Introduction
The aim of this paper is to discuss some international research findings about the role of adult literacy in the achievement of national development goals. I will begin by explaining my own background and experience as an adult educator and university-based researcher in the field. Then I will clarify assumptions in the paper, before reviewing the contribution which adult literacy makes to four key aspects of development, namely:

- health development, especially maternal and child health;
- the development of a ‘culture of education’ to support other education sectors;
- workforce development for sustainable economic activity; and
- more effective democracy through increasing participation and improving governance capacity.

The final part of the paper reviews the international policy context, especially the views of donor agencies, because this is an important part of the context in which national policy will be implemented.

My Background
I am the Coordinator of Adult and Workplace Education courses at the University of New England (UNE), an Australian public university with a strong focus on rural development. Prior to taking up this position, most of my working life was spent doing community development work, adult education and policy-based social research with Indigenous peoples organisations in Australia, particularly in rural and remote areas. For the last seven years, a major focus of my research and policy work has been to clarify the role of adult education in development in Indigenous communities, especially the contribution which adult education programs make to community health development. Australia’s 400,000 Indigenous peoples suffer some of the worst health and social conditions of any population anywhere in the world, despite living in one of the world’s most successful advanced industrial economies. My focus has been adult education, because one of the biggest challenges these communities face is their low levels of adult literacy, in both English and their own vernacular languages.
In accepting the invitation to speak at this forum, I want to make it clear that I do not consider myself an ‘expert’ on Timor Leste. My role here is to share some information and analysis which may help you in your work of reconstruction.

I want to acknowledge the invaluable contribution to this paper made by Deborah Duman, my co-author, who is doing research with UNE’s Peace Centre on the role of popular education in peacebuilding in Timor Leste. She also has extensive experience in adult education in Indigenous communities.

**Definitions and assumptions**

A number of definitional issues need clarification when we discuss adult literacy policies and programs in a national development context. These revolve around the meanings we give to the following terms:

- adult literacy
- adult basic education
- adult education
- lifelong learning
- professional and technical education
- vocational education and training
- non-formal adult education
- popular education
- adult community education
- informal adult education

Following our visit last March, we wrote a brief report for the Ministry of Education, suggesting the need for an agreed system of classification for all the different adult education programs, to assist data collection and policy and program development (Boughton & Duman 2004a). This is a problem worldwide, as the Argentinean educationalist Carla Maria Torres demonstrated in her recent comprehensive analysis for UNESCO (Torres 2003), and we cannot overcome it here today. However, it may help if we clarify three key assumptions made in this paper.

1. **The challenge of adult illiteracy is best addressed in the context of wider adult education policies and programs, which in turn need to be integrated with individual, family, community and national development plans.**

   Literacy is not a subject, like History or Biology; it is an outcome. Adults acquire literacy through learning about other things. English-speaking educators call this literacy ‘in context.’ Adults acquire literacy through participation in adult education programs, which can occur in different parts of the education sector, but also in community development programs in other sectors e.g. agriculture or health.

2. **Adult education is very different from school education, or education for children, in its curriculum, methods and delivery mechanisms, and, most importantly, in the way its participants learn.**

   We sometimes use the term basic education for programs which develop literacy. But adult basic education is very different from basic education for children, which is delivered through schools. Why? Because adults and children have very different
learning needs, and ways of learning. By adults, I mean people who have passed the age of compulsory schooling, but have missed out on acquiring the skills and knowledge base that primary and secondary schooling provides. The aim of adult education policy and programs, which include programs for people with low literacy or no literacy, is to provide learning opportunities for all those people who are no longer of school age, but have unmet basic learning needs. These opportunities have to be provided in ways that are sensitive to the specific needs of adults. This is why adult education has developed as a distinct field of practice, within the discipline of education. However, while adult education is a distinct and specific field, it is also very broad in its reach and type of programs. Earlier this year, a major Conference in Botswana, supported by UNESCO’s Institute of Education and the World Bank, examined the role of adult education in poverty reduction. Their definition of adult education demonstrates its breadth:

