

Friendship City Relations between Communities and Local Governments in Australia and Timor Leste: Developing Citizen-to-Citizen Relations

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Introduction

Friendship city relations between Australia and the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste (formerly the Indonesian Province of East Timor) were set up to assist East Timorese local communities during a very difficult period following the violent withdrawal of Indonesia from East Timor in 1999—a period during which East Timor, under United Nations control, moved towards independence in May 2002.

Formal relationships were first established between Australia and East Timor in 2000. Since then the number of friendship cities has increased. In April 2003, when the first conference and expo on working together for East Timor were held in Melbourne, 13 cities and communities in Australia had established friendship relations with cities, towns and villages in Timor Leste (Perry 2003). By November 2005 there were 50 friendship city relationships, most of these being with cities and communities in the state of Victoria, the others being in New South Wales, Queensland and the Australian Capital Territory (see appendix). The increasing number of friendship city arrangements shows the enthusiasm of Australians to involve their local governments and communities in the future of the people of Timor Leste.

These friendship arrangements have proved to be a valuable form of development assistance during the first phase of the new nation as it emerges from the destruction of occupation and civil conflict. The arrangements have also empowered the citizens of Timor Leste to live their lives—and govern their communities—according to their own

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aspirations. The cross-cultural exchanges which have resulted from the relationships have been enriching experiences for both the East Timorese and Australian participants.

This paper examines and discusses the details of these arrangements, drawing special attention to the citizen-to-citizen relationships, to issues of participatory democracy and local governance, as well as to the development of the social and economic fabric of the emerging nation of Timor Leste.

A unique historical proximity as a foundation for friendship.

Historically and geographically Timor Leste is Australia's closest neighbour. The first major involvement of Australians with the East Timorese occurred during World War II, when 700 Australian commandos in what was then Portuguese Timor, were fighting more than 20,000 invading Japanese troops. The fatalities on the part of the Japanese were 1500, while those on the part of Australians were only 40. This was mainly because of the guerrilla warfare waged by the Australians, the success of which can be explained by the support of the local community. Levy, a commando in the 2/4th Independent Company, wrote:

Our only support was the Timorese. Never once did the Timorese betray us. They were unbelievably loyal to us. That loyalty is why we survived and why I am able to stand here more than five decades later, to tell you of the debt my comrades and I owe to the Timorese people (cited in Aubrey 1998, p xiii).

At the end of the war, the Australian government and the commandos made a promise to the Timorese as a gesture of gratitude for their help and friendship, saying: 'Friends, we will never forget you!'

The price paid by the Timorese for their cooperation with the Australian commandos was high. An estimated 40,000 to 70,000 East Timorese out of a total pre-war population of 450,000 were killed by the Japanese. Many of their hamlets and villages were reduced to ashes. At least 50 Chinese-Timorese women (out of a population of 3500 Chinese-Timorese) and an unknown larger number of indigenous Timorese women were

used as concubines or comfort women by the Japanese army (Gunn 1999, pp 235–7, 242; Levy cited in Aubrey 1998, pp xiii–xiv). These events have formed the basis of bonds of friendship between the two countries.

On 16 October 1975, seven weeks before the massive Indonesian invasion of the nine day old independent East Timor, five young and courageous Australian journalists were shot dead by the Indonesians in the town of Balibo—killed to prevent their filming of the activities of the Indonesian Special Forces reaching the outside world. The murder of the ‘Balibo Five’ has created further bonds between Australians—especially media people, family members and friends of the journalists—and East Timorese. The phrase ‘Balibo Five’ has since entered the collective memory of the Australians and East Timorese.

The indifference and complicity of successive Australian governments during the Indonesian invasion, annexation and the 24 years of oppressive occupation that cost the lives of one third of the population of East Timor, was a betrayal of friendship and of Australia’s democratic and liberal values. Australia’s promise was not kept and this was deeply felt by the East Timorese. However, the solidarity movement in Australia, involving many ordinary Australians, former commandos, their families and friends, kept alive the East Timorese flame of struggle and hope to rule their own country. Australian public solidarity increased from the early 1990s, especially after the widely publicised images of the Santa Cruz massacre in 1991. This solidarity swelled and reached its peak in September 1999 during the massive destruction and violence perpetrated by the Indonesian army following the East Timorese vote for separation from the Republic of Indonesia. Forced by mounting public pressure in Australia, the Howard Government sent Australian troops to prevent further bloodshed and violence and to secure East Timor. The promise of friendship made 55 years ago, after 24 years of betrayal, was eventually fulfilled by the Australian Federal Government.

