

# Libraries in Timor-Leste

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Traditional house in Lospalos

It should come as no surprise that, after 400 years of colonisation and 24 years of occupation, most public, school and university libraries across Timor-Leste are housed (where they exist) in war-ravaged buildings requiring serious maintenance or rebuilding, without any of the equipment and facilities we regard as standard for delivering library services.

Human, physical and financial resources are required to establish a viable, fully functioning network of libraries. Despite the serious lack of resources, libraries are springing up everywhere, thanks to the vision, commitment and sheer hard work of the Timorese and their supporters. Another exciting and promising development was the establishment, in July 2004, of the Asosiasaun Biblioteka no Informasaun Timor-Leste (ABITL) the nation's first-ever library association.

## Background briefing

The Democratic Republic of East Timor, or Timor-Leste, is 15 007 km<sup>2</sup> in size and is 450 km northwest of Australia. Colonised for over 400 years by Portugal and then occupied by Indonesia, Timor-Leste achieved independence on 20 May 2002. It has a population of 924 642, with a median age of 20 years. The majority of the population is Roman Catholic, with Protestant, Muslim and Buddhist minorities. Animism is widely practiced. Over 50 per cent of the population lives under the poverty line, surviving on less than US\$0.55 per day. The unemployment rate is up to 80 per cent. Access to such health services as exist is very poor. Life expectancy is currently 57 years and infant mortality stands at 80 per 1000 live births. One in ten children does not make it to their fifth birthday.

Over 30 indigenous languages are spoken; Tetun is most widely known. Language is a very complex issue. The official languages are Portuguese and Tetun. The decision to choose Portuguese as an official language is controversial. It is spoken by around 5 per cent of the population, mostly the well educated of the older generation. Those educated since 1975 speak Indonesian, so it is the predominant language in universities and is used as a *lingua franca* in meetings. English is increasingly used, with some perceiving this to be the language of the future.



Inaugural ABITL meeting attendees, representing library services from across Timor-Leste

Investment in education during the Portuguese regime was insufficient, to say the least, and improved only slightly during the Indonesian occupation. Over half the population is illiterate and the country faces a huge challenge in tackling low skill levels, a task made more difficult by lack of teachers.

The country's only university was all but destroyed during the violence of 1999. However against incredible odds a new university — Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosae — opened its doors to students in November 2000 and currently has over 8000 students enrolled. It now has a library and an information technology hub is under development.

## Libraries in Timor-Leste

There is no national library. The need for one has been discussed, but as yet there are no firm plans nor any resources committed. No organisation is collecting significant information and materials relating to East Timor and there is no form of legal deposit.

Public libraries are opening up across the country. Some are stand-alone facilities such as the Xanana Gusmao Reading Room in Dili, Baucau Public Library and the Maliana Library. Others are part of community centres or learning centres such as the Baucau Friendship and Learning Centre and the Balibo Community Learning Centre. A mobile library service operates for schools in the District of Aileu, thanks to the Maryknoll



Visiting Japanese volunteer teaches origami to young girls at the Xanana Gusmao Reading Room

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A job-seeker demonstrates word processing software and resume production to his friends, Xanana Gusmao Reading Room

Sisters and on Atauro Island remote communities receive mobile library services by boat and packhorse, thanks to the local public library.

Most of the public libraries are non-government organisations (NGOs). They are heavily used and relied upon for access to learning materials and study space, despite their very poor condition. Collections are largely made up of donated English-language materials and provision of information technology is limited. Tetun materials are being published by organisations such as the Mary McKillop Institute and Timor Aid and these are slowly finding their way into libraries. Common challenges

include limited library management and technical services skills as well as very limited access to funds for collections and programs.

Libraries are an essential ingredient in civil societies and are major contributors to community and economic wellbeing. Timor-Leste's libraries are very much in their infancy and require ongoing, long-term commitment and support. The lack of co-ordination of library services and the absence of a government strategy for libraries is a concern and needs to be addressed at the highest levels. However, the very existence of library facilities and the great people working for them inspires hope.



Baucau Public Library



Lolotoe Junior High School students

*Patti Manolis was awarded the State Library of Victoria's Margery C Ramsay Scholarship in October 2003. The scholarship enabled her to undertake a six week study tour of libraries in Timor-Leste over June/July 2004. She visited again for 5 weeks in Jan/Feb 2005. A detailed report about her findings can be accessed at: [http://www.libraries.vic.gov.au/downloads/Public\\_Libraries\\_Unit/east\\_timor\\_libraries\\_study\\_tour\\_b.pdf](http://www.libraries.vic.gov.au/downloads/Public_Libraries_Unit/east_timor_libraries_study_tour_b.pdf).*



Atauro Island library staff

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