Adult education ... includes concepts such as popular education, lifelong learning, non formal education and adult learning. It can be a skills development or an empowerment process, or both. It can therefore contribute to both direct and indirect poverty reduction strategies. It can have a political focus (such as raising awareness of human rights), an economic focus (such as issues of investing in adult education, addressing economic disempowerment), a social focus (for example, inspiring a spirit of sharing or collective action), an environmental focus (such as fostering indigenous knowledge and environmental sustainability) or an intersectoral focus (for example, encouraging integrated approaches for effectivity and efficiency) (University of Botswana Department of Adult Education 2004)

In this paper, while the focus is the role of adult literacy in national development, the assumption is that adults can become literate through a similarly-wide variety of formal, non-formal and informal adult education programs.

**(3. Literacy is both a basic learning need, and a right – it is the foundation for the exercise of other rights and the achievement of basic needs.**

Adults need literacy, in order to participate in social, economic and political development in the modern world. To be illiterate is to be excluded, because with development comes a whole range of new challenges which require people to have literacy as a basis for engagement. We should be mindful of the fact that people seek to be literate, as is their right, to enable them to participate effectively in development.

**Impact Of Adult Literacy On Health Development**

Improving the health of the population is clearly a major priority for national development in most countries of the South, as it is in the industrialized world. For several decades now, it has been universally accepted that the health of populations improves with rising education levels in the adult population, measured in terms of years of formal schooling or adult literacy rates. Writing in 1991, Professor Jack Caldwell¹ summarised what was then known internationally about “the cultural, social and behavioural determinants of health”:

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¹ In July this year, Caldwell, now 75, received the UN Population Award, which recognises individuals who have brought “remarkable benefits to the health and quality of life of people around the world, and to the wider cause of sustainable development.” UN Press Release DSG/SM/229 POP/906, accessed 19/8/04, from www.un.org/News/press/docs/2004/dsgsm229.doc.htm
The most firmly established generalization ... [is] that parental education, particularly maternal education, has a major impact on the survival of children even when controlled for income and other indices of material well-being... There [is] agreement that any kind of modern schooling reduces mortality levels and that the phenomenon occurs in all parts of the Third World. Furthermore, the change is linear, with a reduction in child mortality of 7-9 per cent for each additional year of maternal education (Caldwell & Caldwell 1991).

The most common health indicator used to demonstrate the link is reduced child mortality, leading to increased life expectancy. This effect persists even after the positive effects that education has on income and employment are taken into account. In most societies, it is the education levels and literacy rates of mothers that have been shown to be most important for children's health, although the effects of fathers' education and literacy are also significant.

The positive health effects of education are usually associated with a wider social movement for increased social and economic equality, especially movements which reinforce women's autonomy (Boughton 2000). The countries where this is said to have occurred include Sri Lanka, Costa Rica, Cuba and China; and the state of Kerala in India (Caldwell 1989; Parayil 2000). One of the most striking studies, for example, examined the long term effects of the 1980-1985 Sandinista-led popular education and literacy program in Nicaragua, called the National Literacy Crusade (CNA). This study shows that a mass adult literacy program can achieve a similar health effect to several years of schooling. It found that the children of women who had participated in the program had significantly lower mortality and better health outcomes (measured by nutritional status), compared with the children of those who had not. It also found that the women themselves enjoyed better health (Sandiford et al, 1995).

Higher education levels have a much more pronounced impact on child survival and health when accompanied by improved access to primary health care services, especially maternal and infant health care. This works both ways. Improved schooling and literacy works better to improve health when there is more primary health care; but improved access to primary health care has been found to have less of an impact on maternal and child health where there is not a corresponding improvement in education and literacy levels, especially among young women (Caldwell 1989; 1994).

The reasons that adult, especially women's, education levels have a positive impact on health are many and varied (Hobcraft 1993). Among the reasons established are that literate women:

- Understand public health messages better
- Access primary health care services more, especially ante-natal and post-natal services;
- Help maintain better public health and domestic hygiene;
- Delay their first pregnancy longer, which increases the chances the infant will survive;
- Interact more effectively and more confidently with health workers and health professionals e.g.
- They are more likely to go to a service when they or their children become sick
- They communicate what is wrong more effectively
- They understand treatment advice better, have confidence in it, and find it easier to follow
- If treatment does not result in improvements, they are more likely to go back and ask for further advice

- Manage their lives and households more effectively, because they have greater influence in family and community decision making about resource allocation.

