

# La'o Hamutuk and Timor-Leste's development challenges: *a case study in human rights and collaborative journalism*

DAVID ROBIE\*

La'o Hamutuk (*Walking Together* in English) is an independent social justice and development communication non-government organization established in Timor-Leste in 2000 by Timorese and international human rights activists and campaigners involved in the country's struggle for independence. Over the past 15 years, the NGO has monitored, analyzed, and reported on development processes in Timor-Leste and has forged a reputation for the quality of its communication for social change. La'o Hamutuk facilitates communication between grassroots people in the country and its elected leaders and decision-makers, and also establishes solidarity links with communities in other countries to explore alternative and independent development models. This author worked on a voluntary basis with La'o Hamutuk in November-December 2013 on a collaborative journalism education project to test notions of critical development journalism, peace journalism, and human rights journalism (HRJ) explored in his book published in 2014, *Don't Spoil My Beautiful Face: Media, Mayhem and Human Rights in the Pacific*. This paper explores a case study on communication for change strategies deployed by La'o Hamutuk on specific issues including the maritime Timor Gap dispute with neighboring Australia and the future of the country's oil and gas reserves; the State budget and Tasi Mane project on the underdeveloped south coast; unresolved human rights cases; food sovereignty and land rights; and a controversial media law regarded as a threat to freedom of speech and information. The paper examines these issues in the context of notions of both HRJ and collaborative citizen journalism.

**Keywords:** citizen journalism, development communication, media censorship, media freedom, media mobilization, social change

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*David Robie is Professor at the School of Communication Studies and Director of the Pacific Media Centre of the Auckland University of Technology, Auckland, New Zealand. Email: david.robie@aut.ac.nz*

## Introduction

A human rights approach to journalism has in recent years gained some traction (Bell, 1996; Lynch, 2008; Lynch & Galtung, 2010; Shaw, 2011). This incorporates the tenets of professional journalism to address “structural imbalances of global society” (Shaw, 2011, p. 117). As outlined by Shaw in his human rights journalism (HRJ) model, four values resonate with the principles of a rights-based approach to journalism. There are: participation, accountability, non-discrimination, empowerment, and linkages to human rights standards.

This author, journalist, and media educator worked on a voluntary basis with an independent social justice and development communication non-government organization established in Timor-Leste in November-December 2013 on a collaborative journalism education project to test notions of critical development journalism, peace journalism, and HRJ explored in his book *Don't Spoil My Beautiful Face: Media, Mayhem and Human Rights in the Pacific* (2014a).

The non-government organization, La'o Hamutuk (*Walking Together* in English) was established in Timor-Leste in 2000 by Timorese and international human rights activists and campaigners involved in the country's struggle for independence. Over the past 15 years, the NGO has monitored, analyzed, and reported on development processes in Timor-Leste and has forged a reputation for the quality of its communication for social change. La'o Hamutuk facilitates communication between grassroots people in the country and its elected leaders and decision-makers, and also establishes solidarity links with communities in other countries to explore alternative and independent development models.

This paper is a case study on communication for change strategies deployed by La'o Hamutuk on specific issues including the maritime Timor Gap dispute with neighboring Australia and the future of the country's oil and gas reserves (Robie, 2014b); the State budget and Tasi Mane project on the neglected south coast; unresolved human rights cases from the Indonesian occupation between 1975 and 1999 (Scheiner, 2007); food sovereignty and indigenous

land rights; and a controversial media law regarded as a threat to freedom of speech and information. The paper examines these issues in the context of notions of both human rights journalism (HRJ) and collaborative citizen journalism (CCJ).

The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, also known as simply East Timor, is a country in Maritime Southeast Asia; and, comprises the eastern half of the island of Timor, the nearby islands of Ataúro and Jaco, and Oecusse, an enclave on the northwestern side of the island, enclosed within Indonesian West Timor. The size of the country is about 15,410 square kilometres and it has a population of about 1.245 million (according to a census projection for 2015, Statistics Timor-Leste, 2015). Official reports put the 2013 non-oil gross national product at US\$1.319 billion (Statistics Timor-Leste, 2015) and the country uses the United States dollar as its currency.

Timor-Leste was colonized by Portugal in the sixteenth century, and was known as Portuguese Timor until Portugal's de facto decolonization of the country in 1975. Later that year, Timor-Leste declared its independence but was invaded by Indonesia in December after a series of border incursions. Indonesia declared Timor-Leste to be its 27th province the following year and Jakarta ruled the territory for 24 years, inflicting hundreds of thousands of systematic human rights violations. In 1999, (Scheiner, 2007) following a United Nations-organized referendum on self-determination, Indonesia relinquished control of the territory, and Timor-Leste became the first new sovereign state of the twenty-first century with restoration of independence on 20 May 2002. After independence, Timor-Leste became a member of the United Nations and the Community of Portuguese-Speaking Countries. In 2011, Timor-Leste announced its intention to gain membership status in the Association of Southeast Asian Nations by submitting a letter of application to become its 11th member. It also has a close relationship with the Pacific Islands Forum based in Suva, Fiji. It is one of only two predominantly Christian nations in Southeast Asia, the other being the Philippines. The vernacular Tetum and Portuguese are the official languages. Timorese resistance hero Xanana Gusmão, who had

been jailed by the Indonesians, was elected the first President after the restoration of independence and was succeeded by José Ramos-Horta, joint winner of the Nobel Peace Prize. In 2007, Gusmão was elected to the more powerful position of prime minister and relinquished this post in early 2015 and was succeeded by Dr. Rui Maria de Araújo.

