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EDUCATION AS STATECRAFT: CPLP COOPERATION, LUSOPHONE INFLUENCE, AND INSTITUTIONAL CAPACITY IN POST-CONFLICT TIMOR-LESTE (2018–2023)

Muhammad Faris Anugrah, Hizra Marisa

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This study examines educational cooperation between Timor-Leste and the Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa (CPLP) during 2018–2023 as an instrument of statecraft rather than a purely developmental enterprise. For a small post-conflict state wedged between Indonesia and Australia, the choice to anchor its education system in Portuguese—a language spoken by a minority of citizens—is a strategic act of identity and alignment, and the CPLP is the institutional vehicle through which Portugal and Brazil project influence into Southeast Asia. Existing scholarship treats CPLP cooperation largely in diplomatic terms and Timor-Leste’s Human Development Index (HDI) largely in aggregate developmental terms, leaving underexamined the institutional processes through which external educational engagement is implemented, adapted, contested, and constrained on the ground. Drawing on qualitative document analysis of institutional reports, policy documents, and scholarly literature, the study traces the pathways through which CPLP initiatives operate as mechanisms of capacity building, governance transfer, and norm diffusion. Teacher professionalization, curriculum reform, academic mobility, and vocational education emerge as the principal channels of influence, but their reach is bounded by reliance on external expertise, sociolinguistic friction surrounding Portuguese-language frameworks, and uneven institutional capacity across regions. The study deliberately resists a causal claim linking CPLP programs to HDI gains; instead, it locates educational cooperation as a supporting institutional factor within a wider field of economic, political, and social forces, and reads that cooperation as soft-power projection negotiated against the limits of a low-capacity host state. Combining Liberal Institutionalism with Dependency Theory, postcolonial critique, and policy-transfer literature, it maps both the strategic logic and the empirical boundaries of international institutional influence.

Keywords: *Timor-Leste, CPLP, educational cooperation, Human Development Index (HDI), liberal institutionalism, human development, capacity building*

INTRODUCTION

In the contest for influence among small and fragile states, education has become a quiet but consequential instrument of foreign policy. Curricula, languages of instruction, and the professional norms of a teaching corps are not neutral technical matters; they shape national identity, elite formation, and a state's long-term alignment. Timor-Leste, a young post-conflict state positioned between Indonesia and Australia and tied by colonial history to the Lusophone world, makes these stakes unusually visible. Education has become a central component of contemporary development strategies and occupies a prominent position within Sustainable Development Goal 4 (SDG 4), which emphasizes inclusive and equitable access to quality education. Beyond improving individual skills and knowledge, education is widely associated with broader development objectives, including human capital formation, and socio-economic progress (UNESCO, 2021). Human capital theorists such as Schultz (1961) and Becker (1964) argue that investment in education increases productivity and strengthens economic development, while Bourdieu (1986) emphasizes that education also functions as cultural capital that shapes social opportunity and inequality. Consequently, international educational cooperation has received increasing attention within both development studies and international relations as states and international organizations seek to address educational challenges through collaborative frameworks.

The relationship between international educational cooperation and development, however, remains contested. A substantial body of literature argues that educational partnerships contribute to development by improving human capital, strengthening public institutions, and supporting long-term reform processes (Nye, 2020; Tikly, 2021). Other scholars question the effectiveness of externally supported programs, arguing that development cooperation frequently reproduces dependency, reflects unequal power relations, and generates reforms that are difficult to sustain once external support declines (Mawdsley et al., 2022; Zajontz, 2021). While these perspectives offer important insights, the debate has largely focused on whether international cooperation succeeds or fails, rather than explaining the mechanisms through which cooperation produces developmental change.

This issue is particularly relevant in post-conflict states, where external assistance often plays an important role in rebuilding institutions and supporting development. Timor-Leste represents a useful case in this regard. Its decision to adopt Portuguese as a co-official language and medium of instruction—despite its limited everyday use—was itself a strategic choice that distanced the new state from its Indonesian past and bound it to a Lusophone community of external partners, making the education sector a site where questions of identity, sovereignty, and external alignment converge. Since gaining independence in 2002, the country has faced persistent challenges in improving educational quality, expanding access to education, and strengthening institutional effectiveness within the education sector (UNICEF, 2018; Lucas et al., 2015). These challenges have significant implications for national development because education constitutes an important component of the Human Development Index (HDI), alongside health and living standards (UNDP, 2023). To address these constraints, Timor-Leste has relied extensively on international cooperation, particularly through the Comunidade dos Paises de Lingua Portuguesa (CPLP). Educational cooperation under the CPLP framework has included teacher training, curriculum development, language policy support, scholarship programs, technical assistance, and institutional partnerships involving Lusophone member states (Cabral & Martin-Jones, 2017; Miranda, 2024; Rurahman, 2016).

