

## **Language-in-Education Policy in Timor-Leste**

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(The presentation was given by Kirsty Sword Gusmao on behalf of Agostinho Caet, who was unable to attend the conference.)

The May 2002 Constitution of Timor-Leste identifies Portuguese and Tetum as official languages, but also promises to value other national languages and further defines English and Indonesian as working languages. However, there is no national language planning being undertaken yet. There isn't a current policy as such specific to language of instruction in East Timor, just guidelines in various documents. The role of mother tongues has not been addressed in any of the Ministry of Education's laws and policies.

The ideal situation would be:

Grade one: Tetum 75%, Portuguese 25%

Grade two: Tetum 50%, Portuguese 50%

Grade three: Tetum 25%, Portuguese 75%

Grade four: Portuguese 100%

But this plan does not take into account the lack of teachers qualified to teaching Portuguese. In 1999, there was a mass exodus of teachers, as most were Indonesian. There had to be a rapid recruitment of teachers, so anyone with a secondary education was taken on, and intensive in-service training was provided.

With so many competing priorities, language gets shoved aside, but the presenters and colleagues are hoping to get policy pushed through. Under the current regime, children are not learning to become independent, critical thinkers. More than 40% of enrolled students are not completing their primary education. Teachers are being asked to acquire and teach a foreign language too quickly. They're "resorting" to mother tongue. There should instead be an official sanctioning of languages that are best understood by the students. The Portuguese Ministry of Education was invited to do an assessment. The recommendation was that in pre-school and primary years, the mother tongue should have supremacy, and then Portuguese should be introduced. Results were not widely publicized due to corporate machinations.

In April 2010, a language-in-education working group was formed which will work alongside policy experts. We have to demonstrate to the government that it's doable, that it's not going to cost the earth and that it's not going to upset communities. The policy emphasizes East Timor's obligation towards the EFA goal and mother tongue instruction as appropriate for a new nation seeking national identity as well as to interact with the world. The policy document is being finalized and will be presented to the Ministry of Education by the end of 2010.