Adult literacy programs also contribute to better population health by helping to create a pool of better educated people to undertake health work and health development work. Primary health care services staffed by local people can provide cost-effective health care where there are no doctors and few nurses, but these local health workers need some basic literacy. There are many good health worker training programs available internationally which can be adapted to local needs, such as in Timor Leste, but basic literacy is usually a prerequisite for undertaking such programs and obtaining some form of certification (Duman 2002).

Our experience working with Indigenous communities suggests one further point which may be relevant. As you are probably aware, Australia’s Indigenous communities are still recovering from a brutal invasion which in some parts of the country amounted to an attempted genocide; and in some communities in which we have worked, the experience of para-military style oppression occurred within the living memory of older people. These communities are therefore ‘post-conflict’ societies, and this history has specific effects in terms of health and well-being. For example, there are very high rates of domestic violence, high rates of abuse of alcohol and other drugs, and a high rate of morbidity and mortality associated with trauma, especially among younger people. This is usually talked about in terms of the need to improve ‘social and emotional well-being.’ In our experience, adult education programs designed to help communities to deal with these problems have to address the powerlessness, alienation and frustration that arises from a lack of literacy and basic education (Bell, Bartlett and Boughton, 2004).

The link between adult education and health is not confined to countries of the South. In the last few years, the Centre for the Wider Benefits of Learning at the University of London has been comparing different countries across Europe in terms of their education system outcomes and their population health indicators. What role, these studies are asking, are education systems playing in the reproduction of social capital, that controversial attribute of communities, regions and even whole countries which is said to be protective of individual health and well-being? This is a huge field, not easy to summarise in a brief paper. Two points can however be made. Once again, education – this time re-configured as learning, as in ‘lifelong learning’ - has been found to be intimately implicated in health and health development, not just at an individual but at a population or collective level. The second point is more thought-provoking. Inter-country

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2 An account of this work and some publications are available at www.learningbenefits.net
comparisons suggest that national education systems which produce highly unequal outcomes play a role in worsening, not reducing, health inequalities.

To summarise, adult education programs with young women, in particular, will have significant long term effects on population health, because the better the health conditions of mothers and their babies, the less likely it is that their children will have health problems as they grow older. The early years of life are recognised worldwide, including by the World Health Organisation, as having major effects on an individual’s health for the reminder of the lifespan. In other words, by investing now in women’s education, and in men’s education too, a country can produce a significant improvement in subsequent decades in its overall population health. The consequences are far-ranging, since this reduces the cost of providing secondary health care as this generation of children become adults and grow older, and it makes also for a healthy and more productive workforce.

**The Impact of Adult Literacy on the ‘Culture of Education’: Learning Communities**

In debates around education and development, the different education sectors – schools, vocational education, higher education, and community or non-formal adult education - are ‘championed’ in different periods over others, especially by funding agencies. The problem with this approach is that education programs succeed or fail inside families, communities and cultures. Therefore, no one sector can achieve the outcomes it requires unless attention is also paid to the other sectors. The education of children and young people, in particular, is highly unlikely to succeed where there is no ‘culture of education’ among the significant adults to whom the children relate, particularly older siblings, parents, grandparents and neighbours. A wealth of evidence exists to show that where attention is not paid to including adults in the educational process, children and young people fail to engage with schooling and finish up leaving it without having attained the desired outcomes, thereby perpetuating inequality from generation to generation.

It is therefore worrying that international agency policies appear to be forcing education sectors to compete with each other for scarce resources. In her exhaustive survey of adult basic education programs in countries of the South, Torres (2003) describes this trend: Poor children and their parents (are) forced to compete in terms of educational priorities. The “option” between adults and children has been institutionalized in educational policies and in recommendations by international agencies, in the name of scarce resources and the need to prioritize.

