

Social Justice Information Sheet:

What's Happening in East Timor?

April 2003

East Timor: a poor country at our doorstep

Brighton Deanery Social Justice Group is looking closely during Lent at the post conflict situation in East Timor. In the light of what we find, we hope to propose a response that we as parishioners in Brighton can offer.

Response of other parishes in Melbourne

Other parishes in Melbourne such as Chelsea have long had a special concern for East Timor and have set up close links with particular communities there. They have raised considerable funds with close community-to-community links established in the form of an Education Training Centre.

The effects of the drought in East Timor

We hear from time to time about the security situation in East Timor but the media report little or nothing about conditions of life among the people. What we hear little of are the effects of the drought conditions that exist there, just as they do in Australia. However, the consequences are often more extreme. Recently six children from the southern coastal town of Suai died of malnutrition and another four were evacuated to Dili Hospital for treatment.

The drought has come on top of the devastation caused by the vote for Independence in 1999. The market produce in Suai has really dried up and there does not seem to be any relief in sight. The wet season started in November so people in the surrounding district planted rice, corn and other crops but then the wet season stopped. The crops have died and they've lost their seed stock. The few crops, which survived the drought, were recently destroyed in a severe storm.

Poverty persists

A series of disastrous events have compounded the difficult situation many East Timorese now face in their efforts to eke out a living. Already one of poorest areas in South East Asia, conditions are likely to get worse before they get better. In the coming weeks, we will provide more details of living conditions in East Timor.

Newsletter 2: Basic statistics

To understand better the situation in East Timor, it is important to look closely at some statistics about the East Timorese and how they are faring.

East Timor has a population of 830,000, three quarters of whom live in rural areas. Half the population are aged less than 15 years and two thirds of the population are aged less than 25 years. The proportion of young people in the population is unusually high. This reflects

population loss during Indonesian administration and the high rate of population in reaction to this. East Timorese women have an average of seven children each!

Most East Timorese live in poverty with a low standard of living unimaginable by most Australians. Nearly two-thirds of the population live on under \$4 a day.

Recent survey results show that two in five people or 40 per cent of the population did not have enough income to cover their basic needs. The people in greatest poverty live in the rural areas of the country. They mostly depend on subsistence farming for their livelihood.

Lack of a regular supply of food is a major problem for more than two-thirds of the population. Many said they went hungry in the months between the rice and maize harvests - a period of some four months (November to February).

The violence of 1999 destroyed much of the country's rural sector. Overall economic production dropped by 49 percent from the year before. However, even before the disruption of 1999, East Timor was one of the poorest provinces of Indonesia. The infant mortality rate in East Timor is nearly twice that of Indonesia's.

In the face of these difficulties, only a few East Timorese could claim at the end of 2001 that things were better. Most said their living conditions were much the same and a small proportion said they were worse. It is likely that economic conditions in East Timor will get worse before they get better in the period up to 2007.

Newsletter No 3: Education

Poverty in East Timor is caused by a number of factors. One major cause of poverty is the lack of productive skills, including high levels of illiteracy in the adult population. Many East Timorese do not have access to primary education for their children and to adult literacy instruction for themselves.

Primary education and adult literacy, along with basic healthcare, safe water and sanitation, are the basic social services every person has a right to.

Only half of the adult population in East Timor are able to read and write. This compares with 87 per cent in Indonesia and 62 per cent in low-income countries in general. Literacy among young people aged 15 to 24 years is better at 77 per cent but it is still much less than for young people in Indonesia (98 per cent). Three quarters of the children in East Timor are in primary school but only 30 per cent of young people are in secondary school.

In national consultations, East Timorese identified education and health as the two top priorities they wanted to see action on by the new government. Expenditure on education in 2002 accounted for 23 per cent of the Budget and this is projected to rise to 28 per cent by 2006. However, more funding is only part of the answer as the capacity to expand primary education is limited by a shortage of qualified teachers.

In the village of Baguia, (population 1,020), where the Chelsea Parish are funding the building of a Learning Centre, 80 per cent of the children are in primary school. However, the quality of this education may not be as it should be as there are 75 students for each teacher.

Adult illiteracy is a barrier to social and political participation as well as limiting economic growth. Information about ways to improve agriculture or health standards is more difficult to impart if subsistence farmers cannot read or write. People are less likely to take part in local decision making if they do not have enough information about a proposal.

The Health of the East Timorese

The people of East Timor have poor standards of health, certainly lower than those in Indonesia. Both infant mortality (80 deaths per 1,000 live births) and under-five mortality (144 deaths per 100,000 live births) are far higher than the rates in Indonesia. Overall life expectancy is 57 years, compared with 65 years in Indonesia.

The major causes of death include preventable diseases such as malaria, respiratory tract infections and diarrhoea. Low health standards are partly the result of a lack of basic services. During the Indonesian period less than 50 per cent of households had access to clean water and only 38 per cent to sanitation.

Only 20 per cent of villages have access to electricity; only 7 per cent have piped water to the household and another 30 per cent of villages have access to piped or pumped water in a public place. Most people who want to reach health facilities need to walk to one: on average it takes them 20 minutes to reach a road, 30 minutes to reach a paved road and 70 minutes to reach a health centre.

Health provision is weak. Although prior to 1999 East Timor had many of the buildings for its health services the facilities were usually understaffed and short of medical supplies. During September 1999 around three-quarters of the health facilities were damaged and the majority of doctors who, along with many other health staff, were primarily Indonesian, left.

Now there is an acute shortage of doctors, though the situation is better for nurses since most of these were East Timorese.

One of the main concerns is reproductive health. East Timor has few facilities for pre-natal and post-natal care and women in the rural areas in particular are at risk when there are complications in pregnancy. Only 30 per cent of births have any skilled birth attendance. This has contributed to a very high level of maternal mortality: some 420 women die for every 100,000 live births.

Rural women in particular who live far from health facilities also run the risk of complications in pregnancy—which contribute to maternal mortality.

Source: United Nations Development Program *East Timor Human Development Report 2002*.