More than half of the country's population lives below the international poverty line, i.e. US\$1.35 a day; and, about 50 percent of the population are illiterate (Human Development Report: Timor-Leste, 2014). It continues to suffer the after-effects of a decade-long struggle for independence against the Indonesian occupation between 1975 and 1999 (Scheiner, 2007), which severely damaged the country's infrastructure and killed between 100,000 and 180,000 people, about one-quarter of the nation's population, according to the UN-established Timor-Leste Commission for Reception, Truth, and Reconciliation (CAVR, 2005).

In 2014, Timor-Leste continued to be one of "the most petroleum-export-dependent countries in the world" (LH Annual Report, 2014, p. 1). About 76% of Timor-Leste's 2013 GDP and 87 percent of 2014 state expenditures came from the current and saved oil income. From 2013 to 2014, Timor-Leste's state expenditure increased by 28 percent.

## Methodology

HRJ is a fundamental rights-based journalism – journalism drawing on the human rights principles enshrined in the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights "to be enjoyed and respected by all human beings," and later expanded on by the twin International Conventions of Civil and Political Rights, and Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, and various other United Nations instruments (Shaw, 2011). As one of the advocates of HRJ, Ibrahim Seaga Shaw, senior research fellow in International Relations at the University of the West of England, Bristol, and a former editor, explains, "mainstream minority-world journalism generally sides with the official rhetoric and policy stances of the governments in the countries in which it is produced" (Shaw, 2011, p. 97). However, whereas mainstream journalism addresses human rights violations as a news frame of individual

perpetrators, HRJ advocates seek to critique the systems and structures that produce the violations.

This paper has been produced within this perspective and also in a context of CCJ as demonstrated by La'ò Hamutuk through its interactive website and blog.

This researcher was a volunteer attached to La'ò Hamutuk between 11 November and 5 December 2013, while on sabbatical from the Auckland University of Technology, New Zealand (see Figure 1). The researcher ran courses on journalism, media research, and writing and delivered a public lecture for civil society advocates on collaboration between the news media and research resources of non-government organizations in the Pacific (Robie, 2014c). During this period, he also carried out a series of interviews with prominent players in the Timor-Leste mediascape, including *Tempo Semanal* publisher and editor José Belo and La'ò Hamutuk researcher Juvinal Dias, and the fieldwork for a development communication research project. These interviews were published in article form.

This paper uses a triangulation of methods drawn partially from Participant Action Research (Baum, MacDougall, & Smith, 2006; Bergold & Thomas, 2012); a review of the relevant documents, articles, and papers; and Activist Research (Choudry, 2014; Forde, 2011; Hale, 2001; MARC, 2015), with the latter approach being predominant. The notion of activist research is located within social movements, non-governmental organizations, and people's organizations with close relations to progressive grassroots struggles in many countries, mainly in the Global South. According to Choudry (2014), "In many activist and social movement contexts, research is a central and essential activity – whether or not it is recognisable to outsiders, including many social movement scholars" (p. 76). In recent years such activist research has been evolving into collectives, such as MARC in the School of Communication at the University of Annenberg, Pennsylvania. The Media Activism Research Collective (MARC) seeks to offer a "collaborative space for graduate students, faculty and activists working at the intersection of media studies and social movement theory."

**Figure 1.**  
The author with La'o Hamutuk advocates and researchers in November 2013.



### Background on La'o Hamutuk

La'o Hamutuk, established two years before the restoration of independence, is a progressive think-tank collective, which analyzes and reports on development issues, rights, and processes, including the actions of international institutions and the Timor-Leste Government. The collective used to be located in the leafy Dili suburb of Farol near the harbourside lighthouse. The district is known for former homes of Portuguese governors, Indonesian officials, and United Nations bureaucrats. Today La'o Hamutuk's office is located in Bebora near the refurbished Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. Many embassies rely on the highly regarded free analysis provided by this agency. In his book *Beloved Land: Stories Struggles and Secrets from Timor-Leste* (2013), peacekeeping and international relations analyst Gordon Peake strongly praised La'o Hamutuk:

In a land of extremely differentiated wages, the local and international staff are paid the same salaries, and work with the same terms and conditions. The NGO is widely respected, mainly for the quality of its information, research, analysis, and comment on socio-economic issues, and many times

it is the only organisation providing written comments on important issues such as the Petroleum Fund (PF) and the state budget. (Peake, 2013, p. 187)

According to its annual reports (see 2001, 2013, 2014), La'o Hamutuk “facilitates communication between people in Timor-Leste and decision makers,” plus establishing links with other countries to “explore alternative development models.” The NGO's vision is that the people of Timor-Leste, current and future generations, will live in peace and contentment. They will control a transparent, just and sustainable development process which respects all people's cultures and rights. All citizens will benefit from Timor-Leste's resources, and will accept the responsibility for protecting them (LH Annual Report, 2014, p. 1).