But, as her study makes very clear, such a position will finish up with countries not achieving their goals even in primary or basic education. Why is this so? Because it makes no sense to separate adult and child learning and well-being. This ‘option’ is therefore not an option at all, because it “denies and breaks the family and the community as fundamental learning organizations... The children’s right to education includes the right to educated parents” (ibid).

One of the strongest arguments for adult literacy programs is therefore that they help create an enabling environment in which children and young people are more likely to
participate and succeed in school and post-school education and training programs. Research in at least seven countries, including Ghana (cited Oxenham 2004, p. 3) and South Africa (Desmond 2004), has found that children are much more likely to attend and complete primary and secondary school when their parents are also engaged in education programs. The South African Family Literacy Projects described by Desmond are particularly important. They were developed because research was showing that increased primary school participation was not producing the desired literacy outcomes among children. Similar research is behind UNICEF’s concern to include mothers in their children’s education, and to address the literacy issue for young women, but again, this excludes many significant other adults in a child or young person’s community. In Australian Indigenous education, and in other countries, governments who have recognised this link are beginning to support ‘learning communities’, where schools become education centres for the whole community (Schwab and Sutherland 2001). The Learning Centres being set up in sixteen countries under UNESCO’s Asia Pacific Program for Education for All (APPEAL) have a similar aim – to establish an “intergenerational” culture of education. However, it is best to think of the idea of learning communities as a policy, not a program, a way of understanding how to build education into the very core of both national and community-level development:

The learning community proposed here does not refer to a particular institution (a community learning center, a school, a network) but rather to an area or territory: an organized urban or rural human community that constitutes itself as a “learning community”, defines and implements its own collective learning strategy to meet and expand the basic learning of all its members – children, young people and adults – in order to ensure personal, family and community development (Torres 2003).

This is borne out by our own experience, working with Indigenous communities with low literacy levels, where we discovered that a major reason why adults undertake adult education programs is so that they can support their children’s schooling, and have some way of participating in it (Durnan and Boughton 1999). The ‘take-home message’, then, is that “adult literacy has an important role to play in making mainstream education both more effective and more pro-poor” (Cawthera, cited Oxenham 2004).

Finally, one of the obstacles to creating a policy environment in which there is a ‘whole-of-community’ and intergenerational approach to learning is that formal school, vocational and university programs have more easily-measurable outcomes which can be inserted into economic models. Adult basic education with people who have low literacy levels is usually better done in the context of community development work, alongside people as they carry out the tasks of their daily lives. This makes it very hard to measure, or to point to, and its outcomes may take some years to manifest themselves. Consequently, this sort of work does not ‘fit’ as easily within the dominant development models of many international agencies. However, as experience in Sri Lanka, Cost Rica, Cuba, and the Indian state of Kerala has shown, paying attention to adult literacy in this way does have a positive impact, if not in immediate economic growth, then in the longer term in the maintenance of social equality and in the collapsing rather than the widening of educational inequality (Parayil 2000). This in turn, as we saw above, has a major effect on the overall health of the population, and its political and social cohesion.
Impact of Adult Literacy on Sustainable Economic independence

The third way that adult literacy contributes directly to national development is by increasing peoples’ capacity to earn income, raise themselves out of poverty, and achieve greater economic independence. This occurs alongside and in interaction with its effects on health and educational participation, because people with higher incomes are generally also more healthy and are also more likely to send their children to school.

There are at least four ways in which literacy programs support economic development. Firstly, literacy skills help people to establish and manage micro-enterprises and income-generating activities. Secondly, literacy levels affect productivity directly, in a range of areas, including agriculture. Thirdly, basic literacy is often a pre-requisite for attaining greater vocational skills, including formal vocational qualifications, which enable people to increase their incomes. Fourthly, literate adults engage more effectively with the market economy and with the government and non-government agencies which regulate and support economic activity.