From the perspective of international relations, the role of international organizations in development cooperation has been widely discussed within the framework of liberal institutionalism. Keohane (1984) argues that international institutions facilitate cooperation by reducing transaction costs, coordinating collective action, and providing information that supports mutual interests among states. In the context of Timor-Leste, international institutionalism has played an important role in shaping governance mechanisms and development strategies within multilateral frameworks. Seixas et al. (2023) explain that international organizations influence decision-making processes and institutional adaptation in Timor-Leste through governance and multilateral cooperation mechanisms. This indicates that international institutions do not merely function as diplomatic arenas, but also as actors capable of influencing development priorities and institutional transformation.

Several previous studies have examined educational cooperation and development in Timor-Leste from different perspectives. Rurahman (2016) highlights the role of the CPLP in strengthening educational capacity through cooperation programs and

institutional assistance, while Miranda (2024) emphasizes the importance of educational partnerships and capacity-building initiatives within Lusophone cooperation frameworks. Cabral and Martin-Jones (2017) focus on language-in-education policies and the role of Lusophone networks in shaping educational development in Timor-Leste, whereas Seixas et al. (2023) analyze the influence of multilateral institutions on governance and political decision-making processes. Despite providing important insights into educational cooperation, governance, language policy, and institutional development, these studies largely examine such dimensions as separate areas of inquiry. As a result, limited attention has been given to how these forms of cooperation are translated into measurable development indicators, particularly improvements in Timor-Leste's HDI.

Empirically, Timor-Leste's HDI has shown gradual improvement, increasing from approximately 0.606 in 2018 to 0.634 in 2023 (UNDP, 2023). This trend indicates progress in human development despite persistent structural constraints. However, it remains important to identify the factors contributing to this improvement, particularly the extent to which international educational cooperation through the CPLP contributes to measurable improvements in human development indicators.

This limitation is also reflected in studies informed by Liberal Institutionalism. Existing scholarship has generally emphasized the role of international institutions in facilitating cooperation and collective action, yet has devoted less attention to the processes through which international cooperation strengthens domestic institutions, transfers knowledge and administrative practices, and supports long-term developmental change. Furthermore, no study has specifically examined how CPLP educational cooperation contributed to improvements in Timor-Leste's HDI during the 2018–2023 period.

These gaps give rise to an important research puzzle. CPLP has maintained a sustained presence in Timor-Leste's education sector through teacher training programs, educational assistance, and broader cooperation initiatives, while the country has simultaneously experienced improvements in key development indicators. Yet the mechanisms connecting these forms of cooperation to improvements in HDI remain insufficiently understood. This puzzle is particularly relevant in post-conflict contexts, where development outcomes are shaped not only by external assistance but also by the ability of domestic institutions to absorb, adapt, and sustain externally supported reforms.

The period 2018–2023 is selected because it captures recent phases of CPLP educational cooperation alongside measurable changes in Timor-Leste's HDI

performance. To address these gaps, this study asks the following question: **How does CPLP educational cooperation contribute to improvements in Timor-Leste's Human Development Index through institutional transfer and domestic capacity enhancement during the period 2018–2023?** This article argues that improvements in Timor-Leste's HDI cannot be explained solely by the provision of educational assistance, training programs, or technical support. Rather, the developmental effects of CPLP cooperation depend on the extent to which knowledge, administrative practices, and governance arrangements become embedded within domestic institutions. Educational cooperation generates sustainable development gains not simply by providing resources, but by strengthening the institutional foundations necessary to translate external support into long-term improvements in human development.

This study contributes to Liberal Institutional scholarship by extending existing explanations of international cooperation beyond their traditional emphasis on cooperation facilitation and collective action. Rather than treating international institutions solely as mechanisms that enable coordination among states, the article demonstrates how international educational cooperation can strengthen domestic institutions, transfer governance practices, and reinforce local capabilities that support long-term development. In doing so, the study highlights the importance of institutional strengthening as a key mechanism linking international cooperation to development outcomes in post-conflict states.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative explanatory case study design to investigate how educational cooperation within the CPLP has contributed to educational development in Timor-Leste between 2018-2023. Rather than treating international cooperation as a variable whose impact can be measured statistically, the analysis focuses on the institutional processes through which cooperation initiatives are translated into domestic educational change. A qualitative case study is particularly suitable for examining these processes because it allows close attention to the interactions between international actors, domestic institutions, and policy implementation within a specific national setting (Creswell, 2014).

The unit of analysis in this study is the institutional mechanisms through which CPLP cooperation operates within Timor-Leste's education sector. These mechanisms

include teacher training programs, educational governance support, curriculum development initiatives, scholarship schemes, and academic exchange activities. Focusing on these mechanisms makes it possible to move beyond broad discussions of international cooperation and examine how external initiatives become embedded within domestic educational institutions and policy structures.