Australian soldiers and other international forces arriving in East Timor were greeted with tears of joy and gratitude by the surviving Timorese. A new bond of friendship was established on the ground between the Australian army and the East Timorese people. The third generation of Australian soldiers, as General Peter Cosgrove (2005) put it, fulfilled the promise made by their spiritual grandfathers at the end of World

War II. The friendship city relations now flourishing between the two countries need to be understood, nourished and developed within this unique historical context. It is this particular context that distinguishes these friendship city relations from sister city relations developed with cities in other countries, established on bases other than historical and geographical proximity. These include, for example, the sister city relations between the City of Port Phillip and the City of Obu in Aichi Prefecture of Japan, and also the friendship relations between Elwood College and St Kilda Primary School of the City of Port Phillip and their sister schools in Obu - Obu Higashi Senior High School and Ishigase Primary School.²

Citizen-to-citizen relations across the nation-state boundaries

The rationale for these friendship city relations is the development of people-to-people or citizen-to-citizen relationships. These start from the grass roots level, and result in community-to-community relationships supported and facilitated by their respective local governments, committing them to long term, often 10 year, relationships (Perry 2003, p 29).

Citizen-to-citizen relationships between people in Australia and people in independent Timor Leste, as stated above, have been coloured by the bonds of friendship made during World War II. In addition, the dismay felt by many over the betrayal of the East Timorese by successive Australian governments during Indonesia's brutal invasion and occupation of their country from 1975 to 1999 and a deep compassion for and solidarity with the East Timorese people, have driven many different communities in Australia, particularly in the State of Victoria, to establish friendship relations with communities in Timor Leste.

The subtle and tacit message underlying the friendship city relations in the period following the independence referendum and Indonesia's withdrawal involving, as it did, massive destruction and violence was this: 'You are not alone. We are with you and walk

² It is worth noting that the City of Port Phillip's sister City of Obu, Japan, donated money for the City of Port Phillip to help the community of Suai in Timor Leste with which the City of Port Phillip formally established friendship relations in early 2000.

with you'. This in some way has helped piece together the shattered lives of the East Timorese, to heal the wounds and find the basic means for survival. The principle drivers of these friendship city relations were a City of Darebin Councillor and representative of the Victorian Local Government Association (VLGA), the then Chief Executive Officer of the City of Port Phillip, and the then Head of the Melbourne Office of Timorese Resistance and National Commission for Emergency Aid (Nyland 2002, p 3)³. The people of the State of Victoria were at the forefront in their solidarity with the struggle of the East Timorese towards political independence during the 24 years of Indonesian occupation. This solidarity helps explain why the largest number of exiled Timorese chose to live in Victoria.

The solidarity has continued with strong links between Victoria and East Timor extending from the grass roots community level up to the Victorian Premier who visited East Timor in 2001 (Darveniza 2003). In October 2003 the Premier returned to independent Timor Leste to open the Balibo Flag House. The House, where the Balibo five took refuge in their final days, was renovated by the people of Victoria and turned into a community centre for the people of Balibo—a living memorial to the murdered journalists. Prior to the post-referendum violence, the VLGA in cooperation with the Australian Council For Overseas Aid (ACFOA) organised for 40 people from the State of Victoria to act as international observers for the United Nation's supervised referendum ballot in East Timor held on 30 August 1999. The VLGA East Timor Working Group was later formed as an umbrella group for all friendship cities and is open to all Victorian local governments. A 'Statement of Principles for Victorian Local Governments Working in East Timor' was signed in early 2000 by the then President of the National Council for Timorese Resistance, the President of the Municipal Association of Victoria, the Victorian Minister for Local Government, and the VLGA President. In April 2003 VLGA Working Together for East Timor organised a very successful conference and expo held in the City of Darebin. Forty organizations—both government and non-government—participated in this event. The President of the newly independent Timor Leste, Xanana Gusmao and the First Lady gave the conference keynote addresses.

