

PACIFIC LIBRARIES SUMMIT – Fiji – 1 June, 2018

*Address by Dr Kirsty Sword Gusmão, AO, Goodwill Ambassador of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, Founder and Chair of Xanana Gusmão Reading Room/Alola Foundation
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Ladies and Gentlemen, it is always a pleasure to be in the presence of individuals and organisations who share my passion for libraries, books, learning and literacy. I feel tremendously honoured to have been asked to speak with you today.

My name is Kirsty Sword Gusmao and I was born in Melbourne in 1966. The quality education I was privileged to receive instilled in me a love of reading and an appreciation for the window on the world that books provide to the reader. Learning a foreign language – two in fact (Bahasa Indonesia and Italian) – for me, rivalled only the power of books to break down barriers and open doors, to open one's eyes and heart to the world beyond the known, the mundane and the often harsh reality of everyday life.

It was my ability to speak Portuguese and Indonesian that led me to fall in love with the leader of the East Timorese resistance army, a guerrilla movement which fought against Indonesia's illegal occupation of the small half-island nation for 24 years. As you might imagine, it is a rather long story and I don't have time to share all the details with you today.

Suffice to say, in May 2002, following a UN-supervised referendum, Timor-Leste declared its national independence and I became the nation's *first* First Lady. My then husband, Xanana Gusmao, and his colleagues in the first constitutional government were faced with the unenviable task of rebuilding a shattered nation, the newest nation in Southeast Asia and by far one of the poorest. There were no shortage of causes and issues to tackle in those early years, but as a teacher by training, I was particularly attuned to the needs of the enormous number of young people in the capital, Dili, many of whom were without employment and educational opportunities.

After the independence referendum in 1999, close to 80% of public and private infrastructure was destroyed and this included many schools and the country's only public university. So I decided to set up a library. Knowing that libraries were scarce in Indonesian times and that Timorese culture embraces oral rather than written expression, I opted to call the old Portuguese colonial building I found for my project a "reading room" rather than a library. And so in June 2000, the Xanana Gusmao Reading Room was born quite literally from the ashes of destruction, violence and trauma. Its mission is to provide the young people and children of Timor-Leste with a safe space in which to celebrate their unique culture and national identity, to stimulate a love of reading and foster a culture of tolerance and understanding which are the foundations of Peace". On the average week, some 500 young people walk through the doors of the Reading Room to read, study, conduct research, attend discussion groups and training courses and to access the free internet café. It is perhaps not surprising that it is a popular and well-patronised space given that 80% of schools across Timor-Leste do not have a library and community libraries are still few and far between. I am delighted that the Manager of the Reading Room, Gaspar Freitas, is here with us in Fiji today and has had the great privilege to learn to lead and advocate for libraries as a participant in INELI Oceania's Cohort 2.

Timor-Leste does not yet have a National Library although one is due to be inaugurated in 2019.

The Reading Room has contributed greatly to achieving the government's strategic goals in relation to education, literacy & social inclusion, but the challenges are quite immense and I know that Timor-Leste shares much in common with other nations in the Asia Pacific region in terms of impediments to achieving quality education and improved rates of literacy.

These relate to but are not limited to the legacy of centuries of colonial rule, neglect of universal, public education in favour of a school system created to benefit a small elite, poverty, the denial of language rights for the speakers of minority languages in

a multilingual society, lack of availability of books in general and in particular in languages accessible to the general population.

I'd like to hone in on the importance of promotion of local languages in education and in libraries. I believe it is the key to improving education quality, educational outcomes, literacy rates, sustainable development and cultural resilience. Timor-Leste has two official languages, Portuguese, the language of the former coloniser and Tetum, the lingua franca among some 17 local languages spoken across the country. I guess it's one of the legacies of colonialism that the language of the former colonial power is too often given precedence over indigenous ones and thought to offer education benefits, a smoother pathway to higher education opportunities and better guarantees of future employment etc. In Timor-Leste's case the language in education space has been a hotly contested one, with government elites arguing that Portuguese should be the principal language of instruction in school, and Tetun serving as an auxiliary language. As the first Chair of the Timor-Leste National Commission for UNESCO, I and education professionals from across the country argued for a role for Timor-Leste's local languages in the early years of primary education, with a gradual progression to Portuguese and other important international and regional languages, including English and Bahasa Indonesia. We were concerned with the results of the World Bank's Early Grade Reading Assessment conducted in 2009 which showed that only about 30% of Grade 3 students were able to read a single line of text in either Tetum or Portuguese.