The 2018-2023 period provides a useful analytical window for two reasons. First, it captures a recent phase of CPLP engagement in Timor-Leste's education sector. Second, it corresponds with the availability of educational and HDI data reported by international organizations, allowing developments in educational cooperation to be examined alongside broader trends in human development. The study is guided by liberal institutionalism, particularly Keohane's (1984) argument that international institutions facilitate cooperation by reducing uncertainty, coordinating collective action, and promoting the exchange of information, knowledge, and resources among states. Within this framework, CPLP is understood not merely as a diplomatic forum but as an institutional platform through which educational cooperation can support domestic development processes.

This study relies exclusively on qualitative secondary data gathered through document-based research. Source selection was guided by relevance to four interconnected themes: (1) educational cooperation, (2) educational development, (3) institutional strengthening, and (4) human development in Timor-Leste. To ensure analytical consistency, the materials were organized into four categories. The first consists of academic literature, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, and book chapters addressing international cooperation, development partnerships, liberal institutionalism, and Timor-Leste's education sector. These sources provide both the theoretical foundation and empirical context for the study. The second category comprises publications produced by international organizations, including reports and statistical assessments from UNDP, UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank. These documents provide information on educational performance, HDI trends, and broader development conditions in Timor-Leste. The third category focuses on CPLP publications, including cooperation frameworks, strategic plans, institutional reports, and program documents related to educational initiatives in Timor-Leste. The fourth and final category includes institutional guidelines, technical manuals, and policy frameworks issued by international organizations and educational agencies. These materials provide additional insights into

educational governance, institutional development, and practices associated with capacity enhancement in the education sector.

The analysis follows a qualitative content analysis approach because it enables the systematic examination of textual materials while preserving the contextual meaning of policy documents and institutional reports (Krippendorff, 2013). The analysis began with document screening. Each source was reviewed to determine its relevance to the research question, and materials lacking substantive discussions of CPLP educational cooperation, educational development, institutional reform, or HDI related indicators were excluded. The remaining documents were then examined to identify meaningful units of information relevant to the study.

Codes were generated through a combination of deductive and inductive coding. Several codes were derived from Liberal Institutional concepts identified in the theoretical framework, while others emerged from recurring patterns in the empirical materials. Examples include teacher training, educational governance, knowledge transfer, institutional support, policy coordination, scholarship programs, academic mobility, and human capital development. Rather than treating these codes as isolated observations, the analysis focused on how they interacted across different forms of cooperation.

As patterns emerged from the coding process, related codes were grouped into broader analytical categories representing the principal mechanisms through which educational cooperation operates. Three categories appeared consistently across the dataset: human resource development, institutional strengthening, and knowledge transfer. These categories subsequently served as the main analytical lenses for interpreting the data and tracing the relationship between CPLP initiatives and developments within Timor-Leste's education sector. Academic literature, institutional reports, and development assessments were then compared through thematic interpretation and pattern matching to identify recurring connections between educational cooperation, educational reform, governance improvements, and HDI-related educational indicators. Rather than seeking to establish direct causal effects, the analysis focused on identifying plausible institutional pathways through which cooperation initiatives may contribute to broader development processes.

To strengthen the credibility of the findings, this study employs source triangulation by systematically cross-checking information from CPLP publications against evidence from international organizations, academic literature, and, where

available, domestic policy documents. Given that institutional reports may reflect the priorities and perspectives of the organizations that produce them, claims regarding educational cooperation activities were verified through multiple sources. For example, descriptions of teacher training initiatives reported by CPLP were compared with educational assessments published by UNESCO, UNICEF, and the World Bank, while claims regarding educational progress were evaluated against HDI statistics and educational indicators reported by UNDP. Academic studies provided an additional layer of verification by offering independent assessments of educational development and international cooperation in Timor-Leste. Only findings supported by multiple categories of sources were incorporated into the final analysis, thereby reducing the risk of institutional bias and increasing confidence in the study's interpretations.

