Nation! Indeed, that is the theme for this 3rd National Congress.

I acknowledge the presence of education professionals, teachers, school administrators and principals from every municipality, as well as representatives from several political parties, the Catholic Church and other churches and the civil society. I also acknowledge a few Timorese scholars and former Ministers of Education.

I welcome you all to this 3rd National Congress on Education!

Truly, each and every one of us is indispensable when reflecting on Education in our country. We need to debate ideas and exchange perspectives by way of dialogue that should be inclusive, transparent and as participative as possible.

What we are talking about here is the most important area for developing a society. Education plays an absolutely vital role in building and shaping the identity of the individual as a citizen with social, moral and ethical concepts and values. In turn, it is these individuals and the society that will build the nation and enable it to develop and to prosper.

Education contributes so that we may live in a democratic society and in an environment of peace, freedom and social justice, where feelings of injustice, conflicts, poverty and social exclusion are gradually replaced by inclusiveness and harmony. Education also means

wisdom and technical and scientific knowledge, so as to nurture development in various areas.

In view of this, and as enshrined in our Constitution, Education is a fundamental right. Consequently the Government has been striving to provide every citizen with equal opportunity to attend quality school in all levels of education.

The outcome of this commitment and of the education policy is not easily measurable in the short term, although it is clearly positive in terms of inputs and outputs. Still, everyone acknowledges that there are still many challenges ahead, which is also the reason we are here today.

Overall we have significantly increased the number of schools in early childhood, primary and secondary education (from 943 in 2011 to 1,715 in 2016 – a total of 772 new infrastructures); according to the 2016 statistics, the number of students increased 64% since (from 238,639 to 391,611); and the number of teachers increased 113% since 2001 (from 6,541 to 13,948).

Over the last 3 years we reduced the ratio of students per teacher from 36 to 28 and increased the net access rate by students (e.g. from 13% to 15% for early childhood education and from 26% to 32% for secondary education).

We equipped basic, secondary and polytechnic education schools with around 98,500 sets of desks and chairs and we distributed over 957 thousand manuals and learning materials to the various levels of education, seeking to improve learning conditions.

As for Technical and Vocational Secondary Education, the Sixth Constitutional Government started to gradually implement the extension programme in 21 secondary education schools, benefitting nearly 3,500 students.

As for University Higher Education, we reassessed parallel classes; drafted mechanisms for legalising post-graduation diplomas from foreign universities; and supported Private Higher Education. I would recall that back in 2011 we had 23,460 students and 948 teachers at this level of education, while in 2015 we already had over 50,500 students and over 2,100 teachers. Furthermore, we recently inaugurated the Betano Polytechnic Institute, which will be able to host 260 students.

We drafted and distributed the class plans for the new curricula of the 1st and 2nd cycles of basic education in the official languages; finished implementing the new curriculum for Technical and Vocational Secondary Education; and provided ongoing training on the new curriculum contents to over 10,700 teachers.

Additionally, the country's 13 School Learning and Training Centres (CAFE) covered over 6,600 students and 100 newly-graduates.

As for the results obtained by the educational system in terms of quality, I must say that we do not yet have conclusive data available.

For instance, school failure and drop-out rates are high, particularly among students in the first cycles of basic education. An assessment of the reading capacity in the first years of basic education, conducted in 2009, determined that over 70% of students at the end of the first grade could not read a single word in a simple text in Portuguese and in Tetum. This percentage dropped to 40% at the end of the second grade.

Only around a third of third grade students could read 60 words per minute (the amount conventionally considered indispensable for a student to be able to follow classes well) and respond correctly to simple comprehension questions.

The latest national workforce survey, conducted in 2013, stated that there is 60% inadequacy between the skills required for employment and the education level of the workers. The Timorese labour market prefers to employ workers with secondary education (42.1%) as opposed to workers with higher education (a mere 1.4%). Ironically, workers with secondary education are paid more than workers with higher education (average \$640 per month against \$578, respectively).

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These are but a few examples of the outcomes of our policies and our investment in Education through our State budget.

If we consider that Education is more than just the structure of the Ministry of Education – instead also encompassing the funding of Education infrastructures through the Infrastructure Fund, UNTL and the Human Capital Development Fund – then we can see that State budgets since 2015 have allocated an average of 9.21% to education. According to UNESCO statistical data from 2014, we have been investing a much higher percentage of our GDP (7.9%) than other countries in the Asia-Pacific region (3.9%).

While there has been a slight reduction in the percentage for Education against previous years, we must remind ourselves that Timor-Leste, as a developing country that has endured a situation of conflict, must include in its budget the construction of core infrastructure (e.g. roads, bridges, electricity) that are themselves essential for students to have access to education and for the country and the people to be able to grow and develop sustainably.

However, since this slight reduction did not prevent us from achieving important outcomes, such as the ones I have listed before, we must conclude that outcomes do not depend solely on the size of budget allocations. Instead, it is more important that these budget allocations are managed, prioritised and implemented in accordance with the set education policies.

I believe that these are just a few examples that may work as a basis or a starting point for debating these and other aspects of our education system, which unquestionably merit an in-depth and sincere review.

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The education policies we have been implementing, as reflected in the Strategic Development Plan and in the Government Programmes, are generally based on the National Education Policy drafted for 2006-2010, which was published as a Government Resolution in 2007, signed by Dr José Ramos-Horta, who was at the time the Prime Minister. This policy also fed the drafting of the Education System Framework Law, which was approved in 2008.

