

Alola Foundation

Alola Foundation is a NGO operating in Timor Leste to improve lives of women and children. Founded in 2001 by the then First Lady, Ms Kirsty Sword Gusmao, the organization seeks to nurture women leaders and advocate for the rights of women.

Alola Foundation was originally created to raise awareness of the widespread sexual violence against women and girls in Timor-Leste during the militia attacks of September 1999. Though this is still a key issue for Alola Foundation, today they also provide a wide range of vitally important support programs for the women and youth of Timor-Leste. Working with community groups and individuals, the programs aim to improve maternal and child health, create employment, promote human rights, strengthen community development, and improve the status of women. Now employing over 100 staff, Alola is committed to developing strong women who will be the leaders of the future in Timor-Leste. All Alola programs support the Government of Timor-Leste to achieve the National Development Goals.

Background

Alola's mission is to promote women's rights and increase women's leadership capacity. It is embedded in an advocacy program and its goal is to strengthen women's leadership and develop networks. The organization works to increase public awareness of the needs of women and is advocating for women's rights. The advocacy activities include local communities and decision makers to strengthen quality and quantity of women leaders and create a woman-and-family-space through working with all partners.

In 2009, Alola Foundation conducted six discussion forums entitled 'Women in Politics - Transformation Agenda Discussion'. They involved women who ran for Chefe de Suco Election, Suco Council and the potential of women and also men who are members of Suco Councils. Based on the results of the political discussion the following needs were detected: To have appropriate interventions to improve the performance of local authorities' work and to increase capacity building in remote areas.

This project is a follow-up recommendation from the activities that were conducted in the year 2009 to address problems and challenges faced by women who are elected as Chefe de Suco for the first time ever. According to the Decree Law No. 03 / 2009 changes have to be implemented upon the level of the Suco.

The members of the Suco Council have to be elected. Two women and two youngsters of each sex have to be incorporated in the Suco Council and the Council has to be held up every month. The **responsibilities are newly defined also**¹. The law is due to gender equality and the consideration that youth plays an important role in the reality of a suco context.

Nevertheless, reality shows that there is still a lack of information about leadership received by potential women/youth and women/youth who are elected already. Even though the ability of reading and writing is established, there are cultural practices which hinder womens' and youngsters' social engagement and there is a lack of capacity in management of village administration, whether public administration, financial administration including proposal writing and reporting activities and finances.

Some common issues that keep repeating themselves in almost all districts are:

- The majority of the women representatives and the youth representatives did not acquainted with their task and function as local administrators as it is meant in the Law Number 3/2009.
- Some of the male Chefe de Suco consider the function of women representatives still in the kitchen in order to prepare coffee or simply just entertain the guests.
- Some women and youth representatives get threatened when they object to the discriminating behaviour.

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- Some Chefe de Suco just makes an appointment with the members of the council once a month and expects them to sign whatever was decided.

Activities

In order to empower women and youth, Alola Foundation is implementing this project through training. They conduct their activities in six districts and thirty four sub districts of Timor Leste (Manatuto, Lospalos, Manufahi, Covalima, Ermera and Liqisa). Additional activities are including regular accompaniment and assistance by Alola Foundation's Field Officers. They are functioning as resource person to give feedback and support for women who have been already elected. Special consideration is given to the implementation of the annual village plan as well as the decentralization plan within the district.

Referring to these issues, the project is focusing upon the following issues:

- Increasing womens'/youths' capacity in the area of leaderships formation
- Strengthen womens'/youths' awareness in regard of participation in political life in all areas
- Promotion and guiding women and youth with potential for future elections so that they have the courage to take decisions in the public domain

Approach

The training is highly interactive. In order to empower women and youth Alola Foundation has establish a unique approach that tries to combine the four fields of empowerment and is nonetheless applicable and welcome at the grass root level.

The trainings are designed in a way to give power to the women and youth starting in the class room already. There is no material to "take away" or simply just to repeat.

The information is given in short lectures. Then the participants are divided into small buzz groups. They have to discuss about what they have received and understood and then they have to mirror it back in their own words. After this step they have to write down the essential of it. This is followed by a facilitation of the whole group incorporating visualisation. The whole process is supervised by the trainers: They give constructive feedback upon the issues that can be improved.

At the end of the training the participants are able to facilitate discussions, distinguish between information that is important or not in order to make political decisions and have increased self awareness and self confidence. They speak freely in front of a whole group.

This conducted approach seems to be very simple, but in the context of TL and the history of how knowledge is delivered, it is a revolution.

Target group

Due to the professional experience of Alola Foundation the trainings are conducted within the time planned and are reaching the target group. The number of participants who took part in the seminars is 600 hundred so far.

Obstacles

Due to their mission Alola Foundation is shaking old structures of a patriarchate system. A lot of the male Chefe de Suco does not support the new approach of equal rights because of power plays. An essential prerequisite for gender equality is the genuine participation of women in political affairs. However, a change in gender relations toward more equality is a slow process.

Approaches that proved to be successful

What makes the approach of Alola very successful is the fact that they have installed an "in-the-class room-supervision" and the combination with field staff support that is available for women and youth any time. Women and youth can refer to an existing structure of support. The Field Officers are located in all the thirteen districts (one in every district) and are established since 2007. They are females themselves. They been supporting women groups and has involved in many different activities in district and national levels and are very experienced. We also have organized different trainings to them as part of their capacity building.