The study makes no causal claim linking CPLP cooperation to Timor-Leste's HDI; that index moves with petroleum revenues, public health, and a dozen other forces well beyond the education sector. The aim is narrower and more political: to trace the institutional pathways—knowledge transfer, governance support, capacity building, and human resource development—through which an external bloc embeds its practices, standards, and language in a host state, and to identify where that influence takes hold and where it meets resistance. The evidence is read as a demonstration of process and of strategic reach, not as proof of outcome.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa (CPLP) Programmes in Timor-Leste's Education Sect

By 2018, Timor-Leste had entered a period of greater political stability following a series of democratic elections. Freedom House (2018) upgraded Timor-Leste's status from "Partly Free" to "Free," citing the successful conduct of elections and the peaceful transfer of power. This development suggests a more stable political environment in which the government was potentially better positioned to pursue longer-term development objectives, including reforms in the education sector. At the same time, the CPLP was implementing its New Strategic Vision 2016–2026, adopted at the XI CPLP Summit in Brasília in 2016. The document positioned the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as a common normative framework for cooperation among member states. Within the education sector, SDG 4, which emphasizes inclusive, equitable, and quality education,

became a central reference point for cooperation initiatives undertaken in Timor-Leste (CPLP, 2021). Consequently, 2018 marked a period in which several programs developed under this strategic framework had moved beyond initial implementation and entered phases of institutional consolidation.

One of the most prominent areas of cooperation concerned teacher professional development, particularly in Portuguese-language instruction. The Pro-Portugues program was introduced to address a longstanding challenge within Timor-Leste's education system: the limited number of teachers capable of delivering instruction in Portuguese, one of the country's official languages and a key medium of instruction within the national curriculum. Rather than operating solely as a language-training initiative, the program functioned as a mechanism for transferring pedagogical knowledge and professional standards across the Lusophone community. Its implementation was coordinated through Instituto Nacional de Formacao de Docentes e Profissionais da Educacao (INFORDEPE), which served as the principal institutional interface between Timor-Leste and CPLP member states, particularly Portugal and Brazil. Through INFORDEPE, cooperation extended beyond the deployment of foreign trainers to include efforts aimed at strengthening domestic teacher-training structures and enhancing their long-term capacity to manage professional development independently. From a liberal institutionalist perspective, this arrangement reflects how international institutions facilitate cooperation by reducing knowledge gaps and supporting local capacity development through sustained institutional partnerships. Portugal's role was particularly significant due to its historical and linguistic ties with Timor-Leste. Through institutions such as Instituto Camoes, Portugal continued to support Portuguese-language education, while OECD data indicate that approximately USD 24 million in Portuguese official development assistance was disbursed to Timor-Leste between 2011 and 2012, with around 15 percent allocated to the education, health, and population sectors. This pattern of support continued in subsequent years and remained an important component of educational cooperation by 2018 (Lucas et al., 2015).

Teacher professionalization was closely linked to broader efforts to reform curriculum and educational governance. A major example was the General Secondary Education Restructuring Project (RSGE-Reestruturacao do Ensino Secundario Geral), developed through cooperation between the Ministry of Education of Timor-Leste and the University of Avereiro in Portugal, with funding support from the Portugues de Apoio ao Desenvolvimento (now Camoes Instituto). The project introduced a new secondary school

curriculum organized into two academic streams, which are Science and Technology, and Social Sciences and Humanities, while maintaining a common curriculum that included Tetum, Portuguese, English, Indonesia, Civic Education, Multimedia Technology, Religious Education, and Physical Education. Beyond curriculum revision, the RSGE represented an effort to transfer governance practices and educational planning models from a Lusophone context into Timor-Leste's education system (Gomes et al., 2024). By 2018, the curriculum had been fully implemented across grade 10 to 12 and had entered a stage of evaluation and refinement. The adaptation process revealed several structural constraints. Interviews with education policymakers identified three recurring challenges: limited Portuguese-language proficiency resulting from decades of prohibition during the Indonesian occupation, weaknesses in the scientific and pedagogical preparation of teachers, and insufficient administrative and pedagogical management capacity at the school level. These obstacles highlight that institutional transfer is not a linear process. External models require continuous adaptation, local ownership, and sustained mentoring if they are to become embedded within domestic educational structures.

Cooperation also extended to vocational and non-formal education through the AQEP Programme (*Aumento da Qualidade da Educação e dos Profissionais*), which sought to improve educational quality and strengthen workforce competencies. The program covered both formal and non-formal educational pathways and received support from CPLP member states through the deployment of teachers, technical specialists, and vocational instructors across all thirteen districts of Timor-Leste. Its underlying objective was to align educational outcomes more closely with labor market needs. This orientation reflects what educational scholars describe as "education for employability," an approach that emphasizes the relationship between learning and economic participation. Given Timor-Leste's continued dependence on the hydrocarbon sector and persistent youth unemployment during this period, vocational training represented an important policy instrument for broadening economic opportunities. Contributions from Portugal and Brazil included curriculum design, technical training modules, and expertise derived from similar vocational programs implemented in their own national contexts. In this sense, AQEP functioned not only as a skills development initiative but also as a channel for transferring institutional knowledge related to workforce preparation and vocational governance.