³ Abel Gutters, then Head of the Melbourne Office of Timorese Resistance and National Commission for Emergency Aid, now Consul General of the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste in Sydney, has lived in Australia since 1975 and has developed strong connections with many people and communities in Australia especially in the State of Victoria. As a result, he has played a crucial role in establishing the link between local governments and communities in Australia and Timor Leste.

The possibilities of forming friendship relations were first explored towards the end of 1999 and early 2000 when visits to towns in East Timor such as Suai, Baucau and Aileu were paid for by Australian local governments and community leaders. Confronted with near total destruction of towns and villages and seeing that the East Timorese had lost almost everything, the question raised by these local government officials and community leaders was: what can be done on a practical level to respond to the emergency and humanitarian needs of the East Timorese? Back in Australia, meetings were held and communities were mobilised to give assistance, especially during the period of emergency following Indonesia's withdrawal. The following are some of the practical initiatives that flowed from this:

- Fund-raising events were organised and donations of various types including sewing machines, clothing, bicycles and hospital equipment, were shipped to East Timorese towns such as, Remexio, Suai, Aileu and Baucau;
- Committees were formed in Australia, and later in East Timor, and regular meetings held to discuss, draw up and execute strategic plans for helping East Timorese local communities and local governments;
- The City of Port Phillip's Friends of Suai, was formally launched and a Community Steering Group established in March 2000. The City signed a ten year commitment to the people in Suai-Coba Lima district with a basic annual budget of \$100,000 from the Council. In May 2005 the City of Port Phillip and Suai-Koba Lima renewed their Memorandum of Understanding and strengthened their future strategic planning for the next five years;
- In May 2005, during a 12 day visit to Melbourne of the newly appointed District Administrator of Aileu, a new five year friendship agreement with Aileu was signed by the City of Moreland and Hume;
- Community, youth and learning centres were built in several towns, such as Suai, Baucau and Aileu;
- Training in computer literacy, English language, carpentry, nutrition and health was, and is still being provided to the East Timorese people;
- In 2003–2004 the Cities of Moreland's and Hume's Friends of Aileu awarded seven tertiary scholarships for students of Aileu to study in Dili and Baucau;

- Two English teachers from the cities of Moreland and Hume's Friends of Aileu have been placed as Australian Volunteers in Aileu;
- Several community leaders, representatives and district administrators in Timor Leste were invited to Australia to observe and undergo short-term training in local governance, education, nutrition and health, youth and small business. For example, in 2003 the City of White Horse's Friends of Oecussi, funded two women from Oecussi to undertake a six week intensive course in small business at Melbourne's Box Hill TAFE;
- Through the City of Port Phillip's Friends of Suai, three Australians have worked with the people in Suai in varying capacities in the past five years. They were financially supported by the City of Port Phillip and Australian Volunteers International;
- Coordinators of Friendship Cities in Australia, such as the Cities of Port Philip, Darebin, Yarra, and the City of Moreland and Hume were employed to coordinate and facilitate the relationships between communities in Australia and in Timor Leste. As at July 2005 two Timorese, both with experience living and studying in Australia, have been employed by the VLGA and Australian Volunteers International as the Dili-based Timor Leste Friendship Relationship Liaison Officer and Liaison Advisor, respectively. They will coordinate and facilitate friendship city relations covering all friendship cities in both countries (VLGA 2005);
- The City of Boroondara's Friends of Same has been successful in their coffee fundraising project and have turned it into a large moneymaker for that organisation. In cooperation with East Timor Women Australia, the City of Boroondara's Friends of Same invited several women master weavers from Same to visit Australia in September 2005 to promote Timor's traditional textiles (*tais*); and
- The Shire of Mornington Peninsula's Friends of Los Palos has supported a soap-making venture and helped build a guest house in Los Palos.

Local participatory democracy and governance

One very important issue that is being investigated as part of the friendship city relations is that of the introduction of participatory democracy through local governance in Timor Leste. At the forefront of this initiative is a City of Darebin Councillor and Victorian Local Governance Policy Officer who participated as an international observer in the 1999 UN-supervised referendum (Perry 2003). She approached the VLGA for them to assist local governments and communities in Timor Leste to take control of their own destiny as individuals and communities, to decide for themselves where they are as communities where they are heading and which path to take to reach that destination 'without prejudice to the participation of the State' (Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor Leste 2002, art 73).