Some examples will illustrate this. Oxenham (2004) conducted an exhaustive review of evidence that adult literacy helped alleviate poverty. This included World Bank studies in Bangladesh, Indonesia and Ghana; programs in El Salvador, Uganda, Nepal, and Bolivia; and his own research in Senegal. The benefits from individual literacy projects included improvements in savings and investment, improvements in production practices especially in agriculture, and improved incomes. In Senegal, people who undertook literacy programs subsequently took on leadership roles in local producer cooperatives. With agricultural communities participating in REFLECT programs in El Salvador, Ghana and Bangladesh, participants reported that it had stimulated them to improve their use of their land, water, crops and money.

This does not mean that literacy programs can do this on their own. The best programs are those which link into actual economic development programs and the development of practical and technical skills. This has been referred to as the ‘Learning and Earning Approach’. For example, in Kenya, literacy programs are being successfully integrated with economic development projects for women. The Department of Adult Education in the Ministry of Labour and Human Resources Development reported:

To make the teaching of the 3Rs meaningful, deliberate efforts were made to integrate income-generating projects into the literacy programme…. These [projects] helped learners get some income and improve their living standards. It was [observed] that centres with income-generating projects registered more learners due to high motivation as skills learnt were put into practical use and the income generated helped learners to solve some of their domestic problems (Kenyan DAE, cited Thompson 2002, p. 103)

Similarly, in Uganda, the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) is sponsoring a program which connects adult education to sustainable agricultural development, under the auspices of the Ugandan government’s Plan for the Modernisation of Agriculture, which is part of the government’s Poverty Eradication Action Plan. In this project, adult literacy is integrated with the development of rural micro-credit programs and adoption of new and sustainable agricultural practices (Olinga & Lubyayi: 2002). Interviews with
Botswanan women participating in their country’s national literacy program likewise reinforced the crucial links between ‘learning and earning’ (Raditloaneng & Mulenga 2003)

Finally, sustainable economic development requires that the fruits of economic growth are distributed equitably, and lead to improved living standards across the whole population. This is not possible unless attention is paid to raising literacy levels in the adult population, because these literacy levels will determine the extent to which the mass of people are included in the development process. There is strong evidence, e.g. from Kerala (Franke and Chasin 2000), that societies which pay attention to adult literacy achieve more equitable development outcomes, with the benefits of growth flowing through to improved living standards and quality of life for the majority of the population.

An important lesson we learned in Indigenous development in Australia was that once the bulk of education resources are locked up in urban-centred formal education systems, the more educated classes who benefit most from such systems (who in North Australia are predominantly the non-Indigenous people) resist efforts to de-centralise and redistribute resources to rural and remote areas, where illiteracy is high. The education system then itself becomes one of the ways that social inequality is legitimated and maintained.

The Impact of Adult Literacy on Participation, Democracy and Good Governance

As a teacher of adult educators, I point out in my introductory lectures that adult education has a long and proud historical connection with movements for independence and democracy. In 19th century Europe, the early trade union, cooperative, and women’s movements all made adult education a central feature of their activity. Twentieth century independence movements in the colonial world did the same, and it would be hard to find a social movement for democracy and independence anywhere in the world in the last two hundred years which did not include adult education, especially with less literate and marginalised peoples, in its program and activities. Timor Leste has its own history in this regard, with the mass literacy program of Fretilin in 1974-75 (Hill 2002) as an example. In El Salvador, the FMLN ran literacy programs and taught their guerrilla soldiers to conduct classes in the areas under their control (Hammond 1998). My own work has uncovered examples of trade unions and political parties and producers cooperatives doing similar education work in Australia from the late 19th to the middle 20th century (Boughton 1997). When I began working as an adult educator in Central Australia in the 1980s, it was with local Aboriginal organisations who wanted their young leaders to learn about politics and government, so they could more effectively campaign around their basic needs, for housing, health care, and legal rights.

This integral connection between adult education and political participation does not stop once independence is achieved, democracy established and a popular government elected to power. On the contrary, without a strategy for continued mobilisation and involvement of the whole population in pursuit of national development goals, there is a risk of
dependency on governments and donor agencies, on the one hand, and bureaucratic stagnation, even corruption, on the other.

