

Opening remarks
by
H.E. Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão

President of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste

At the
Workshop on Transparency and Economic Justice

Dili, 18th August, 2004

Excellency, Prime Minister
Excellency, SRSG
Distinguished Guests and Participants
Ladies and Gentlemen

Before I begin, I wish to extend my great appreciation to the organizing committee of this workshop and I welcome the newly formed Timor-Leste's Network for Transparency and Economic Justice (NeTEJ).

This workshop follows a series of workshops of the same nature previously held by UNMISSET, UNDP, Government and other Civil Society Groups. Today we are here to speak, as the theme suggests, not only on Transparency but also on Economic Justice.

Moreover, today, it is not the Government or international organisations who are organising this workshop but a network of Timor-Leste's civil society groups. This is indeed a strong indication of how far civil society has progressed and a clear and firm affirmation of our full commitment to promote a culture of transparency in the public administration and in our society in general. As I have stated on many occasions, only with transparency can we combat corruption, collusion and nepotism, or as it is commonly referred to in Timor-Leste, "KKN". Only in a free, transparent society can we expect a fairer and more just distribution of wealth.

Transparency and economic justice are interlinked. One leads into the other and both deal with the human dignity. Without transparency, economic development cannot play its role in improving the quality of life. This is prevalent in poor and developing societies such as ours, which are much more susceptible to corruption.

But what is transparency? It is certainly a term widely used in our society. We have all recognized the urgent need for it, but do we really know what it is? Somehow it has been understood to be an essential element in our responsibility to build our country.

We demand for transparency in our public institutions as part of this responsibility and our people have identified the need for transparency to realize their vision for 2020. Transparency entails responsibility and accountability. It entails access – access to information, to opportunity, etc.

Transparency in public institutions means having public officials opened to scrutiny and justifying their actions to the public or to those charged with the responsibility of monitoring the actions of officials and all citizens alike.

It entails the adherence to ethics and professionalism by all public servants, especially by those in positions of authority. It is therefore critical that members of the public have the courage to denounce any public servant who abuses the system or acts in a manner unbecoming a servant of the State.

This not only demands courage but the ability to recognize the act of corruption or abuse. The mentality that we inherited from the past needs to be challenged and changed for the better. But I am more than aware that this process will take time.

Ensuring transparency in public institutions encompasses more than just having a strong anti-corruption policy and mechanisms of checks and balances. There needs to be a concerted and united effort from all segments of society to combat KKN and foster a culture of transparency and accountability in the daily lives of the people. In a society such as ours, awareness or consciousness of the importance of transparency and accountability can perhaps be more effective than simply having mechanisms in place.

One such example would be the upcoming establishment of the Office of the Provedor, which will provide citizens with a constitutional channel for reporting and seeking investigation into alleged abuses. Whilst the Office itself is an adequate mechanism to address corruption in the public administration, it will not be effective if sufficient working conditions are not in place and if the Provedor is not a person of a strong and independent nature.

The judicial system can also play a critical role in ensuring transparency and accountability both in the public administration and in society in general. However, adequate infrastructures need to be in place to ensure that the judicial sector undertakes its role effectively.

However, ensuring transparency and accountability does not just lie with the State institutions alone. Civil society, at large, including the private sector and media, must be engaged in this endeavour.

There has to be greater political will from the part of the government to cooperate with other sectors of society and vice versa. In this huge effort to promote transparency and combat corruption, the actions of State Institutions, political parties and civil society, should always set an example for the people.

Transparency is indispensable in combating corruption. I have always stated that corruption is the worse social disease imaginable. It destroys whole societies and tears at the very fabric of our way of living. It is a well-known fact that corruption hinders economic growth and sustainable development – in other words, economic justice.

On paper, economic justice is a very simple concept. It entails that every citizen of Timor-Leste, from the towns to the rural areas, should have access to at least a basic income to sustain their lives. Economic justice also means having equality of opportunity for every citizen. All people have the right to participate in the economic life of the society. Basic justice demands that people be assured a minimum level of participation in the economy.

Sadly, in the short to medium term, economic justice almost seems unattainable in the face of the widespread poverty amongst our people.

Economic justice can only be measured when there is a significant reduction in poverty; when every Timorese parent has the capacity to pay the school fees and send their children to school. Economic justice in Timor-Leste is when every Timorese family can afford decent housing and sit down to three nutritional meals a day. In sum, economic justice is when every Timorese has the ability to contribute to the re-building and economic development of the country.

Our economic system should, therefore, take into consideration this policy of allowing every Timorese to participate in the whole process of the economic development in a way that it can serve the people fairly. Any economic policy will directly affect the human dignity and the capacity of individuals to contribute to the national economy.

The implementation of every economic decision from the part of those in power and the institutions they built for that purpose must be seen in light of whether it protects or undermines the dignity of every Timorese.

Ladies and gentlemen,

It is common belief among our people that petroleum is a potential major source of wealth, and that it will lead to economic growth and raise Timor-Leste out of the extreme poverty in which it currently finds itself. Therefore, the policy on the management of these resources should be handled in a transparent manner, so as to ensure that the people are aware of this incoming revenue and can benefit from this national resource.

In this light, we welcome the Government's intentions to be part of the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative or otherwise known as the Blair Initiative. Increasing transparency and knowledge of revenues will only empower Timorese citizens and civil society groups to assist the Government in managing the revenues effectively.

However, more public engagement and debate are needed on how these revenues will be saved and managed. I have stated before that transparency and accountability are not limited to information on what has been done or is being done, but also includes what is intended to be done next, what is intended to be done in each phase of development. More of that is demanded when dealing with the question of oil and gas, which without doubt is an issue of national interest.

Better information sharing between all interest parties needs to occur to allow for more informed public debates, resulting in realistic solutions. In this regard, the current negotiations with Australia on the issue of maritime boundaries, including the ratification of the Greater Sunrise International Unitization Agreement should be put to a national debate, given that this is an issue of great national interest, which will affect future generations.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We can discuss at much more length on the issues of transparency and economic justice. I have provided you with a general overview of the importance of these two themes in the context of how we wish to see our nation move forward.

I am heartened to know and see civil society groups actively engaged in these discussions, as concrete proof of their responsibility as citizens and as key actors in the process of nation building and economic development.

I wish you success in this workshop and I know that the results from this will serve as a contribution to the ongoing effort in combating corruption and ensuring transparency and economic justice for our people!

Thank you.