

**Press Release**  
**Concerns raised about alterations to  
National Preschool and Primary Curriculum**

*Date: 8 February 2018*

*Media contact: Cisca Alves, Fokupers (77310355) and Rosi de Sousa (77779555)*

Last week, a group of national organizations and 70 citizens sent a letter to Timor-Leste's President Francisco 'Lu Olo' Guterres expressing concerns about proposed alterations to two Decree Laws which regulate the preschool and primary education to grade 6. The letter calls on the President to not promulgate the changes, asserting that the proposed changes are sudden and not based on valid, scientific evaluation, but in fact go against a great deal of research that supports the curriculum *en vigora* (still officially in place by law).

On 25 January 2018, one day before the President dissolved Parliament and announced Early Elections, the Council of Ministers held a special meeting and approved proposed alterations to Decree Laws N° 3 and N°4/2015. From very limited information released by the Council of Ministers' Office, we understand that the changes are understood to include increased minimum hours for pre-school and the designation of Portuguese as the predominant language of the curriculum, with Tetun taking an 'auxiliary' status.

The Constitution affirms Tetun and Portuguese as the two official languages, and states that Tetun and other national languages must be valued and developed by the State. Despite messages from some leaders to the contrary, the curriculum *en vigora* does not teach national languages ('mother tongues'), but does allow teachers in early grades to use these languages only as necessary to support understanding and inclusion, when a child doesn't know either Tetun or Portuguese. The curriculum *en vigora* teaches literacy and numeracy first in the official language of Tetun because many more Timorese children and families know Tetun compared to Portuguese. A structured language progression plan helps students to transfer the content knowledge and skills they have developed in Tetun to Portuguese; this methodology has been shown in various studies to lead to better school success for students. The ultimate goal of this method is for all children in the country to have a solid understanding of both official languages as well as understanding in math, science, and other disciplines, before the end of second cycle (grade 6).

The organizations and individuals who signed the letter to the President share a commitment to effective and inclusive education for all Timorese children, without any shared allegiance to a political party. They also share their strong hope that education be a sector dedicated to evidence-based approaches and not a political tool.

In the letter, they share that, starting in 2013 and until 2017, they were involved in different ways with the curriculum development, including through a number of consultations and collaborations, and were thus very surprised to hear about these sudden changes without any consultation.

They write, “We understand that the curriculum *en vigor* works to motivate and truly value student participation and active learning. This is hard to do if students are not able to understand their teachers or are unable to express themselves. We also understand the critical importance of parent participation in their children’s schooling, and the difficulty of making this participation happen if the parents do not understand what their children are learning. Many studies from various countries, including within Timor-Leste, have been done which point to the success of the language progression methodology.”

Finally, the NGOs and individuals ask the President to not promulgate the changes to teaching methodology when the Government is not yet able to show scientific evidence that the curriculum passed to law in 2015 won’t achieve the goals of quality education. They also offered their availability to meet with the President to explain their position more clearly.

Organizations that signed the letter include: Fokupers, Knua ba Labarik, Alola Foundation, ACbit, AJAR, La’o Hamutuk, Belun, Haburas, Permatil, MOFFE and the Timor-Leste Women’s Network.