The warnings by La'o Hamutuk about the unsustainable future for the country given current government policies have been delivered with increasing urgency over the past few years in annual reports: “This dependency on non-renewable resources has, in our analysis, caused Timor-Leste to begin to fall into the ‘resource curse’ [trap]” (LH Annual Report, 2014, p. 1). La'o Hamutuk criticized the

government in 2014 for continuing to “neglect social services and the domestic non-oil economy.” During that year, the organization continued to urge the government and development partners to “prioritise agriculture, fishing, tourism and small industries, as well as investing more in health, education and sanitation – as these are the foundations of our nation’s future” (LH Annual Report, 2014, p. 1).

In a paper questioning whether Timor-Leste’s PF could “exorcise the resource curse,” originally prepared for an Australian National University publication and since updated several times, Scheiner wrote that the country’s economy and politics are “typical” of this condition – “a set of conditions, choices, and consequences that almost always make citizens of extractive-export-dependent countries worse off than people in countries with little oil or mineral wealth” (2015, p. 8). He added that in general, “resource curse results from easy access to non-renewable wealth, which is seen as a windfall that can be freely spent on short-term desires rather than strategic longer term development.”

Since there are few taxpayers demanding that their money be used wisely, corruption, conflict, and opacity often occur, although Timor-Leste has taken some steps to avert them. At the end of the day, when all the mineral wealth has been converted to cash and spent, the opportunity to develop a sustainable, self-sufficient economy may also have been squandered (p. 9).

At the time of this researcher’s collaborative work in 2013, La’o Hamutuk had eight full-time Timorese staff and two foreigners. The agency conducts itself collectively in a non-hierarchical manner, with two rotating coordinators (Annual Report La’o Hamutuk, 2014, p. 32); see Figure 1.

## Critical issues

### *Petroleum dependency*

Timor-Leste is one of the most petroleum export-dependent countries in the world – more than every country, except Libya, South Sudan, and perhaps Equatorial Guinea (Scheiner, 2015, p. 2). It is a *rentier*, or “easy money” rent-based economy based on the country’s stake in the Timor Sea and

Timor-Leste’s modest and short-term extraction revenue is rapidly dwindling because oil and gas production are declining (Barma, 2014). According to La’o Hamutuk, citing documents and the 2015 State Budget, 73 percent of state revenues during 2014 came from converting non-renewable oil and gas wealth into cash, and a further 20 percent was from returns on investing oil and gas income received in earlier years (La’o Hamutuk, 2015c, p. 1).

“However,” warned the La’o Hamutuk annual report (2014, p. 3), “the [country’s oil and gas] reserves could be used up in less than five years.”

Timor-Leste’s oil and gas revenues are dropping rapidly and the country received 40 percent less revenue from them in 2014 than the year before, mainly because the Bayu-Undan and Kitan fields are being used up, La’o Hamutuk has indicated (2015b). More than 75 percent of the non-renewable wealth from these wells has “already been extracted – and this is irreversible.”

In a paper delivered at a Timor-Leste conference at the Australian National University in Canberra late in 2013 and updated in 2015, Scheiner noted that the dependency is not due to vast oil and gas reserves or high production rates, “but because the non-petroleum economy, which scarcely existed when independence was restored in 2002, is still very small.” According to Scheiner:

Although 23.6 percent of Timor-Leste’s US\$5.6 billion GDP has been categorised as ‘non-oil’, about half of this is generated by state spending for public administration, procurement and infrastructure construction. Since oil money provides the lion’s share of state revenues, this will evaporate when the wells dry up. The private sector and consumer-driven portions of economy – agriculture, manufacturing, and local commerce for businesses and individuals – average less than \$2 per citizen a day, although most citizens make do with far less than the average. (Scheiner, 2015, p. 2)

State agencies and the small middle and upper classes have money to spend and they use it to buy goods and services from abroad because of the shortage of home-produced products. Thus, the

balance of external goods trade is heavily lopsided with 96 percent imports (US\$519 million) dwarfing goods exports (\$22 million, excluding oil and gas) (RDTL DGS, 2015). However, in reality the trade problem is even worse than the statistics say, as Scheiner (2015, p. 3) has repeatedly pointed out. Coffee is the most exported non-oil good, but its revenue fluctuates due to weather and global commodities markets. More than half Timor-Leste's exported services are "travel" tickets on foreign airlines sold locally. More than half of state spending goes offshore, and well-off people make little effort to spend in the local economy. Scheiner gives many examples:

Chickens are imported from Brazil, rice from Vietnam, eggs and beer from Singapore, fruit juice from Cyprus, onions from Holland, garlic from China, milk from Australia ... In 2014, more than US\$116 million went to the Indonesian suppliers for everything from water to candles to cigarettes to instant noodles to sugary drinks to canned fish. Although a few agencies advocate 'local content,' almost nobody weighs economic sovereignty when deciding what to buy. (Scheiner, 2015, p. 3)

Present and pending free trade policies make it even harder to cultivate local production: "As oil and gas revenues tail off, there will be little cash to pay to foreign suppliers, and imports will become unaffordable. Without local food production, people will starve," warned Scheiner (2015).

But, he has also pointed out that "counting people rather than dollars tells a different story." As an agricultural nation, most households in Timor-Leste live mainly from subsistence farming. The formal economy, both public and private, employs less than a third of the working age population. "Only 10% of the working age population works for companies, and less than one-fiftieth of those jobs are in the petroleum industry," noted Scheiner. The International Monetary Fund expands on this with the explanation: "The oil and gas sector is the mainstay of the economy ... However ... the sector directly accounts for virtually no on-shore employment. Its economic impact is entirely via government spending" (International Monetary Fund [IMF], 2013). More than 90% of

Timor-Leste's government revenues are from oil, including returns on investing past oil income (RDTL DGS, 2015).

