

# The war against poverty starts with a battle of ideas

by Harold Mitchell

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*Harold Mitchell delivered these introductory remarks at the inaugural [Harold Mitchell Development Policy Lecture](#) on November 22nd at the ANU. We'll be posting the speech of Timor-Leste's Minister of Finance, Emilia Pires, soon. You can listen to the podcast [here](#).*

Ladies, gentlemen and distinguished guests, it is such a pleasure to be here today at the inaugural Harold Mitchell development policy lecture. And how lucky we are to attract such a brilliant speaker! I am a great admirer of Emilia Pires, and her work as Finance Minister of Timor-Leste.

For me, her presence here today is especially meaningful, as I have a close connection with Timor. I first met Timor's Prime Minister, Xanana Gusmao in 2000, just a year after his release from prison. And I was immediately struck by his compassion and drive. I said to him, 'Xanana, how can I help?' thinking that he'd ask for some money to build a hospital or a school or a road. So picture my surprise when he asked for 300 musical recorders. 'Harold,' he said, 'my first task is to rebuild the spirit of our people. We cannot tackle any of our challenges unless our hearts are strong. I believe music is key!'

This was the beginning of a close and enduring friendship, and the first of many times that I've tried to help. I'm currently supporting the former Victorian Premier, Steve Bracks, in his role as one of Xanana's advisers. And I'm also helping Xanana's wife, Kirsty Sword Gusmao, in her quest to improve maternal health and education. As Kirsty says, supporting women is absolutely critical, when it comes to alleviating poverty and promoting development. I am also pleased to support CARE implement two of its projects in Timor.

So Minister, can I just say that's it's been a privilege to get to know your beautiful country and to do what little I can. It's a wonderful place.

Now, let me turn to today. Why are we all attending a Harold Mitchell Lecture? The answer begins with my strong belief that Australia is a lucky country. Our creativity, our proximity to Asia and our abundance of natural resources have made us a place with unique opportunities.

But how can we make the most of them? Both professionally and on a philanthropic level, I've recently become very focussed on how we, as a country, can prosper. And I think that much depends on what we do in our region. Australia is one of the only developed nations that is almost entirely surrounded by poor countries. Helping those countries to develop is not just a matter of being a good global citizen. It's a matter of ensuring our own security and progress.

It's for this reason that I'm a strong supporter of foreign aid – and would really like to see us give more. I'd like to commend Peter Baxter and his AusAID team for the great job they do. They are managing an increasing aid budget with Australia as one of the world's top donors.

But of course, an effective aid program has everything to do with *how* we spend. It's not just about how *much*. The United Kingdom and the United States both have independent think tanks to keep their aid programs transparent and accountable, and continually fed with fresh ideas. And now we do too. I think that the ANU's Development Policy Centre is set to make a huge contribution to aid policy debates, both at home and abroad. I don't just see it as an asset for big institutions such as AusAID, but a boon for everyone in the development field. This includes NGOs such as CARE Australia, of which I am Chair. Of all the things we can do to support good development in our region, supporting a contestable environment is one of the most important. The war against poverty starts with a battle of ideas.

So that's why I'm here to help. Today, I am pleased to announce a grant of \$2.5 million over five years to the ANU Development Policy Centre. This grant will cover core administration costs, and allow Professor Howes and his team to focus on their most important job: delivering a world class think tank. I congratulate Professor Howes and his team for their significant contribution to development in our region. And I can't wait to watch them grow.

Thank you very much.

*Harold Mitchell AC is founder of the Harold Mitchell Foundation and Chairman, Aegis Media, Australia and New Zealand. For more on the Harold Mitchell Foundation gift, click [here](#).*

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