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Australian MPs and aid sector leaders visit Mary MacKillop Today Timor-Leste early learning project

A cross-party delegation of Australian federal politicians and international development leaders visited a preschool in Dili earlier this month to see Mary MacKillop Today's EdTech for Early Learning project in action.

The visit was part of the Australian Regional Leadership Initiative (ARLI), a program delivered by Save the Children Australia that takes Australian decision-makers into the field to see Australian aid and development first-hand. It is designed to support better-informed public debate and policy on Australia's Official Development Assistance.

The delegation included Senator Sarah Hanson-Young and Members of Parliament Alison Penfold, David Moncrieff, Louise Miller-Frost and Ben Small, alongside Save the Children Australia chief executive Mat Tinkler and Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) chief executive Matthew Maury. Mark Lamont, founder of Mosaic, the technology partner behind the app, also attended.

Fifty years in Timor-Leste

Mary MacKillop Today's Country Director, Alipio Baltazar, opened the meeting by presenting delegates with tais, traditional Timorese woven scarves, before setting out the organisation's history in the country. Mary MacKillop Today and the Sisters of Saint Joseph have worked in Timor-Leste since 1994. Baltazar showed the group some of the earliest Tetum-language books, produced in the early 2000s at the request of Bishop Belo so children could learn in their own language.

Alison Penfold MP told Mary MacKillop Today that her first piece of volunteer work, before entering Parliament, was writing a media release on the canonisation of Saint Mary MacKillop, a connection that made the visit personal.

A program built for rural classrooms

Timor-Leste is home to one of Mary MacKillop Today's largest programs, spanning five education projects and two livelihoods' projects. EdTech for Early Learning uses play-based digital learning activities aligned to the national curriculum to improve the quality of early childhood teaching. Developed by Mosaic, the app runs entirely offline, a deliberate design choice for the rural and remote classrooms it is built to reach.

The app is currently used in 75 preschools, around 15 per cent of all preschools in Timor-Leste, with plans to reach 30 per cent within the next year. "This project works because it is designed for local classrooms and delivered by local teachers", said Alipio Baltazar, Country Director at Mary MacKillop Today.



The delegation observed a class in progress, where a teacher projected the app from a tablet onto the classroom wall. Children followed lessons on the days of the week, the months of the year and the weather, singing along and copying the actions on screen. One child stood up to point out the pictures to the room as the visitors watched.

A national partnership

Early childhood education is a national priority for the Timor-Leste Government, and every lesson on the app aligns with the government curriculum. The Chief of the National Preschool Department attended the visit and spoke in support of the initiative on behalf of the Ministry of Education. Over time, Mary MacKillop Today will transition the program to the Ministry and continue to support its expansion.

The approach reflects how Mary MacKillop Today works: building programs alongside communities and local government so they can be sustained long after the organisation steps back. For a delegation helping to shape Australia's aid policy, the Dili classroom offered a clear example of what that looks like in practice.

Learn more about our education work in Timor-Leste.
marymackilloptoday.org.au

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Images approved – see attached.

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