Current policies neglect domestic revenues. For example, a so-called "tax reform" in 2008 "slashed import, wage and business taxes" with the idea that this would encourage foreign investment and reduce prices for consumers (Scheiner, 2015, p. 5). This means that Timor-Leste now has the third-lowest Total Tax Rate in the world – one quarter of the global average (World Bank/PWC, 2014).

Between 2003 and 2014, Timor-Leste converted US\$20.1 billion of its oil and gas wealth into dollars, of which the country spent \$6 billion. The rest was saved in the PF, invested in bonds and stocks around the world (La'o Hamutuk, 2015b, p. 4). According to La'o Hamutuk in an analysis entitled "Oil and gas are going fast," these investments "have earned US\$2.5 billion over the last 12 years" and this was deposited in the PF. At the end of 2014, the La'o Hamutuk figures drawn from Central Bank documents showed that the PF was worth US\$16.5 billion, US\$95 million less than its balance six months earlier. La'o Hamutuk projections indicated that the Petroleum Fund could be "entirely empty" by 2025, with "severe implications" for the country after then if current state-spending trends continue. "How will we pay for schools, hospitals, police and maintenance – let alone pensions, trips and civil servants – after all the wealth is gone?" asked La'o Hamutuk (La'o Hamutuk, 2015b, p. 4). Petroleum policy officials are optimistic that the country has additional – so far undiscovered – oil and gas reserves. But analysts and La'o Hamutuk (La'o Hamutuk, 2015b, p.5) consider it extremely unlikely that another field as large as Bayu-Undan or Sunrise exists, as petroleum companies have been exploring the limited sea and land area for more than 50 years, conducting many seismic surveys and drilling more than 50 test wells. Kitan is the only commercially viable field discovered after the flurry of exploration in the 1990s when the illegal Timor Gap treaty came into effect.

Charles Scheiner argued that some "structural elements of the resource curse are nearly impossible to control, such as the ruthlessness and amorality of

Figure 2.  
La'o Hamutuk's Juvinal Dias ... public education and transparency  
on Timor-Leste's economy.



huge international oil companies, global and local environmental damage, invasions and civil wars” (Scheiner, 2015, p. 9). However, he added, others can be overcome if there are leaders with the “far-sightedness, wisdom and courage [needed] to make the best decisions” for a nation’s future. In the case of Timor-Leste, its history and geography make the resource curse more severe than would have been the case with petroleum dependency alone. For example, factors such as these have been critical: extreme poverty and underdevelopment caused by both the colonial powers, Portugal then Indonesia; emergence from foreign rule in 2002 with administrative and legal structures needing to be built from scratch; recovery from a prolonged 24-year war against foreign and self-interested neighbors Australia and Indonesia with their “thirst for oil and insistence on impunity” (Scheiner, 2015, p. 9). Also, both citizens and leaders must learn how to participate effectively in a peaceful, accountable, stable society, where government with public participation serves the people’s interest.

The appointment of Rui Maria de Araújo as Prime Minister in February 2015, observes Scheiner, has prompted optimism that these patterns may change.

In the La'o Hamutuk analysts’ view, however, Timor-Leste “must fortify its strongest resource, its people, by investing in education, nutrition, health care and rural water and sanitation” (Scheiner, 2015, p. 13).

### **Maritime Timor gap boundary dispute**

In 2013, Timor-Leste filed an international arbitration case against Australia in an international tribunal referred under the Timor Sea Treaty in a serious bid to compel Canberra to “respect Timor-Leste’s right to a maritime boundary halfway between the two countries” (Annual Report LH, 2014), the latest phase of a four-decade-long disagreement. These proceedings, which have implications for the ownership of and development strategies for the Greater Sunrise oil and gas field continued during 2014 with considerable international attention. For several years, La'o Hamutuk has been the key source of diverse information and objective analysis on Timor Leste’s sovereign rights, especially on maritime territory and the quaintly named CMATS (Certain Maritime Arrangements in the Timor Sea), a disputed treaty between Australia and Timor-Leste signed

by foreign ministers Alexander Downer and Jose Ramos-Horta on 12 January 2006.

Much of the global media coverage of the arbitration process relied on La'ò Hamutuk, which compiled documents and coverage (La'ò Hamutuk CMATS, 2015). When the Northern Territory Bar Association held a conference in Timor-Leste, La'ò Hamutuk encouraged strong resolutions on the country's boundary rights, such as: calling on Canberra to give up its "unlawful and unjust" claim to a continental shelf boundary north of the media line between Australia and Timor-Leste (NT Bar Association, 2014). La'ò Hamutuk also "collaborated with the Australian Timor Sea Justice Campaign and other activists around the world," the annual report noted (LH Annual Report, 2014, p. 4).

Timor-Leste's Petroleum Ministry invited La'ò Hamutuk to a three-day workshop with the UK Hydrographic Office, where the NGO joined others from the media, government, security forces, and civil society to "try our hands at delineating maritime boundaries" (LH Annual Report, 2014, p. 4). Although this particular meeting may not have had special significance, it is an indicator of the varied levels that La'ò Hamutuk staff engage with policy makers and the public .