At the tertiary level, CPLP cooperation focused on academic mobility and access to higher education. The *Programa de Mobilidade Académica* facilitated exchanges of students

and academic staff among member states, creating opportunities for Timorese institutions to engage with broader Lusophone academic networks. These exchanges supported the internationalization of higher education while exposing participants to alternative teaching practices, research environments, and institutional experiences. Complementing this initiative, the *Programa de Bolsas de Estudo CPLP* provided scholarship opportunities for Timorese students to pursue higher education abroad. Priority was often given to students from disadvantaged backgrounds, reflecting an effort to expand access to educational opportunities that might otherwise remain inaccessible. From the perspective of educational equity, these programs carried significance beyond academic mobility alone. They also functioned as mechanisms for widening access to cultural and educational capital, a process that Pierre Bourdieu (1986) argues is central to addressing the reproduction of social inequality through unequal access to educational resources.

The scope of cooperation extended beyond teaching and curriculum reform to include technical assistance, educational infrastructure, and learning resources. Through the *Plano Estratégico de Cooperação Multilateral na Área da Educação*, CPLP member states contributed to the rehabilitation and construction of school facilities, the distribution of textbooks, and the development of educational assessment systems. Such support addressed structural constraints that had long affected the Timorese education sector. Earlier international assessments documented schools lacking adequate sanitation, clean water, classroom furniture, and basic learning materials. Infrastructure assistance therefore contributed to creating more conducive learning environments, while the provision of textbooks in Portuguese and Tetum helped address persistent shortages of teaching materials associated with the implementation of the revised curriculum. Although these initiatives do not directly demonstrate improvements in educational outcomes, they strengthened institutional conditions necessary for the effective delivery of education and supported the broader objective of enhancing educational capacity within Timor-Leste.

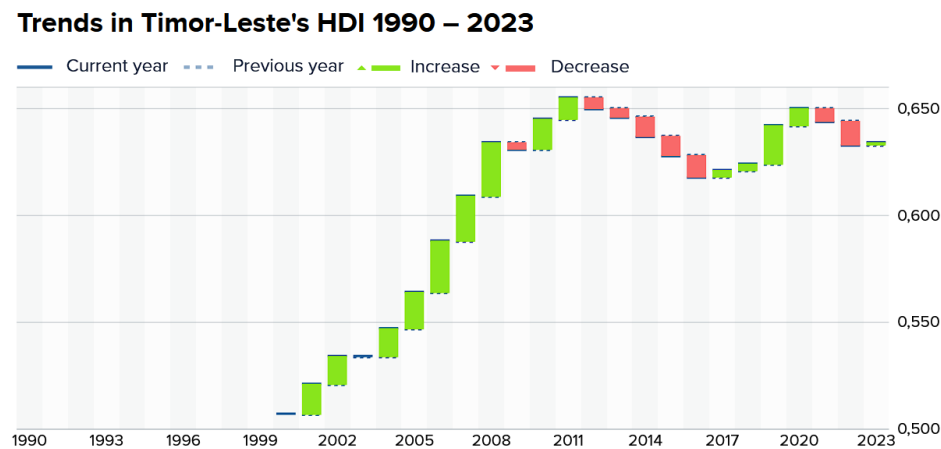
Cooperation between Timor-Leste and the Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa (CPLP) in the Education Sector to Support Human Development Index (HDI) in Timor Leste

The cooperation between Timor-Leste and the CPLP reflects a form of institutionalized international cooperation aimed at supporting human development through educational capacity building. It is also, read in strategic terms, a vehicle of soft

power: by financing teacher training, supplying curricula, and underwriting scholarships, Portugal and Brazil cultivate professional and linguistic ties that extend their reach into a strategically located corner of maritime Southeast Asia at modest cost. Within the framework of Liberal Institutionalism, international institutions are understood not merely as diplomatic forums, but as mechanisms that facilitate cooperation, reduce structural constraints, and promote the exchange of resources, knowledge, and expertise among member states (Keohane, 1984). In the case of Timor-Leste, the CPLP functions as an institutional platform through which educational assistance, professional training, and policy support can be mobilized to address limitations within the national education system.

Since gaining independence in 2002, Timor-Leste has faced persistent challenges in educational development. Limited infrastructure, shortages of qualified teachers, uneven educational access between urban and rural areas, and institutional capacity constraints have affected the country's ability to strengthen human capital. These challenges are particularly relevant to the education dimension of the HDI, which is measured through indicators such as Mean Years of Schooling (MYS) and Expected Years of Schooling (EYS). As education constitutes one of the three core dimensions of HDI, improvements in educational access, quality, and institutional effectiveness remain closely connected to broader human development objectives (Citrawan et al., 2018).