Both the Timor-Leste National Commission for UNESCO and my women's NGO, the Alola Foundation, have been strong advocates of the use of local languages in the education system and have produced dozens of books and teaching resources in at least 3 of the country's local languages, putting the lie to the argument that these languages are purely oral ones and cannot be used in a written form. The results of the National Commission's evaluation of its mother tongue based multilingual education pilot program, published last year, is a resounding testament to the superiority of the use of mother tongues in the acquisition of early literacy. The evaluation showed that the use of a student's home language accelerates children's

educational development by 1.5 to 2 years. Especially important is the difference observed in the category Reading Comprehension as this is the fundamental objective of reading instruction—learning to read. In this category, we observe that the average level of reading comprehension in the mother tongue program is close to three times as great as that of the standard public schools which rely upon Tetun and Portuguese as languages of instruction.

The XG RR is proud to showcase a vast collection of books in Tetun, a language which has grown dramatically in written use since independence, and a range of other local languages. It cooperates with other NGOs to encourage the production of works of fiction in Tetun with a view to making the world of literature more accessible to Timor-Leste's young people and to elevating the status of those engaged in literature and literary production. I believe that libraries have a vital role to play in cultural revitalisation and in fostering pride in indigenous cultural expression. In the coming year or so, the XGRR hopes to acquire sponsorship for a revival of the 2010 National Languages Literature Competition which 8 years ago encouraged budding writers from across the country to contribute works of fiction and non-fiction in the languages of their ancestors. This exercise resulted in some 600 entries from citizens ranging in age from 6 to 80!

In addition to providing a vital and accessible library service to the people of Timor-Leste, the XGRR has been leading social change by bravely hosting two years in a row activities honouring the rights of the country's LGBTIQ community, including Timor-Leste's first Gay Pride parade in 2016. Working together with a local youth group, *Hatutan*, and with the support of the Prime Minister, the Reading Room facilitated public discussion groups with youth on the issue of gay rights and has recently formalised a partnership with *Hatutan* to continue to promote diversity and tolerance as fundamental values of a democratic and informed society and pillars of the Reading Room's own mission and vision. This has been no mean feat in a traditionally very Catholic and conservative country, and I applaud Maun Gaspar's leadership in embracing this challenge.

As I mentioned earlier, community libraries exist in only certain district capitals. In some of the more remote parts of the country, books are a rarity and regarded with awe. Often where schools do have access to a small tub of readers, teachers will be reluctant to share them with the children for fear that they will be ripped or soiled. In my travels around the country in my capacity as Goodwill Ambassador for Education, I would often find myself hauling armfuls of books out of dusty locked cupboards and standing back with satisfaction to see a classroom full of children in raptures over their books and reading.

The Alola Foundation, my women's NGO established in 2001, has concluded that if children can't make it to a library, take the library to them!

The Foundation has two mobile libraries, including one with four-wheel drive capabilities that enable it to reach the farthest flung areas of the country. Over the period 2012 to 2017, over 54,000 children aged 6 to 9 years have accessed books and reading sessions made available through the mobile libraries, with an average 52% improvement in reading levels recorded.

Timor-Leste is one of the youngest countries in the world with 74 per cent of the population aged under 35, making it the second youngest nation in the Asia-Pacific region after Afghanistan and the 15th youngest globally.

Consequently, young people have the potential to play an extremely important role in the country's achievement of its future development aspirations. I believe that a quality basic education built on a national curriculum which recognises the importance of local languages, history, culture and day-to-day reality is vital to the achievement of this goal. And it is an ambitious goal which can not be achieved by education authorities alone. It is my hope that the new government to be sworn in in Dili in the coming weeks will recognise libraries such as the XG Reading Room and the many other community libraries scattered across the country as important partners in development and invest in better resourcing and training. It is an

investment that will pay far-reaching dividends and contribute greatly to Timor-Leste's achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals.

In concluding, let me share my view that if libraries in the South Pacific are to play their part in helping their government and nation to achieve the lofty and ambitious goals of eradicating poverty, contributing to quality education, gender equality, reducing inequalities etc, then they need to be places which are rooted in the local community and reflect its values, priority needs, cultures and languages. When Timor-Leste's national library is inaugurated next year, it is my hope that it will be a place of welcome, of celebration and not denial of indigenous Timorese cultural heritage and expression. A place that will allow all East Timorese citizens to connect with and participate in our local and global community.

I am conscious that I have ranted a great deal about language and its importance today. It is undeniable, however, that language is vital to us all, as advocates of libraries and their role in our communities and nations. After all, it is with language that stories are crafted, books are written and upon which literature and literacy are built. And, of course, the right to access information can only be fully realised when information is provided in languages the people can understand.

It is my hope that the libraries we create for our children today and tomorrow will be places of escape into worlds and cultures beyond our own, but also places that strengthen our connectedness to community and affirm our unique identity as peoples of the South Pacific.

Thank you, obrigadu barak!