"We publish the truth, we don't care what the global banks or the government think," said LH researcher Juvinal Dias in an interview with this researcher about the organization's strategic education program (Robie, 2014c). "Some appreciate what we do, but some are not really happy. This is normal – a political characteristic of advocacy" (see Figure 2). Dias regards as strengths for La'ò Hamutuk work that includes:

- (1) Providing independent economic analysis based on facts;
- (2) a belief in principles and social justice;
- (3) educating Timor-Leste's people on development issues and explaining options – "the people have a right to decide what is best for them";
- (4) Refusing to be compromised by funding from foreign donors or other agencies that may be involved in influencing the government.

In October 2014, Dias was sent by the Core Group on Transparency to the Publish What You Pay regional meeting in Yangon. Another example of the range of local and international transparency consultations and seminars La'ò Hamutuk is invited to and engages in, often organized by coalitions on issues.

## Tasi Mane development

Tasi Mane is the Tetum name for the Timor Sea between Australia and Timor-Leste and means "the male sea" and for its rough and treacherous swirls. The project on the southwest coast bearing the Tasi Mane name is a multibillion dollar petroleum infrastructure project that the government has prioritized since 2009. Since then, La'ò Hamutuk has questioned its economic viability and warned that it will have serious social, environmental, and fiscal impacts on the entire country. The project has been managed by the national oil company, TimorGAP, since 2011. Many people were displaced and their land cleared in Suai during 2013–2014, and La'ò Hamutuk supported local communities trying to protect their rights. After La'ò Hamutuk urged Parliament not to spend additional money, the government reduced project appropriations for 2014 to \$46.3 million, down from \$139 million in the 2013 budget (LH Annual Report, 2014, p. 4). However, in June 2015, Timor-Leste awarded the largest contract in the nation's history – \$719 million – to a Korean company to design and build the Suai Supply Base, the first major component of the Tasi Mane Project.

## State budget

La'ò Hamutuk continues to be the primary source on Timor-Leste's State Budgets (La'ò Hamutuk, 2015a) and plays a key role in public education (see Figures 3 and 4). As the 2014 annual report noted:

Although the budget process has become less open since 2013, La'ò Hamutuk has continued to write letters, present to parliamentary seminars and interact with many policy-makers, journalists and citizens. Many of the 20 recommendations in Parliament Committee C's report on the 2014



Figure 3.  
The sectoral allocation of the proposed 2016 State Budget. Graphic: La'o Hamutuk.

### Sectoral allocation of Proposed 2016 budget Total: \$1,562 million USD

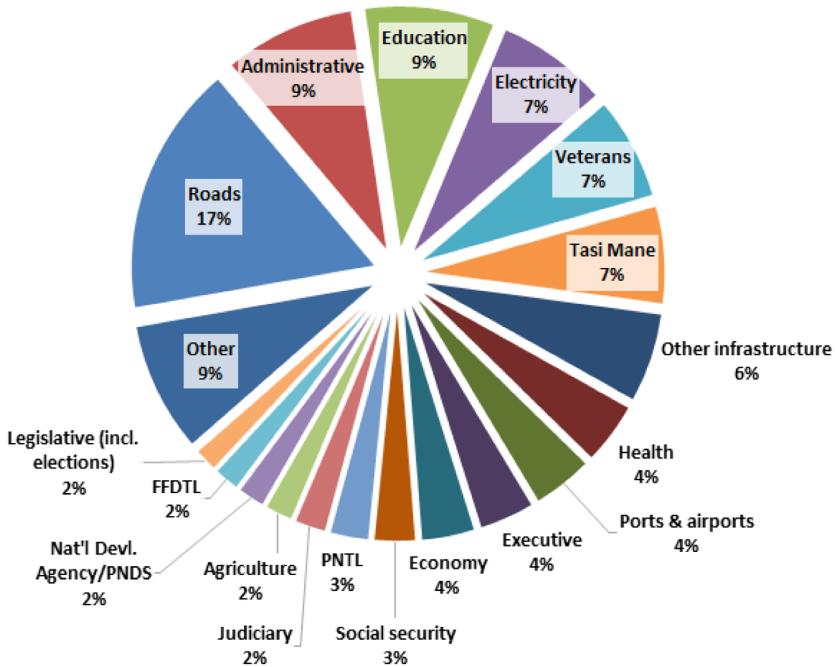
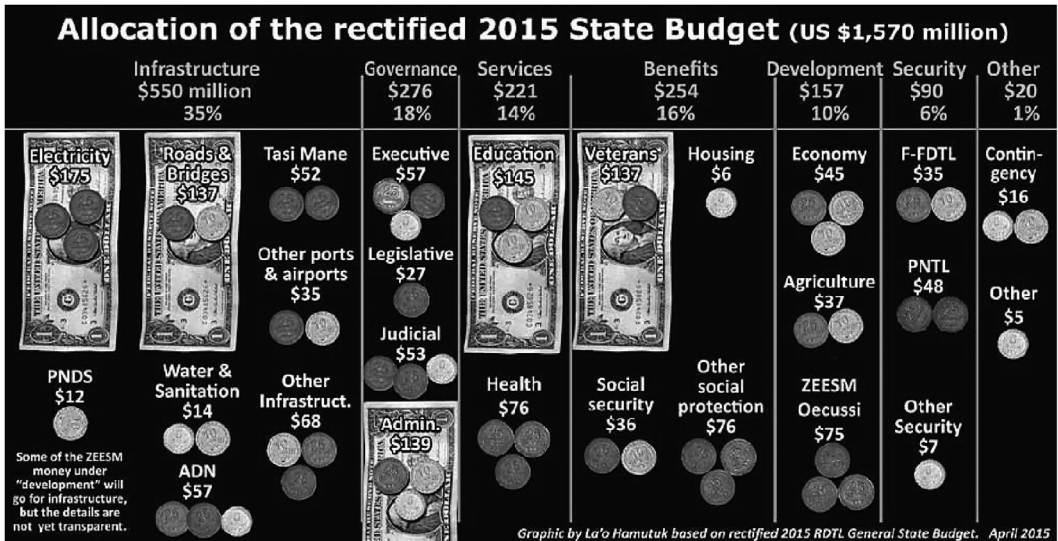