The role the friendship cities in Australia can play in this respect is to promote participatory democracy, constructive and egalitarian development that benefits all people at the grass root level and to respect the communal spirit of traditional socio-political systems. The friendship cities can play their part in helping the local people to become genuine authors and owners of their own democracy and development. However, ideas of local participatory democracy and governance can only be gently introduced and offered as a possible alternative or addition to the local indigenous systems of social and political arrangement; systems that 'have proven their effectiveness over a long period of time' and that the Timorese defended over decades during the Indonesian occupation (Hohe 2002). These indigenous systems are based on kinship and marriage systems, the foundations of Timorese social structure (Hohe 2002). Whether or not the ideas of local participatory democracy and governance will be accepted is the prerogative of the local people, not that of outside powers (such as foreign governments, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF), aid donors, international non-government organisations or friendship cities). Neither is it the decision of the Timor Leste central government. If these ideas are forced on the people in the rural areas where the indigenous systems are still deeply rooted and highly valued, they will have no legitimacy and will not take deep roots. There is a danger that the rural people, who make up the great majority of the population, will feel they have been re-colonised and will be unable to truly participate in their political independence.

Empowerment of local communities, centrality of people in decision-making

The idea and practice of local participatory democracy involves the idea and practice of empowerment of the local communities. To empower local communities is to make them feel that it is they, not others, who determine how they will live their lives; it is they who govern themselves, decide for themselves and determine and control their own destiny and fate. Without that feeling, the idea of democracy as *ukun rasik aan* (Tetum's phrase for self-rule or self-governance) is just an empty concept. And as Dureau (2003, p 20) rightly concludes in his paper on governance and local government in Timor Leste:

The key values for a successful transition to good governance at the local level seems to be a belief in the centrality of the people in decision making and a trust on the part of the national leadership that this will lead to a greater sovereignty.

This includes people's decision to welcome or reject the idea of participatory democracy and local governance including, for instance, the World Bank's Community Empowerment and Local Governance Project (CEP) introduced in 2000. Such a decision is in itself the practice of participatory democracy and self-governance at the local level.

Talk of democracy is meaningless if the local people feel that their traditional values, social, economic and political systems that they strongly defended during the years of colonisation are being disregarded and threatened. The same is true if they feel they are not given time to think and decide for themselves by central government or outsider agencies, particularly aid donors such as the World Bank or the IMF. For instance local people regard the World Bank's CEP and its Councils in Timor Leste as the 'Banco Mundial' (World Bank) project and councils and not as their own. This indicates that the CEP does not have roots in people's hearts and that local people feel they are not the authors and owners of the project which in turn, is felt as undermining and disempowering of the traditional local authority (Dureau 2003; Moxham 2005). 'The CEP', Moxham (2005) writes, 'is an unfortunate example of the depoliticisation and bureaucratisation of some [...] participatory experiments in popular democracy'. The empowerment of people at the grass-root level in Timor Leste can help decentralise power in that it can prevent the central government from becoming too powerful,

paternalistically bureaucratic and corrupt. And it can help local people to be authors of their own development and change.

Cross-cultural exchange and enrichment

In contrast to the extreme economic poverty of Timor Leste, Australia is a rich nation. According to the United Nation's Human Development Index of 2003 (*The Economist*, 17 September 2005, p 100) Australia has the highest standard of living in the world after Norway. Colonisation and its accumulative consequences have condemned the East Timorese, like many other colonised people, including indigenous Australians, to poverty, misery and to some extent the loss of cultural pride. However, it is interesting to look at whether there is anything of value, beyond economic or monetary value, that communities in Australia can learn from the people of Timor Leste. Livermore (2003, p 13), a medical doctor and PALMS Australia volunteer in Timor Leste, reflected:

As we work through a sense of justice and friendship to try to assist and empower people in the other countries, we need to be mutually aware of the pitfalls of dependency and loss of cultural cohesion and pride. [We need] [t]o work together with the leaders of East Timor to improve education and freedom from debilitating illness while preserving the uniqueness, resilience, family and community spirit of Timor. Looking beyond ourselves and our community may well strengthen the compassion within our own society, which can become cynical and jaded [...]. How can we in Australia learn from the simplicity of life, joy, courage and determination of the Timorese people? How can we extend the hand of friendship so as to facilitate programs that communities in Timor feel are a priority?

