

Immediate release

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Mary MacKillop Today's legacy in Timor Leste continues 25 years after the referendum on independence.

As the 25th anniversary of the referendum for Timor Leste's independence approaches, Mary MacKillop Today reflects on the education achievements started by courageous Australian Josephite sisters 30 years ago.

The people of Timor-Leste voted overwhelmingly for independence from Indonesian occupation in a United Nations-sponsored referendum on 30 August 1999. The Indonesian occupation had lasted 24 years and during this time, there were significant human rights abuses suffered by the Timorese people. The historic vote followed years of resistance against foreign occupation and an enduring quest for self-determination.

"This anniversary marks the unwavering spirit of the Timorese people, and we stand with the people as they celebrate their achievements," said Jane Woolford, CEO of Mary MacKillop Today.

Mary MacKillop Today has been working in Timor-Leste for more than 30 years, since the Sisters of Saint Joseph first began their courageous work during the violence of the Indonesian occupation.

The Sisters first arrived in Timor-Leste in 1994, following a call from Bishop Carlos Belo to help educate the people in the Tetum language. Just like Saint Mary MacKillop, the Sisters answered the call because they knew the incredible power of quality education to transform lives for those most vulnerable and excluded. Despite the many challenges they faced, they persevered in their mission to reach the margins with education opportunities.

“I was drawn to Timor-Leste because I saw the enormous need. When I first arrived, education was only for the elite. There were enormous rates of illiteracy, and the situation was made worse because of the restrictions on language. Not only were Tetum books banned, but Tetum was not even allowed to be spoken,” said Sister Josephine Mitchell.

“One of the first things we did was develop materials in the local language. We had to print the books in Australia and discreetly carry them into Timor-Leste ourselves. As well as developing the books, we trained teachers how to get the most out of them for their students’ education. That’s when we built a strong core group of teachers to go out to villages to train other teachers.

“It was a great privilege to work all these years in Timor-Leste. The Timorese people have endured so much suffering, and I am so thankful they finally have their freedom.”

Today, the legacy of the Sisters of Saint Joseph’s work in Timor-Leste lives on through Mary MacKillop Today. Through the delivery of Learning for Life programs, Mary MacKillop Today provides education to break the cycle of poverty and transform lives.

“The Sisters developed the first story books for children in their mother tongue, Tetum, providing a pathway to literacy for these kids,” said Jane Woolford.

“Mary MacKillop Today still carries on this project along with teacher training and parent literacy programs, reaching communities across a significant remote area of the country.

“There is still so much crucial work to be done in Timor-Leste and we remain committed to supporting the most marginalised communities in the hardest to reach areas.”

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ADDITIONAL INFORMATION:

Timor-Leste is one of Australia's closest neighbours. Since gaining independence in 2002, the country has made significant progress focusing on education, healthcare, and infrastructure.

Despite these significant strides in nation building, more than 45% of the population are living below the poverty line, which is the highest number in Southeast Asia. People living in rural and remote areas are especially vulnerable to poverty and exclusion.

ABOUT MARY MACKILLOP TODAY:

Mary MacKillop Today is an international development organisation working in Australia and overseas. We build partnerships that create opportunities for self-determination through education and the teaching of practical life skills to women, men and children. Established in 2018, we continue the legacy of a 150-year-old ministry founded by Saint Mary MacKillop. We are proudly continuing the works of the Sisters of Saint Joseph, transforming lives through learning for life so that people can flourish.

We directly manage and implement programs with a range of local partners in Australia, Timor-Leste, Fiji, and Peru in the areas of education, health, financial inclusion, and livelihoods. We stand with the marginalised poor in rural and remote communities, so they can break the cycle of poverty and realise their full potential.