Figure 4.  
A La'o Hamutuk's graphic for public education showing the breakdown of the 2015 State Budget. The graphics are produced in both the national language of Tetum and English. Image: La'o Hamutuk.



Budget reflect La'o Hamutuk's concerns. For example, the committee advised: 'Don't take

more than estimated Sustainable Income (ESI) from the Petroleum Find in 2014, and

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don't take more than what is needed during 2013' (LH Committee on Public Finances, 2014). When Parliament discussed the budget in a closed-door committee, we published the key amendments they were considering. In October, when government asked Parliament to revise the 2014 Budget Law, we translated and analysed the process. (Annual Report La'o Hamutuk, 2014, p. 5)

In the case of the proposed budget for 2015, La'o Hamutuk was the only civil society group invited to make a presentation at a parliamentary seminar. The organization also prepared two unsolicited submissions to Parliament and observed some of their non-public hearings. The planning was even more problematic for the proposed budget for 2016. According to La'o Hamutuk's analysis, although the government's stated priorities had changed in past years, "infrastructure remains dominant" at the expense of the health, education, and social justice sectors (La'o Hamutuk, 2015c). High spending on power plants and the electricity grid in 2011–2013 had been replaced by funding for the Special Economic Zone in Oecusse (ZEESM) and Tasi Mane "whose benefits for most people are less clear."

On 29 October [2015], Timor-Leste's government sent Parliament a budget proposal which would spend \$1.56 billion during 2016, essentially the same amount as in 2015. Spending for the ZEESM ... grew 63 percent to \$218 million, while appropriations nearly doubled for roads, ports, airports and the Tasi Mane project.

The 27 percent increase on spending for physical infrastructure is financed by cuts across the public service, including health (14 percent), education (7 percent, notwithstanding many more school-age children), the judicial system (36 percent), veterans' benefits (22 percent), security forces (19 percent) and other sectors. Agriculture, which receives less than 2 percent of state spending but is the livelihood for most Timorese families, will be cut by 20 percent. (La'o Hamutuk, 2015c)

La'o Hamutuk has also closely monitored how oil companies try to circumvent the Timor-Leste

law and contracts by paying as few taxes and royalties "as they can get away with" (World Bank and PriceWaterhouseCoopers, 2015). One case, in particular, that has been closely followed is that of an opportunist "adviser" recruited as part of the Norwegian aid program in late 2009. Bobby Boye claimed to be an expert in petroleum tax law and offered to help Timor-Leste "receive all the money that it was entitled to" (Bobby Boye: Convict, advisor and fraud, 2015). However, for the next three years Boye "advised and defrauded" the country's Ministry of Finance. He was arrested on 19 June 2014 by US federal agents in New Jersey, USA, (Bergen County man arrested, 2014). In April 2015, Boye pleaded guilty to defrauding Timor-Leste of more than US\$3.5 million (Boye pleads guilty – must repay TL \$ 3.5 million, 2015).

## Human rights

Fifteen years after Timor-Leste emerged from Indonesian occupation, no effective processes have been the perpetrators accountable for crimes against humanity committed in Timor-Leste between 1975, when the Indonesians invaded, and 1999, when they violently withdrew after the referendum. La'o Hamutuk has engaged with international agencies and human rights groups to encourage ending impunity, which can be best be done via an international tribunal established by the UN Security Council. The organization work's both on its own and through the Timor-Leste National Alliance for an International Tribunal. In November 2014, Inês Martins was invited to the Impunity Watch conference in Bangkok on transitional justice and re-establishment of war victims' dignity. This is another example of the many consultations that La'o Hamutuk staff are engaged in (Annual Report La'o Hamutuk, 2014, p. 9).

West Papua has been an important issue. Sharing a struggle with the same colonial master, Indonesia, has provided an important synergy between the Papuans and Timorese. On West Papua's National Day, marking 1 December 1961 when West Papuans raised their *Morning Star* flag – banned by Indonesia – in a statement of self-determination, La'o Hamutuk organized a "Free Papua" event,

including the screening of a film. Collaborating with the HAK Association and human rights activists from Australia and the Netherlands, La'o Hamutuk has been planning a 2015 Human Rights Film festival across Timor-Leste.