The recent literacy campaign in Kerala is a case study which shows the positive relationship between literacy and participation. In the early 1990s, there was a popular movement to involve the people more in the development process, to decentralise the planning and decision making. Even though Kerala already had an 80% literacy rate, it was decided that the first priority of development should be the eradication of illiteracy, because without literacy, it was not possible to include the people most marginalised into the development process. In a program supported by progressive elements within government and local political leaders, utilising thousands of volunteers recruited through an NGO, some districts attained the extraordinary rate of 100% literacy – this in a country, India, where the national literacy rate is around 56% (Tomquist 2000).

Literacy is a fundamental element in the building of a modern democratic state. Oxenham’s (2004) study, which examined the contribution of adult basic education in countries around the world to the Millenrial Development Goals, concluded that:

- In sum, suitably organized and implemented literacy programmes do tend to engender stronger and more confident social and political participation by poor, unschooled people - particularly poor women.

But the corollary is also true, that illiteracy is very often the accompaniment to inequality and tyranny. Without basic literacy, people are excluded from the political processes, and are prone to manipulation by populist leaders. Low literacy levels form a fertile ground in which unrealistic notions of democracy can develop, as recent experience in some Pacific island states demonstrates. This is why adult education has always seen itself as an ally of democracy, because it helps ordinary people, who have not had the benefit of schooling and higher education, achieve sufficient basic understanding to be able, as Freire said, to ‘read their world.’

Our work in Indigenous communities where literacy levels are extremely low confirms the contribution that adult literacy makes to the effective operation of governance and democracy at the micro-level. In the absence of programs which address adult illiteracy, Indigenous communities have enormous difficulty taking control and becoming active agents in their own development, and the few leaders who do have better literacy levels quickly burn out. In our direct experience, this results in high levels of wastage of funds applied to local development goals, and increasing alienation, frustration, and socially-destructive behaviour, especially among young people. Literacy programs can be developed around helping people to clarify their needs, identifying and accessing the resources within and outside their communities to meet those needs, and then managing those resources to achieve their goals. This is not rocket science, but it does involve literacy, as a first step towards establishing good governance at the local level and participatory development strategies which have the consent of the local population.

Finally, governments in the South which seek to engage critically with the major forces of the global economy cannot afford not to have a literate population actively engaged in political participation. A politically literate population provides essential support to
governments wanting to maintain an independent position internationally. Adult education programs which are organic, coordinated and integrated across the different sectors of government and non-government activity help to engage people actively in national dialogues, and to reflect critically on the way global issues impact on their own development aspirations and needs.

**International Policy Context**

This last part of the paper briefly reviews the international policy context in which the support for adult literacy has to be addressed. This international dimension is important, because, with the best will in the world, and the most progressive education policy, Timor Leste, like every other peripheral country in this globalised world, will be required to establish and implement its policies with reference to the policies of international agencies and donor nations. The lack of understanding and commitment among these external parties to the critical role of adult education presents a major obstacle to obtaining support for an enhanced effort in relation to adult literacy. This policy impediment will need to be addressed, through arguments based on reliable international, but also local, research.

This conference was called to recognise International Literacy Day, declared by the United Nations and supported by its many agencies and key multinational institutions. Historically, this commitment goes back at least to 1990, when the Education For All (EFA) manifesto was adopted at Jomtien. The international adult education community re-asserted its commitment to adult literacy at the UNESCO CONFINTA V Conference in 1997, and the World Education Forum, held in 2000 in Dakar adopted a Framework for Action on EFA by 2015 which included a commitment to improve literacy rates by 50%. The UN, moreover, has declared an International Decade of Literacy 2003-2013. We can hope that these developments will over time help create a more supportive policy environment for national governments and NGOs who wish to prioritise adult literacy. A declaration of a recent conference of Southern African development agencies, for example, included the following statement:

> WE SEE ADULT BASIC AND LITERACY EDUCATION as a fundamental human right and an indispensable complement to the formal education of children and youth. It is a vitally important component of education policy that must stand alongside formal schooling, as it is adults who hold the responsibility for building sustainable futures. We believe that adult basic and literacy education is the essential foundation for lifelong learning that can be the portal to the development of knowledge, values, skills and sustainable livelihoods. Policies, programmes and legislation should reflect this. THEREFORE, this community of adult educators and development practitioners constituted by people from governments, education and training institutions, NGOs, unions, adult education networks and donor agencies, expresses its commitment to the revitalization of adult basic and literacy education for democracy and sustainable development (cited Schugurensky 2002).

