

## Associate Paper

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### **Timor-Leste: Water Governance Thwarts Peace-Building and Development**

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#### **Key Points**

- Poor water governance is a significant contributor to the spread of water-borne diseases in Timor-Leste.
- Due to prevailing circumstances and other priorities, the Timor-Leste Government has missed several opportunities to change that situation.
- The government must hasten its decision-making processes to reduce the number of fatalities caused by the lack of a water policy.

#### **Summary**

Ineffective water governance in Timor-Leste has facilitated the increase of water-borne diseases while simultaneously promoting malnutrition. As a result, stunted growth affects over 50 per cent of the Timorese population, just behind the African countries of Niger and Burundi as the worst in the world. Water-borne diseases, furthermore, remain a dire risk for more than half of all Timorese children; diarrhoea, for instance, is the leading cause of death of children aged five years or younger in Timor-Leste. The country did not attain its Millennium Development Goals in 2015 – including its water and sanitation goals – mainly because of the decision to prioritise other projects, such as the expansion of the oil and gas sectors, while ignoring opportunities to promote and incorporate water governance into the Constitution.

## Analysis

The complexity of defining a post-conflict state and maintaining the momentum for peace-building and development remains challenging. Conflicts can be international, civil, ethnic or regional, or caused by any combination of those factors. They could also be the result of twenty-first century disruptions such as water and food insecurity or the impact of climate change and population growth, all of which could have geopolitical and geostrategic ramifications. Every one of those remains a very complex issue, and especially so in the case of Timor-Leste.

The capacity of the local and state authorities to initiate the process of peace-building and development are critical to the stability and security of the post-conflict state, both in the immediate and longer terms. Coherent policies and strategies from multiple actors support frameworks that create transparent practices within an inclusive society, capacity development programmes and community stake-holder engagement, all of which include identifying accountability through multi-level governance, while strengthening the relationship between the state and its community.

The transitional period from conflict to post-conflict is a strenuous and prolonged one; this is an especially accurate observation in the case of governance issues in Timor-Leste. Attempts by the Timorese Government to prioritise, distribute and delegate governance in the capital city, Dili, remain at times incoherent. The results have been, and remain, challenging for the people of Timor-Leste and this has resulted, among other things, in the inability of the state to provide clean water and sanitation.

Equitable, clean and accessible water resources assist in the reduction and prevention of water-borne diseases, which remain responsible for the deaths of millions of people annually in post-conflict states. This process can be aggravated by the lack of sanitation and infrastructure, with outbreaks of diseases such as typhoid and cholera. This is especially apparent in fragile post-conflict states. It is often accompanied by poor food security, gender inequality, the impact of climate change, little or no economic future and inept, corrupt regimes with no governance strategies, which collectively exacerbate an already volatile post-conflict peace process.

Governance is complex and multi-dimensional and is composed of regulations, governing organisations and guidelines. These elements have an impact upon development across a broad spectrum of government and non-government sectors, including water governance. They can, furthermore, create an opportunity for inequitable water allocation and promote corruption, particularly in a fragile, post-conflict state. They can cause further social disharmony if not managed effectively, such as the misappropriation of funds distributed for water resources purposes. Water governance should be applied equitably across all levels of society, which requires a new form of understanding, skill and capability to execute the process successfully – and this is particularly true for Timor-Leste.

This understanding emphasises the need to incorporate policy decisions at both the local and national levels, as governance is a collective and inclusive action that involves both the government and the local community. This action binds the relationship that facilitates a

state's ability to govern effectively, transparently and ethically in the interests of both state and non-state actors. Not adopting this process can be a set-back for the broader recovery period, which includes the economic, social and political elements essential to the process.

Water governance has developed as a critical issue since the beginning of this century, particularly in relation to poor water management. This, of course, points to human behaviour, including a fractured attitude that has contributed to the inequitable governance of resources, such as water, and other essential services. From a global perspective, the United Nations World Water Assessment Programme suggests that the world's water worries are growing worse and becoming critical. It remains, therefore, a crisis of water governance because of the various ways in which the world's populations do not manage their water resources correctly.

Water governance has to be flexible to meet the needs of individual states and communities because this innate inclusiveness ensures that stake-holders have an input into the decision-making process, including such components as participation, monitoring, evaluation and reporting, for their community. In addition, other forms of information are critical, as this strengthens the local community through education, including through the provision of government and international non-governmental organisation (INGO) policies and programmes. This includes observational tools for the management of water resources. The sharing of information about water consumers in both urban and rural areas is a critical enabler for the actors involved; this, though, has proved challenging in Timor-Leste. To appease the general population and prevent unrest, government and INGOs need to create systems to monitor water use, which involves community decision-making and cross-societal consensus and information-sharing. This approach can create the foundations for peace-building and development, while promoting equitable water governance and political stability.

Directly after the referendum on independence, the Indonesian military and pro-Indonesian militants destroyed infrastructure, including an estimated 70 per cent of Timor-Leste's irrigation systems. Timor-Leste urgently requires irrigation systems throughout its rural areas to create and expand on opportunities in the agricultural industry. Coffee, for instance, is the major agricultural export with an annual turnover of around US\$30 million. The Indonesian military and its sympathisers also destroyed many documents, including the records of births, deaths and marriages held in central Dili, which has hampered the government's effectiveness in both the short and longer terms. One outcome of this situation has been the creation of a deficit in confidence in the government's ability to ensure the provision of water to the general population. There is, moreover, broad dissatisfaction with the government's seeming lack of tangible progress in reconstructing the water infrastructure in both urban and rural areas.

Following a decade-and-a-half of receiving international aid, there appears to be no indication of water resource reconstruction in Dili and/or rural Timor-Leste. Access to rural Timor, moreover, remains difficult as there is insufficient transport infrastructure. As one consequence of this, poverty and malnutrition rates will continue to have a dire effect on

the future of the Timorese people and particularly for vulnerable women and children, who still die from water-borne diseases every day.

Other challenges abound. The new leadership of Timor-Leste has been left to contend with ongoing and challenging geopolitical relations with Australia over the controversial oil and gas boundaries. Timor-Leste remains heavily reliant on its natural resources, including its oil and gas deposits. It also remains unclear if Timor-Leste will be allowed to become a full member of the Association of South-East Asian Nations (ASEAN), because Dili has many unresolved issues, such as the state of its financial affairs and various departmental infrastructural problems, which greatly concern the current ASEAN members.

Lastly, although Timor-Leste has made a strong start as a new nation after decades of illegal occupation, missed opportunities such as the strengthening of water governance have set the country back progressively and multi-dimensionally as it propels itself into the twenty-first century. Although its challenges are immense, the people are incredibly resilient. The new Prime Minister, Dr Rui Maria de Araújo, must take a path that is in the best interests of all Timorese people. That path needs to be both tangible and sustainable for economic growth, food security, nation-building, combatting climate change, and, of course, the provision of basic services. Improved resources governance will be necessary so that clean water can become a normal part of everyday life. The state's oil and gas resources must be made a revenue source for all, while working on peace-building and development in one of the newest states on the planet.

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