'[C]ross-cultural friendship', Livermore argues, 'opens us up to look beyond our own borders and experience of life from another perspective' (2003, p 13).

Selective and critical conservation and transformation

Cultures and traditions as created by human beings are not infallible nor perfect. Not all traditional values are necessarily bad and to be abandoned, and not all modern values are necessarily good and to be welcome and conserved. There needs to be a process of critical encounter in which people can learn from each other and can understand themselves critically. Through dialogical relationships, Timorese and Australians can promote the conservation and transformation of each other's cultural distinctiveness, and enrich one another beyond the prevailing purely economic or materialistic needs and values in the capitalistic world. In selectively and critically preserving and developing its own history and traditions, Timor Leste should not allow itself to be imprisoned by the fixity of its history and traditions. It needs to be critically open to different experiments, traditions and possibilities for its own enrichment—traditions and possibilities from outside and within its own multicultural and multilingual society consisting of more than 30 different languages.

In the early stages of their independence, the East Timorese perhaps need to be supported in: first, shaping and affirming their own unique identities which were suppressed by the colonisers; secondly, restoring their cultural values and pride; and thirdly, defining themselves in terms of their distinctive cultural, historical and ecological experiences and in terms of their collective dreams. These are projects to be realised for a better future.

Friendship city relations as a hope

Australia has a moral responsibility and a great opportunity to help Timor Leste, without imposition, as its closest geographical and historical neighbour, to be a successful democratic nation with its own cultural, historical and ecological distinctiveness and particularities. The activities of friendship cities, other organisations⁴ and of individual philanthropists,⁵ give hope for this success.

⁴ These other forms of organisation include the Australia East Timor Association, Timor Sea Justice Campaign, Mary Mckillop Institute of East Timor Studies, Australian Volunteers International, Oxfam Community Aid Abroad, Churches, Rotary International, Lions International, Kiwanis International, the

Australia's role in the 1999 liberation of East Timor was an admirable and uplifting achievement which understandably generated joy and pride for many Australians. Many Australian communities, local governments, non-governmental organisations and the Australian army and police forces who worked in East Timor, have won the hearts of the East Timorese through their acts of caring, solidarity and friendship. However, while the Australian Government itself won the respect of the East Timorese as well as the recognition of the international community for its deeds in 1999, it has more recently undermined these achievements in the eyes of many Timorese who perceive that the Australian Government has exerted 'bullying tactics' in its dealings with the East Timorese regarding maritime boundaries and oil and gas resources in the Timor Sea (Senevirante 2003; Kammerer 2004; *The Economist* 2003; ABC 2004). In order to intervene in what is also popularly perceived by many Australians as unfair dealings by the Australian Government, and to prevent their existing friendship city projects and good works from being undermined, many local communities and governments, directly and indirectly, have become involved in the Timor Sea Justice Campaign. They have stood up in order to demand their own government deliver what is fair to both the East Timorese and the Australians under international maritime law (Clark 1992; Brennan 2004a, 2004b; Michelmore 2004). By doing so, local communities and governments have helped to prevent the Federal Government's 1999 achievement from being undermined. A news poll survey of October 2004 found that 77 per cent of Australians supported the view that the International Court of Justice, from which Australia unilaterally withdrew in March 2002, should determine the maritime boundary issue if amicable negotiations failed. Only 10 per cent were against the idea, while 13 per cent remained undecided (Michelmore 2004).

In the same way that the growing loyal solidarity movement of the Australian people during the Indonesian occupation eventually helped lead to the independence from

Jesuits, Caritas Australia, Uniting Church, World Vision, the Salesians, the Ballarat Mercy Sisters, Austcare, the Freemason and the Knights of the Southern Cross and the RSI, the Marists, Australian Peoples Humanitarian International Development Aid, East Timor Women Australia, Friendship Schools under the umbrella of ALOLA Foundation led by the Timor Leste's First Lady and others.