Figure 1. Timor Leste's Human Development Index Data from 2018-2023



Source: <https://hdr.undp.org/data-center/country-insights#/countries/TLS>

Figure 1 is presented to provide contextual background regarding broader human development trends in Timor-Leste during the period under study. According to data published by UNDP (2023), Timor-Leste's HDI increased from 0.606 in 2018 to 0.634 in 2023, indicating gradual progress in overall human development. However, this trend should not be interpreted as evidence of a direct relationship between CPLP educational cooperation and changes in HDI. As a multidimensional indicator, HDI is shaped by forces that lie largely outside the education sector—income, health, and public expenditure chief among them—and that no single program can claim to drive. This caution does not diminish the analytical interest of the case; it sharpens it, directing attention away from outcome metrics and toward the institutional and strategic channels through which external cooperation alone. Developments in national income, fluctuations in petroleum revenues, government expenditure on infrastructure and public services, improvements in healthcare provision, and development assistance provided by international organizations such as the World Bank, UNDP, UNICEF, and the Asian Development Bank have all influenced Timor-Leste's broader development trajectory. Consequently, while the increase in HDI provides important contextual evidence of human development progress during the period under study, it cannot be attributed exclusively to CPLP educational programs (Gomes et al., 2024).

Within this broader context, the significance of CPLP cooperation lies primarily in its contribution to strengthening the institutional foundations of the education sector. Through teacher training programs implemented by INFORDEPE, Portuguese-language capacity building under the Pro-Portugues initiative, curriculum reform through the RSGE

vocational education support under AQEP, and academic mobility programs among member states, the CPLP has contributed to the development of educational institutions and human resources in Timor-Leste. These initiatives provided access to pedagogical expertise, professional networks, technical assistance, and governance practices that were not always readily available within domestic institutions.

From the perspective of Liberal Institutionalism, such programs illustrate how international institutions facilitate cooperation by reducing domestic capacity constraints and creating structured channels for knowledge transfer. Rather than focusing solely on material assistance, CPLP cooperation has emphasized the strengthening of institutional capabilities that support the long-term delivery of education. Teacher professionalization programs sought to improve pedagogical competence and language proficiency, curriculum reform initiatives supported the modernization of educational governance, while scholarship and academic mobility schemes expanded opportunities for higher education and professional development. Together, these initiatives contributed to the institutional conditions necessary for sustaining educational development.

The relevance of these programs became particularly evident during the COVID-19 pandemic, when education systems across the world faced significant disruption. While the available evidence does not permit a direct assessment of the extent to which CPLP initiatives affected HDI outcomes, the continued operation of teacher training programs, institutional partnerships, and educational support mechanisms helped maintain important components of educational capacity during a period of considerable uncertainty. In this regard, CPLP cooperation can be understood as supporting the resilience of educational institutions rather than directly determining national human development outcomes.

The relationship between CPLP cooperation and HDI is therefore better understood as a process of institutional contribution rather than one of direct causation. Educational cooperation occurred alongside broader national and international development efforts, making it difficult to isolate the effects of any single program on overall HDI performance. Nevertheless, the evidence suggests that CPLP initiatives contributed positively to the strengthening of educational institutions, human resource development, and governance capacity, all of which are associated with the education dimension of human development.

The relevance of Liberal Institutionalism becomes particularly visible in explaining this process. Keohane (1984) argues that international institutions facilitate cooperation by reducing uncertainty, providing coordination mechanisms, and encouraging the exchange of information and resources among states. In Timor-Leste's case, the CPLP provided a framework through which educational cooperation became more structured, predictable, and sustainable (Hickel, 2020). Through this institutional framework, member states such as Portugal and Brazil were able to support educational development in ways that extended beyond financial assistance alone, encompassing technical expertise, professional training, and policy coordination.

This pattern of cooperation also aligns closely with the SDGs, particularly SDG 4 on Quality Education and SDG 17 on Partnerships for the Goals. Improvements in educational capacity, teacher training, curriculum development, and access to higher education reflect objectives associated with SDG 4, while the collaborative nature of CPLP initiatives demonstrates the practical importance of international partnerships emphasized by SDG 17. The Timor-Leste case therefore illustrates how multilateral educational cooperation can support national development priorities while simultaneously advancing broader international development agendas.

At the same time, several structural challenges continue to affect the effectiveness of educational cooperation in Timor-Leste. Educational inequalities between urban and rural areas remain visible in access to qualified teachers, learning resources, and institutional support, while continued reliance on external assistance raises questions about the long-term sustainability of certain programs. Linguistic barriers also persist, particularly as Portuguese-language educational frameworks interact with local realities in which Tetum and regional languages remain more widely used. These challenges indicate that the success of international cooperation depends not only on support from external partners but also on the ability of domestic institutions to adapt reforms to local conditions and sustain them over time. Within these limitations, CPLP cooperation has nevertheless contributed to strengthening educational capacity in Timor-Leste through teacher professionalization, curriculum reform, academic mobility, and institutional support in the education sector. However, the increase in Timor-Leste's HDI between 2018 and 2023 cannot be attributed solely to CPLP programs, as human development outcomes are influenced by a wide range of economic, social, political, and institutional factors. The findings instead suggest that CPLP cooperation contributed to the educational conditions

associated with human development, particularly through efforts to strengthen institutions, expand educational opportunities, and support human resource development.