### Food sovereignty and land rights

On 20 March 2012, then Timor-Leste President José Ramos-Horta vetoed the so-called Land Law package designed to “reform” the country’s complex and illegal laws inherited from the Portuguese and Indonesian colonial past. According to Ramos-Horta, he decided to veto the draft laws because they did not reflect the needs of or protect the rights of the poorest and most vulnerable and didn’t resolve unjust systems established in the past, as La’o Hamutuk paraphrased his statement (Whom Will the Land Laws Empower, 2013, p. 1). The President’s concerns endorsed those raised by both La’o Hamutuk and Rede Ba Rai (Land Rights Network).

Three draft laws made up the package: a Special Regime for Determination of Ownership of Immovable Property (generally referred as the Land Law); the Expropriation Law, and the Real Estate Fund Law. As La’o Hamutuk described the legal package:

The Land Law defines who the owner is if more than one person claims ownership of the same property. The Expropriation Law defines how the State can take private or community land and use it for ‘public interest’. The Real Estate Fund defines how indemnity and compensation will be paid in cases where the Land Law recognises that more than one individual or group have rights to the same property. In that situation, people who lose their property rights have the right to compensation. (Buletin La’o Hamutuk, 2013; La’o Hamutuk Bulletin, 2013, p. 2)

In such situations, the Fund would be used to compensate people whose land is expropriated from private or community use. The package was reworked and the revised laws approved by the Council of Ministers by July 2013. Some improvements were taken on board, such as clarifying the hierarchy on property rights, providing protection for people being evicted, and recognizing customary informal land

rights. But La’o Hamutuk noted that in spite of the improvements, “a fundamental question remains that the draft laws do not try to resolve: how to deal with the actions under Portuguese and Indonesian rulers when the State and its allies stole people’s land with no justice, accountability or transparency.” (Buletin La’o Hamutuk, 2013; La’o Hamutuk Bulletin, 2013, p. 2). Parliament has still not yet started discussing the revised proposed laws even though they have been on the agenda for nearly two years.

The agricultural sector is arguably most important platform for strengthening the nation’s economy, health, culture, and stability and is a core component of La’o Hamutuk’s advocacy. About 70 percent of Timor-Leste people live in rural areas and depend on farming, forests, and fishing. As La’o Hamutuk notes, “the majority of agricultural activity is subsistence-based, small scale production to meet immediate needs, with small amounts being sold in order to purchase goods which cannot be grown or made directly” (Buletin La’o Hamutuk, 2013; La’o Hamutuk Bulletin, 2013, p. 8).

Through the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries and with the Australian agency Seeds of Life, the Timor-Leste Government has been campaigning hard about the importance of establishing food security in the country. But their strategy relies on imported seeds and chemicals, and moves Timor-Leste agriculture away from being organic and locally controlled. The Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011–2030 points to strategies “modeled on the ‘green revolution’ in India” with the introduction of high-yielding seed varieties and the increased use of fertilizers and irrigation from 1965 onward, which “dramatically reduced the risk of famine.”

However, La’o Hamutuk has critiqued the input-intensive model as practised in India, and other examples such as Mexico, and has argued for the concept of food sovereignty, using the term “diversification” to refer to “respecting and protecting seeds, food and living things that are local and unique: the biodiversity that exists naturally” (Buletin La’o Hamutuk, 2013; La’o Hamutuk Bulletin, 2013, p. 9). It wants to see the nation build national self-sufficiency without needing to depend on imported food and

**Figure 5.**  
**Investigative journalist and Tempo Semanál publisher José Belo – struggling for greater transparency in governance and a free press.**



agricultural imports unless there is an unavoidable need.

### **Media law**

When Parliament was about to enact a media law with grave consequences for freedom of expression in Timor-Leste in early 2014, La'o Hamutuk raised public concerns that the law would have serious consequences not just for so-called "professional journalists" (LH Draft Media Law, 2013). La'o Hamutuk urged Parliament to hold additional hearings with a broader range of participants, and they scheduled a second week of hearings at which the rights organization and others testified (LH Proposed Law on Media, 2015).

La'o Hamutuk sees the law as a threat to our own work (nobody other than accredited journalists would be allowed to disseminate information to the public), and we mobilised Timorese civil society and media freedom advocates worldwide, including Human Rights Watch and Amnesty International, to oppose it, which led to coverage in *Time* magazine, *The Economist*, *The Guardian* and many Australian

and Pacific media. David Robie, a communication studies professor from Auckland University of Technology, who had volunteered with La'o Hamutuk in 2013, helped mobilise and educate people across the Pacific on this threat to media people. (Annual Report La'o Hamutuk, 2014, p. 8)

This researcher wrote in his blog *Café Pacific* that the flawed law would "severely limit who can qualify to be 'journalists' and could potentially curb overseas investigative journalists and foreign correspondents from reporting from the country as they would need advance state permission" (Robie, 2014d). Parliament passed the law without considering the serious constitutional issues. La'o Hamutuk organized an open letter co-signed by about 30 people and organizations (including the Pacific Media Centre) urging President Taur Matan Ruak to veto it. In response, the President's Office held a three-hour discussion with about 50 representatives of media and civil society. The President asked the Court of Appeal to advise him on four articles in the law, and the judges determined that three of them violated the Constitution. The President sent the draft law back

to Parliament for revision. “This is a victory for the Timorese people,” commented a leading independent publisher. “The government is trying to stop freedom of the media and freedom of expression” (McDonnell, 2014).