⁵ For instance, Liberal Party member Ian Melrose. Melrose's empathy with, or compassion for, the vulnerable and the poor in Timor Leste and his strong passion for fairness have compelled him to spend millions of dollars from his own pocket to campaign tirelessly against what he views as the Australian Government's unfair dealings with the East Timorese over the disputed seabed boundary and oil and gas resources of the Timor Sea. Another prominent individual is Mavis Taylor whose inspiring generous spirit and humanitarian activities with people, especially women in Timor Leste, have been turned into a play 'Mavis goes to Timor', which has been performed around Australia.

Indonesia of Timor Leste, the growing loyal solidarity movement of Australians post-independence, taking the form among others, of the friendship city relations, will hopefully help lead to a successful Timor Leste as a democratic nation coloured by its own unique and particular history, traditions, languages and physical environment. A successful Timor Leste as a democratic nation will also be advantageous to Australia.

The basis for genuine friendship relations

A genuine friendship relation requires dialogue, humility and openness for the parties to learn from each other. It is interesting that the New South Wales Kangaroo Valley Friends of Remexio adopt the following enlightening words from Lao-tzu (500 BC) as their philosophical basis for working with their friends in Remexio:

Go to the people. Live with them. Learn from them. Begin with what they know. Build with what they have. Be committed. But of the true leader, when the work is done, the task is accomplished, people will say ‘we did it ourselves’ (Woodcroft-Lee 2002).

A good leader or good educator or a good friend gently teaches by example, without imposition or hurting the autonomy of others.

Mistakes and misunderstanding have perhaps been made and will continue to be made in friendship city relations. They are an inevitable part of the process of learning, of growth and of enrichment in friendship relations. People learn by trial and error and by the acknowledgment and correction of those errors. A continuous dialogue is therefore necessary to minimise mistakes and misunderstandings, to detect and correct the errors and to ease unnecessary conflicts or tensions emerging from misunderstanding. The experience of making errors and of misunderstanding one another makes us feel, as Perry (2003, p 30) rightly points out, the ‘need to find a much better way of working together’ and a much better way of interacting dialogically with each other. Perhaps there is no better cure for misunderstanding than a genuine dialogue among equal and free partners in which fear, arrogance, suspicion and pretension crumble.

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APPENDIX

Cities with established friendship relations as at May 2005

Australian local governments and community-based groups	Timor-Leste districts and subdistricts
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Victoria

City of Ballarat	Ainaro
City of Boroondara	Same
City of Greater Geelong	Viqueque
Cities of Yarra and Darebin	Baucau
City of Kingston	Manutu
City of Whitehorse Friends of Oecussi (Community-based Group)	Oecussi
City of Mooney Valley	Liquica ¹⁰
Cities of Moreland and Hume	Aileu
City of Port Phillip	Suai
City of Casey	Ermera
Shire of Mornington Peninsula	Los Palos
Maryborough Friends of East Timor (Community-based Group)	Loihuno (Viqueque)
Daylesford Friends Group (Community-based Group)	Bobonaro
City of Greater Bendigo	Ossu (Viqueque)City of
Stonnington	Baguia
Shire of Bega Valley	Natarbora

NSW

Kangaroo Valley Community	Remexio
City of Leichhardt	Maliana
SSROC – 11 Cities of Southern Sydney	
Regional Organisation of Councils	Uatocarbau & Illiomar

QLD

City of Brisbane	Oecussi
Shire of Caloola Gympie	Laga

ACT

City of Canberra	Dili
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NT

City of Darwin	Dili
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Cities with friendship relations being established as at May 2005**Australian local government and
community-based groups****Timor-Leste districts and subdistricts****Victoria**

City of Wangaratta (Ovens & King Valley)	Lacluta
Shire of Mansfield	Venilale
Shire of Bendigo	Ossu
Shire of Wodonga	Maubessi
City of Banyule	TBA
Shire of Hepburn Spring	Bobonaro
City of Monash	Vermassee
Mildura Rural City	Quelicaí
Shire of Campaspe	Lequidoe (a subdistrict in Aileu)
Moora Moora Community	Besilau (a village in Aileu)
City of Bayside	TBA

NSW

Shire of Albury

Shire of Leeton

City of Newcastle

Shire of Coffs Harbour

Luro

Uatolari

Maubessi

Maubara