A decade after those policies were implemented we should ask ourselves: is our education policy adequate to the needs of Timor-Leste in this 21st century? If not, what parts are misadjusted and how can we calibrate them according to the challenges faced by Timor-Leste? Do we know precisely where our education is taking us? What do we expect the outcome of our education system to be? In other words, what is the profile of the Timorese citizen we are trying to train in this 21st century? Is our education system training citizens who are ready to take on the new millennium, i.e. people who are able to inspire trust wherever they are placed, to learn and to develop their skills autonomously and to make active contributions to the social and economic development of Timor-Leste? More importantly, are we training people who will be aware of their responsibilities to the State and to the Nation?

While everyone seems to be in agreement on these general issues, there appears to be some discord regarding a few specific issues. As such, we should ask ourselves: do we want to start everything all over again? Or should we improve what can be improved, correct what can be corrected and strengthen what can be continued? In countries that have achieved strong outcomes in education (such as Singapore, just to name one), the education system is designed to respond at all times to the internal and external conditions of those countries, preparing the citizens to be able to meet the challenges within each time period and to contribute to the social and economic development of those countries.

As such, we need to be pragmatic and, most importantly, realistic. We need to be honest and realistic in the short term so that we may work to be successful in the medium and long term. We need to plan now what we want to achieve in the future and in a near future, even more so because as you know these policies do not yield results immediately.

In this short term we must set priorities concerning those issues on which there is disagreement or that are not very clear, including inter alia the training of teachers, the matter of language as an education vehicle and school administration and management ability.

These are measures that concern strategy and planning and whose implementation will influence their efficiency and effectiveness. Setting goals helps us to plan how to achieve those very goals.

Indeed, the Ministry of Education is one government body that, as a result of the Government measures to curb superfluous spending, is already drafting its annual planning based on programme budgeting. Setting programmes, measures and indicators in accordance with goals, calculating the funding required to achieve them and being able to monitor them has yielded positive results in the past and will continue to do so.

As such, we should now consider the following issues:

- Will we be able to teach in Portuguese in every school in 2020?
- How will we overcome our children's literacy and numeracy difficulties?
- How will we determine the actual learning and academic needs so that we may draft the best possible teacher training model?
- What mechanisms can we create so that school administrators and managers may assist in implementing education policies and helping students achieve better outcomes?

There are countless important issues to be considered within the framework of education. If you will allow me the analogy, education is more than "a blackboard, a desk, a chair and a teacher". If we want it to be "the cornerstone for consolidating our identity and developing our nation", then education must focus mainly on the type of Timorese citizen we want to train. This will require setting clear and unequivocal Desired Outcomes of Education (DOE), which should serve as a compass for adapting national curricula, adopting teaching methods and evaluation mechanisms, capacity building teachers and training new teachers.

In other words, once we set clear DOE it is absolutely essential that we have alignment and harmonious effort between policies, practices and preparation (i.e., the three P's). There are three key elements in education systems: the Ministry of Education, which sets education policies (P for Politics); Schools and Universities, which carry out the policies set by the Ministry (P for Practice); and the agencies for preparing teachers (P for Preparation).

A solidary education system must have this trilateral relationship and partnership, thus contributing to a clear perspective of each one's role in achieving the DOE.

This model of 3 P's is only feasible if there is mutual respect between the three parties. Life experience shows that it is common for policymakers (the Ministries of Education) to seek to impose their perspectives because they are appointed by the governments, while scholars in teacher training agencies see themselves as "better informed" because of their own researches or those by their counterparts in other countries, thereby showing some degree of "scholarly arrogance". Meanwhile, education facility managers or administrators and teachers think they are the ones who know best the reality of schools and universities, thus seeing themselves in a way as "the sole recipients of knowledge on the ground", who must be heard at all costs.

Such “primordial thinking” by these components of education systems can only be overcome through mutual respect and by giving equal importance to the perspectives of each partner. Evidently school practice and teacher training should be guided by clear policies; however it is no less important that policies should take into account the actual situation of the schools and/or universities and that education policies should ultimately support the professional role of teachers, rather than hindering them.

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We need to reflect about the future and to call upon politicians, managers, teachers and all education professionals to implement it.

This is the proper forum for inclusive participation by all those who set and implement the policies and who are more in touch with the actual constraints and obstacles that can be overcome or bypassed.

It is also very timely, since it takes place around 10 years after the last congress on Education, at a time when the 1st stage of the Strategic Development Plan has been completed and when the review of its implementation is in its final stage. It also takes place a short time before the Parliamentary elections that will appoint a new Government, which will draft a new programme for the next 5 years. Furthermore, we now have access to the data from the Census 2015, which show that the population of Timor-Leste has increased. This information must necessarily be taken into account.

It is now important that each of the 6 Technical Working Groups created for each key area works on its own issues and produces a series of suggestions that are in tune with the realities of our education system, since they are the ones who know them best.

Consequently I would like to praise the Organising Committee and every working group for designing and holding this event. I am certain that the sincerity, honesty and realism you put in this debate will shine through in its outcomes.

I wish you great success in the work that follows, so that Education may follow the motto of the Sixth Constitutional Government of “All for One and One for All!”

I now declare the 3rd National Congress on Education to be open!

Thank you very much.

15 May 2017
Dr Rui Maria de Araújo