Liberal Institutionalism and the Contribution of CPLP to Human Development in Timor-Leste

While Liberal Institutionalism provides a useful framework for understanding how international institutions facilitate cooperation, the Timor-Leste case also reveals several limitations that cannot be fully explained through institutionalist assumptions alone. Keohane (1984) argues that international institutions reduce uncertainty, facilitate coordination, and promote mutually beneficial cooperation among states. The experience of CPLP educational cooperation in Timor-Leste partially supports this argument. Through teacher training programs, curriculum restructuring initiatives, academic mobility schemes, and vocational education support, the CPLP has provided institutional resources that assisted the development of educational governance and human resource capacity during a period of post-conflict state consolidation.

The transfer of educational norms and governance practices through programs such as Pro-Português, INFORDEPE, and the General Secondary Education Restructuring Project (RSGE) illustrates how international cooperation can function as a process of norm diffusion and governance transfer. Educational actors in Timor-Leste were exposed to administrative models, professional standards, and pedagogical approaches originating from other Lusophone countries. Rurahman (2016) argues that such forms of cooperation often operate through the gradual internalization of institutional practices rather than through direct intervention. Similarly, Cabral and Martin-Jones (2017) highlight how educational cooperation between Portugal and Timor-Leste involved not only technical assistance but also the transfer of educational governance frameworks and curriculum models. From a liberal institutionalist perspective, these processes demonstrate how international institutions can support domestic capacity building by providing access to expertise, policy coordination, and administrative guidance.

Human capital development represents another important dimension of CPLP cooperation. Academic mobility programs and scholarship schemes expanded opportunities for Timorese students to access higher education institutions across the Lusophone world. These initiatives facilitated exposure to new academic environments, professional networks, and forms of technical knowledge that were less accessible within

the domestic education system. Miranda (2024) notes that educational mobility programs can contribute to long-term capacity formation by strengthening professional competencies and expanding access to higher education. Vocational education initiatives such as AQEP similarly sought to improve workforce preparedness by aligning educational training with labor-market requirements. These programs created institutional pathways through which knowledge, skills, and professional standards could circulate between Timor-Leste and other CPLP member states.

At the same time, a more critical perspective suggests that the benefits of international cooperation are neither automatic nor evenly distributed. Dependency Theory offers an alternative interpretation by emphasizing the unequal power relations that often characterize development cooperation. Rather than viewing external assistance solely as a mechanism for capacity building, dependency scholars argue that sustained reliance on foreign expertise, funding, and technical support may limit the development of autonomous domestic institutions. In the Timorese context, many educational programs remain closely connected to financial and technical assistance provided by Portugal and Brazil. While such support has facilitated educational reforms, it also raises questions regarding long-term sustainability and domestic policy ownership. Educational institutions that rely extensively on external expertise may encounter difficulties maintaining programs independently if international support diminishes.

Postcolonial perspectives raise an additional concern regarding the sociolinguistic foundations of educational cooperation. Portuguese occupies a central position within many CPLP educational initiatives and continues to function as an important language of instruction, administration, and academic exchange. However, this institutional preference does not always correspond to the linguistic realities of Timorese society, where Tetum and various local languages remain the primary means of communication for much of the population. Cabral and Martin-Jones (2017) note that the promotion of Portuguese within educational policy has generated practical and pedagogical challenges, particularly in communities where exposure to Portuguese remains limited. From a postcolonial perspective, the transfer of Lusophone educational models may therefore reproduce certain forms of cultural hierarchy in which externally derived norms receive greater institutional legitimacy than locally embedded linguistic practices.

Policy transfer literature further complicates the assumption that successful institutional models can be easily transplanted across national contexts. Educational reforms that perform effectively in Portugal or other CPLP member states may encounter

implementation difficulties when introduced into Timor-Leste's distinct political, administrative, and socio-cultural environment. Bureaucratic capacity constraints, uneven resource distribution, and regional disparities continue to affect the implementation of educational programs across the country. Schools in rural areas frequently face shortages of qualified teachers, educational materials, and administrative support, limiting the extent to which transferred policies can be implemented uniformly. These challenges suggest that governance transfer is not a linear process of institutional replication but rather a negotiated process of adaptation shaped by local realities and institutional constraints.

