

Dili, Timor-Leste – When 20-year-old Eugenia de Jesus Cardoso graduated from high school, she had two problems. First, she could not afford to attend university and second she knew that finding work in her hometown of Maliana was not going to be easy.

“I had skills and I tried to apply for jobs with the government and NGOs, but their criteria were very high. I was not qualified for those jobs,” she said.

“Many of my friends couldn’t continue their studies and couldn’t find jobs either. Some went to the capital Dili searching for work in supermarkets or as cleaners in government offices and NGOs”.

Ms Cardoso was nearly ready to give up when she heard about a government programme looking for young people from across the country willing to travel to Dili, and receive training in running their own small businesses.

Ms Cardoso applied for the programme and was one of 12 young people selected to take part in the initiative. Her goal was to open a beauty salon in her home town. The next three months involved training in small business management, beauty techniques and the craft of hairdressing.

The training was part of the Jovem Iha Serbisu (JOIN) initiative implemented by Timor-Leste’s Secretariat of State for Vocational Training and Employment (SEFOPE) in collaboration with the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) Youth Employment Promotion (YEP) programme.

JOIN the world of business

“JOIN can help young people establish a business, like this beauty salon,” said Jose Maria da Costa Soares, SEFOPE’s Director of the National Directorate of Employment. “We found there was a lot of demand for hairdressers in the districts, so we asked interested people to register for training. Now they are running their own salons in various districts”.

Following the training SEFOPE helped Ms Cardoso set up her salon. Mirrors, chairs, scissors, and even the sinks were provided by SEFOPE. Once she had all her equipment installed and had given the room a fresh lick of paint, she needed to find some customers.

Ms Cardoso’s salon is located in a small room next to her family’s kiosk, where locals buy drinks and snacks, making it easier to attract customers. Her brothers, sisters and other relatives also helped to spread the word. Before long, news of the salon was widespread and a steady stream of clients was coming through the door.

“The salon project has been really successful,” said Susan Slattery, an Australian Youth Ambassador for Development working with SEFOPE. “Here in Maliana, we had more than 20 applicants. We just put the advert up around town. Candidates filled in a form and provided a CV and Cardoso was selected as the best candidate.”

The ILO's YEP Programme and its technical assistance to SEFOPE is presently supported through the Australian Government – ILO Partnership Agreement. The programme has been made possible through the Timor-Leste Government's Employment and Vocational Training Fund, which has supported a variety of community activities.

The ILO and SEFOPE have worked closely together since 2008, when a five-year, US\$11.3 million programme on YEP was launched with the support of the Australian Government Aid Program, AusAID. The programme strengthens the community with employment skills training, while building the capacity of the national administration and other institutions.

Opportunities for youth

"Before we support our clients, especially youths, we first identify potential business ideas. Then we call upon communities to submit applications, Candidates are interviewed and proposals developed with the help of trainers," said Alexandrina Verdial de S. Gama, Chief of SEFOPE's Department of Self-Employment Promotion.

"JOIN offers opportunities for youths in Timor-Leste, where unemployment is high. Many young people do not continue their studies after they finish secondary school, so they lose opportunities to engage in gainful employment, which are few and far between," she added.

"Part of my training was business training included marketing and promotion," said Mr Cardoso. "I prepared some pamphlets, went to the local army and police offices and offered them a special discount. It actually worked and I got quite a lot of business!"

Ms Cardoso now has many repeat customers, raising her income to \$100 a month – a great start for a business in a country where about 40 per cent of the population live on less than a dollar a day.

Every month, the young hairdresser puts her earnings into her newly-opened bank account, keeping a little for herself. She also helps support her family, including sending her younger brother to school. The rest is injected back into the business. With her skills and support of SEFOPE, she plans to build up the business further, so she can have a brighter future.

"I feel really happy. Although I've faced some difficulties, I didn't feel nervous or anything. I just tried to stand up for myself and support myself. My family was very happy when I started this business," she said.