



**Workshop on Local Government in Post-Conflict Situations:  
Challenges for Improving Local Decision Making and  
Service Delivery Capacities**

**ANNEX 6: Presentation by Mr. Arcangelo Leite,  
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First of all, I would like to thank the organizers for inviting me to this workshop. I very much look forward to hearing about and learning from experiences of other countries which are facing similar, or perhaps greater challenges in delivering services than Timor-Leste.

As most of you are probably aware, Timor-Leste is one of the newest countries in the world. We recently obtained our independence in May 2002, after a referendum in 1999 and after two years of the United National Transitional Administration. The destruction during the 1999 referendum and the subsequent exodus of qualified Indonesian civil servants left Timor-Leste in a devastated state. Since then, and with the assistance of the UN and our development partners, we have re-built state institutions and basic public services. Although there has been significant progress, the process has been slow and we have not yet reached many of our main targets. Unfortunately, our efforts were again interrupted with the crisis in April 2006 which resulted in a prolonged period of instability and insecurity in the country – and which, more indirectly, culminated in the holding of presidential and parliamentary elections earlier this year.

In terms of the two challenge areas which are the focus of this workshop, namely local decision making and service delivery capacities, there are different points of departure for analysis within the context of Timor-Leste. In addition, it is important to clarify that the challenge in Timor-Leste in this regard is not simply a question of improving local decision making and service delivery capacities but rather one of how to establish a local government system which will enhance local level service delivery and strengthen participation in decision-making and overall local development processes.

I am convinced that weak capacity for basic service delivery is not the result of the recent crisis in 2006. The challenge of delivering services has not increased as a result of the recent crisis, but has been an ongoing challenge since 1999. The challenge in this respect has been, and still is, to re-establish all basic public services both in terms of building the physical infrastructure that is needed (for example, health centres, schools) and in terms of strengthening human resources for actually providing services (for example, qualified teachers and nurses). In the current post-crisis context, it is also clear that there are additional constraints to certain services (such as education and health) in areas where large numbers of internally displaced people have temporarily settled. However, the current problem posed by internally displaced people, is not the main issue when it comes to assessing service delivery coverage and access to high quality public services by citizens in rural areas .

By 2005, it was clear that whilst significant improvements in service delivery had taken place in our capital Dili, very little in terms of real development had occurred in rural areas (where most Timorese live). At this point in time, the former Government received positive feedback on and support for its emerging policy on decentralization and local government. However,

with the crisis in 2006 new questions surfaced concerning the strategic positioning of the Government in relation to decentralization. In particular, concerns were raised about weak central institutions and service delivery capacities which could possibly be further stretched and weakened by being devolved responsibilities for service delivery. Finally, questions were raised as to how the decentralization process might further impact upon and deepen the regional divide in the nation that emerged from the events and political crisis of 2006.

The position of the present Government is that the decentralization process needs to be moved forward and this has been made very clear in our Government programme for the next five years. Although we are aware that there are still low capacities in our local administrations and deconcentrated line departments, they must be given a larger role and more responsibility in overall service delivery if we are to reach our development targets. It is too easy to use the excuse of weak capacity at the local level to justify continued centralization: local capacities will only grow with the development of the right kinds of institutional tools and with the genuine devolution of responsibilities to the local level. Over time and within a decentralized model, sub-national levels have the potential to play a significant role in service provision since they are in a better position to define local needs than those of us who are based in the center.

On the other hand, decentralization is not only a tool for improving local service provision but also a mechanism for facilitating local participation in government decision-making. At this point in time, this objective is just as or perhaps more important to us as than the potentially positive role of local government in service delivery. Over the past five years, our citizens in rural areas have had very few opportunities and very little access to actively participate in governance issues and the development process in general. It is therefore a priority for this Government to open up governance in order to ensure local participation in the development process – and decentralization will play an important role in this regard.

Improved service delivery can only be achieved through local participation in both delivering the services and in making strategic decisions about how and which services should be delivered. We also hope that this strategy will contribute to enhanced overall political stability through people's participation in local governance processes – which will enable people to influence the decisions that impact on their daily lives and livelihood opportunities. As a Government, we need to re-establish trust in public institutions. Improved service delivery at the local level and the opening up of public space for participation are seen as key factors for achieving this.