Although Parliament made a few changes to the law before re-enacting it, it still contains several provisions regarded by critics as unconstitutional, one of which was a confirmed provision about limiting foreign ownership in a second court opinion. The Timor-Leste Press Law was finally approved by the President and took effect in December 2014. Under the new law a Press Council has been established as an “independent body for media self-regulation” comprising two representatives from the journalism community, one representative of the media owners, and two public representatives (Media freedom and regulation in Timor-Leste, 2015). According to the *Asosiasaun Jornilista Timor Lorasa’e* (AJTL), its own recommendation that public figures be selected by representatives of journalists and media owners to prevent “possible political interference” was ignored (Media freedom and regulation, 2015). The ATJL described the law in its current form in May 2015 as: “A deplorable outcome for democracy in East Timor.”

While no journalist has been jailed for their work, press freedom and journalist safety in Timor-Leste are constantly under threat, mostly from politicians - both government officials and parliamentarians. For example, in 2013, two journalists were sued, convicted, and fined because of their reports about corruption by a state prosecutor. In the months of March and April 2015, there were four cases of beatings of journalists, mainly by police officers who were not satisfied with stories in the news publications and who misunderstood the role of journalists (Media freedom and regulation, 2015).

While some politicians claim that the law only applies to commercial and state media, La’o Hamutuk argues that the actual wording indicates much wider implications. The Media Law also threatens that there could be future legislation specifically regulating expression by civil society and nonprofit media. For the time being, at least, La’o Hamutuk has decided not to seek media accreditation, in spite of the fact that

the research team functions like a quality investigative journalism unit. La’o Hamutuk staff reject the notion that somebody needs a license from the state in order to collect, analyze and distribute information to the public, and will not apply for one. Given the limited resources of most news media and the shortage of journalists with investigative skills, La’o Hamutuk’s strength as a communicator of quality research information is vitally important whether or not they have formal accreditation.

*Tempo Semanal* editor and publisher José Belo, who is also the president of the Timor-Leste Press Union and perhaps, the country’s most influential journalist, once said in a radio interview: “Corruption, collusion [and] nepotism are when people take the state money and make [other] people suffer” (East Timor journalist faces jail time, 2009). This researcher interviewed him in Dili while on the sabbatical internship with La’o Hamutuk (see Fig.5):

When I met up with him, he was holding court on a Dili café terrace contemplating how best to use another bunch of leaked government documents that had fallen into his lap for his *Tempo Semanal* (*Weekly Times*) newspaper and website.

He now also faces a broader new challenge. As president of the Timor-Leste Press Union (TLPC), one of several media groups representing journalists in his country - but reputedly the strongest with 120 members, he is trying to put the national media house in order.

The government is keen to impose a media law that some say is draconian in controls on journalists but is not subject to serious scrutiny because few [had] actually seen the latest draft [originally drawn up in Portuguese, which is coequal with Tetum as a national language under the Constitution]. Belo sees his mission as to defend the ‘self-regulatory’ status of the media and to unify the media industry.

A national media conference last October - only the second since independence - made some encouraging headway on both counts, with a national code of ethics being adopted by the entire industry for the first time. ‘Journalism is in transition in Timor-Leste,’ says Belo. ‘The conference was in response to

the so-called international aid, particularly from the United States and Australia, which has been misused in the name of journalism in this country.' (Robie, 2013)

## Conclusion

While the courage and tenacity of the Timorese people in their struggle for independence ultimately overcame Indonesian oppression after almost a quarter century of resistance, achieving economic sovereignty is proving a tougher challenge. "It will require diverse approaches, building on Timor-Leste's strengths and prioritising medium and long-term sustainability," argues La'o Hamutuk researcher Charles Scheiner (2015, p. 13). He estimates that the country has only about a decade before the rest of its petroleum wealth "the only ship which can take the nation away from poverty – will have sailed" (2015, p. 13).

In the national quest for economic security, La'o Hamutuk is critically important in ensuring that the government and officials keep sight of the necessary priorities. By providing well-researched documentation and critiques, collaboration with the fledgling news media that has limited independent research resources of its own is vitally important. If La'o Hamutuk is not seeking media status as well as its already formidable research and communication credentials, then it needs to build solid alliances and collaborations with "activist" journalists who have the credibility and sound judgment to dispense with the delusions around economic security and to avoid the "resource curse." However, in the observation of this researcher the reality is that there are few of these activist professional journalists who have the initiative, confidence, and willingness to make the powerful uncomfortable for such collaborations. Also, financial incentives to the media (subsidies, public notices, and advertising, for example) make it less likely that news organizations would raise uncomfortable issues with the power elite. Inexperience, low pay, lack of a career path, and non-exposure to "real investigative journalism" are also key factors.

Some critics describe reporters in Timor-Leste as "stenographers to the politicians," who barely try to get hard information and alternative sources.

They also sometimes have little understanding of the issues. "Whenever we have something complicated we want to get into the media, we write it ourselves, because the reporters are likely to get it confused or miss the important points," was a typical observation of at least some non-government organization communicators.

Journalism professor Philip Seib at USC Annenberg once wrote in *The Global Journalist*, "the job of the news media is not to try to solve all the world's problems, but to shake awake the world's conscience. Good journalism can do that" (2002, p. xiv). In a global media landscape driven increasingly by "infotainment" and reality television, the role of activist journalists, independent journalists, and media educators working in collaboration with non-government organizations such as La'o Hamutuk can make a difference. They can challenge, analyze, and mobilize while building independent communication alliances.

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