The relationship between CPLP cooperation and Timor-Leste's Human Development Index must therefore be interpreted with caution. Timor-Leste's HDI increased from approximately 0.606 in 2018 to 0.634 in 2023 (UNDP, 2023). However, this improvement represents a multidimensional development outcome influenced by a wide range of factors extending beyond educational cooperation alone. Economic performance, petroleum revenues, public health interventions, government expenditure, infrastructure development, and assistance from other international organizations all interact in shaping human development outcomes. Consequently, the findings of this study do not establish a direct causal relationship between CPLP educational programs and changes in HDI.

A more appropriate interpretation is that CPLP cooperation functioned as a supporting institutional factor within a broader development environment. Teacher professionalization initiatives, curriculum reforms, vocational education programs, and academic mobility schemes strengthened institutional conditions associated with educational development and state capacity building. These initiatives contributed to the consolidation of educational governance structures and expanded opportunities for knowledge exchange and human resource development. Their significance lies less in producing measurable changes in HDI itself and more in supporting the institutional processes through which long-term human development may be pursued. Viewed from this perspective, the CPLP operates not as a direct driver of human development outcomes but as an institutional platform that facilitates cooperation, governance adaptation, and capacity-building efforts within Timor-Leste's evolving education system.

CONCLUSION

This study has examined how educational cooperation between Timor-Leste and the Comunidade dos Países de Língua Portuguesa (CPLP) has operated as a form of institutionalized international cooperation within the education sector between 2018 and 2023. The findings indicate that CPLP cooperation has supported educational development through a range of initiatives, including teacher professionalization programs, curriculum reform, academic mobility schemes, technical assistance, and educational governance support. These initiatives facilitated the transfer of professional standards, educational practices, and institutional knowledge from Lusophone member states into Timor-Leste's educational system. Rather than functioning solely as a platform for interstate cooperation, the CPLP served as a channel through which educational norms, administrative practices, and governance models were introduced and adapted within domestic institutions. The findings also suggest that these forms of cooperation contributed to strengthening institutional conditions associated with educational development, particularly through efforts to enhance teacher capacity, improve educational governance, and expand opportunities for human resource development.

The relationship between CPLP cooperation and broader human development outcomes, however, should be interpreted with caution. Although Timor-Leste's Human Development Index increased from 0.606 in 2018 to 0.634 in 2023 (UNDP, 2023), this improvement reflects a complex interaction of educational, economic, social, political, and public health factors that extend beyond the scope of educational cooperation alone. Consequently, the findings do not establish a direct causal relationship between CPLP programs and changes in HDI. Instead, the study identifies a set of institutional pathways through which educational cooperation may support broader human development objectives. In this regard, CPLP initiatives can be understood as supporting institutional factors that strengthen educational capacity and human resource development rather than as independent drivers of improvements in national development indicators. At the same time, the analysis highlights several constraints that shape the effectiveness of cooperation, including continued reliance on external expertise, uneven institutional capacity across regions, and sociolinguistic challenges associated with the implementation of Portuguese-language educational frameworks in a multilingual domestic context.

From a theoretical perspective, the findings are broadly consistent with Liberal Institutional arguments regarding the role of international institutions in facilitating cooperation, reducing uncertainty, and supporting capacity building among member states

(Keohane, 1984). At the same time, the Timor-Leste case demonstrates that the outcomes of international cooperation remain mediated by domestic institutional conditions and are not automatically translated into developmental gains. The study therefore does not seek to extend or revise Liberal Institutionalism, but rather to contextualize its application within a post-conflict developing state characterized by limited institutional capacity and ongoing development challenges. Considered alongside concerns raised by dependency perspectives, postcolonial critiques of knowledge transfer, and policy transfer literature, the findings suggest that international institutions operate within a more complex landscape than Liberal Institutionalism alone may imply. The contribution of this study lies in providing an empirically grounded account of how educational cooperation is negotiated, adapted, and constrained in practice, while illustrating both the possibilities and limitations of international institutional support in the pursuit of long-term educational and human development objectives. For the wider study of strategy, the case carries a clear lesson. Influence in small and fragile states is increasingly exercised not through coercion or large transfers of capital but through the slow, low-visibility shaping of institutions, professions, and languages—a register of competition in which middle and former colonial powers such as Portugal and Brazil can remain consequential. Yet the Timor-Leste experience also marks the limits of that register: where language policy outruns social reality and where host institutions lack the capacity to absorb what is offered, externally supplied models stall. The strategic value of educational cooperation, in other words, depends as much on the receptivity of the host state as on the ambitions of the sponsor—a finding with implications well beyond the Lusophone world, including for the larger powers now competing for influence across the Indo-Pacific.

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