

## NHDR Write-Up: VDA Practitioner Course on Human Development

### Timor-Leste: The Path Out of Poverty

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Two NHDRs have been produced in Timor-Leste (TL) since its declaration of independence in 2002. In this essay I will mostly refer to the second NHDR (2006) entitled “The Path out of Poverty: Integrated Rural Development.”

TL is certainly the “poorest of the poor” among nations. According to Global HDRs, it has internationally ranked 140<sup>th</sup> with an HDI value of 0.426 in 2005, and 142<sup>nd</sup> with 0.512 in 2006. Since all nations with HDI values lower than TL are in Africa (with the exception of Yemen and Haiti), it can be said that TL is the least developed country in the Asia-Pacific. This is confirmed when comparing the regional average of HDIs: 0.768 for the East Asia Pacific, and 0.628 for South Asia.<sup>1</sup>

The simultaneous lack of resources in TL exacerbates difficulties in achieving HD. The prioritization of development interventions and allocation of resources becomes another challenge, since all sectors have competing needs. Statistical data (2004) from TL reveal a life expectancy of 55.5 years (Life Expectancy Index: 0.508), adult literacy rate of 50.1% and combined enrolment rate of 66% (Education Index: 0.554), GDP per capita of US\$ 732 (GDP Index: 0.217). There also exist great gender disparities as demonstrated in the GDI value of 0.369. As for dimensions not captured by the HDI: Given TL’s short history as an independent nation, its young democracy, and recent relapse into conflict (ex: the socio-political crisis of 2006), citizens face great obstacles in participation for decision-making, guarantee of fundamental human rights, and security of person.

The 2006 NHDR was successfully launched with the participation of key government leaders and senior UN officials. Since independence, the TL government, the UN and other international actors had formulated assistance plans based on a ‘normal development scenario.’ Accordingly, the NHDR focused on agricultural/rural development as a means for poverty reduction, and ultimately, the promotion of HD. The report highlighted the unequal opportunities between urban and rural communities and encouraged national/international actors to invest in the latter.

However, few months after the launch, politically motivated violence swept through TL and resulted in the breakdown of its security sector. Citizens were internally displaced, criminal activity surged, and political instability lingered. Thus, policy attention swiftly moved from long-term economic development to short-term conflict recovery, security and stability. It is quite unfortunate that the theme set by the 2006 NHDR was thus not able to fully materialize.

The 2006 crisis compelled policymakers to acknowledge that in countries emerging from conflict, security and stability must be achieved as prerequisites for sustainable development.<sup>2</sup> Where there is conflict, lives are lost; schools close; business activities cease; basic livelihoods are threatened (income, health, food security, etc.); vulnerable groups are disproportionately victimized by violence. Thus, to improve the HD situation in TL in the current context, strengthening the rule of law would be an important priority, among others. Greater support should be given to strengthen justice and security sector institutions; public awareness on their respective functions increase; citizens’ access to judicial services and remedies be enhanced.

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<sup>1</sup> p.11, Timor-Leste NHDR (2006)

<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, the UNDP TL Country Office has adopted “peace and conflict” as the theme for the upcoming NHDR (2008). The tentative title is: “*Reducing Conflict, Promoting Peace and Human Development.*”