However, it is important to recognise that there are counter tendencies. Despite strong international policy commitments, implementation has proved less straightforward. In particular, a World Bank study in 1994 seriously questioned the value of adult literacy
programs in national development, and this scepticism flowed through into the Millennium Development Goals, based on OECD international development targets; and the World Bank-funded Fast Track Initiatives on EFA, which prioritised primary school education, at the expense of adult education programs, in the campaign to overcome illiteracy. This occurred even though, by 1998, the World Bank had acknowledged the inadequacy of the 1994 study (Torres 2003; Burchett 2004).

A second challenge is that international policy trends reflect national policy shifts inside donor countries. During the 1990s, broadly-defined adult education, which included a wide range of social and community development goals and programs, suffered a substantial reduction in financial support from governments which chose to prioritise the vocational education and training sector. However, this trend has begun to be reversed again, in the last two years. Such national policy shifts flow through into the attitudes of aid agencies, both government and non-government. It is also important to acknowledge that very few OECD countries prioritise adult education in their aid budgets (Youngman 2000).

Thirdly, the dispersed nature of adult education makes it difficult to measure, and leaves it without a single institutional base inside governments. As a sympathetic commentator from UNESCO puts it: Lack of clarity on what constitutes adult education, lack of specified recording of financial support to adult education and lack of knowledge on what financing is needed to undertake adult education activities and achieve the adult education-related EFA goals act against provision of funding for adult education. In a context of scarce resources, this may reinforce the trend towards paying particular attention to investing broadly in school education for children, and particularly girls, rather than ensuring systemic development, of which continuing education and special programmes for marginalized and excluded adult population groups form a necessary part (Burchert 2004).

Nevertheless, there is substantial international evidence which can be used to advocate for improved programs targeting adult illiteracy. In some areas, particularly health, the evidence is simply overwhelming, while in other areas, the evidence is still being accumulated.

In a world increasingly dominated by economic thinking, it is important to point out that short term savings in education budgets ‘upstream’ do not take long to translate into higher ‘downstream’ costs. These can include poor maternal and child health; reduced economic productivity; lowered participation in education by children and youth; reduced political participation; less effective governance at a local level; and ultimately, increasing social inequality with its consequences in terms of increased risk of social conflict and a breakdown of peace and order.

**Conclusion**

This paper has set out some of the evidence from around the world that demonstrates the fundamental importance of adult education to sustainable development, especially programs with people who are illiterate or have low literacy. We have presented this with
a view to supporting your own democratically-decided national development plan, which commits to the elimination of illiteracy.

The main thing, as you go forward, will be to develop your own Timorese system for addressing these issues. All education, including adult education, has to grow from within the culture and the experience of the people it is to benefit. There are no ‘cheap imports’ which can substitute for your own national system, and education is not a product that can be bought off the shelf, much as some industrialized countries, our own included, would sometimes have us believe. As we argued in another paper, the key to an effective Timor Leste adult education system, which addresses the problems of adult illiteracy in the context of local, regional and national development goals, will be the capacity and leadership of your own adult education workforce, because only Timorese adult educators can really know what is needed (Boughton and Durnan 2004b).

To add a final point, the other activity which deserves some attention is the development of a local capacity to undertake the research and evaluation of your programs which generates the data on which submissions for funding and of policy development depend. Such locally-run evaluative research can become an extremely powerful tool in your negotiations with donor agencies and your own Treasury. It will also help to rectify the continued Euro-centric and Anglo-centric focus of much adult education research.

Bob Boughton & Deborah Durnan
University of New England, Armidale, Australia.
September 15th, 2004
Emails: bob.boughton@une.edu.au; djduman@bigpond.com

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