

Vegetables provide healthy diet for community recovery in Timor-Leste

Background

Timor-Leste is Asia Pacific's youngest and poorest country. Its one million-strong population mostly live in small rural villages across the country's remote mountainous areas. More than 40% of the population survive on less than 1 US dollar a day. Subsistence agriculture is the principal livelihood with corn, rice and coffee the main crops. Average fertility rate is a very high 7.77.

In April 2006, a civil conflict erupted in Timor-Leste, destroying infrastructure and forcing approximately 150,000 people to flee their homes for camps for internally displaced people (IDPs). The government has been unable to provide many of the basic services and meet all the needs of the people in areas such as food, shelter, security, health and employment.

The project

In 2004, a food shortage as a result of a long drought affected about 4,000 people in Hatu-Bulico sub-district, in Ainaro district. Cruz Vermelha de Timor-Leste (CVTL) (known in English as Timor-Leste Red Cross), distributed food to 754 beneficiaries. In 2005, the situation further deteriorated

when disease caused a massive failure of the potato crop, the only cash crop for the community.

Communities faced malnourishment and hunger with infants, children, and lactating mothers most vulnerable. In total, 53 people died between June 2004 and February 2005.

To address the chronic food insecurity CVTL established a livelihood project in Mulo village. National society staff, volunteers, and board members coordinated with local government officials, village chiefs and NGOs.



Field of dreams & hard work: a group member works in a community garden.



CVTL worked with the community on a one-year action plan that identified roles and responsibilities. The community agreed to organise itself into groups, and contribute

labour and local materials necessary for gardening. CVTL agreed to coordinate the development of relevant gardening skills and access to agriculture tools, seeds and irrigation facilities.

Activities conducted:

- A livelihood analysis in Maula-Hulo hamlet, Mulo village, included input from 72 people.
- Participatory Disaster Risk Reduction (PDRR) tools were used. National and branch staff and five volunteers – selected from community-based disaster preparedness training graduates with support from the Federation – facilitated the process.
- The PDRR process fed into the development of the community action plan.
- The community established four farmer groups, each comprising 20 members, of whom 20% are women.
- Each group developed their own work schedule, monitoring plan and structure, including roles and responsibilities of the group coordinator and officers.
- The four groups focused on creating and managing vegetable gardens. CVTL provided seeds and agricultural tools.
- Upon request from the community and CVTL, the Ministry of Agriculture developed vocational and agricultural skills among the farmers to improve productivity.
- CVTL recruited a livelihood officer who has been based in the community to support on market gardening techniques.
- In line with the community action plan, CVTL and the community together protected a nearby spring for irrigation and drinking water in Maula-Hulo.
- Two groups – Hakuakt Metin and Servi Hadomi – also planted potatoes. CVTL provided two varieties of seeds, recommended by the Ministry of Agriculture. For the past three years, the community had planted a local variety of potato, which had been infected and died. The Ministry of Agriculture provided the methodology for planting the new varieties. Likewise, the Lequi Hadomi and Hakuak Meting groups harvested half of their cultivated fields of carrots and sold them in the market. The groups decided to buy cabbage seeds to plant for the next season.
- The Servi Hadomi group harvested the cabbages and sold them in the local market. The income was used to buy cabbage seeds for group members.

Outcomes

- Vegetable gardens yielded a good harvest, enabling the community to generate funds through sales as well as having fresh vegetables for personal consumption,
- People acquired new knowledge and skills of vegetable gardening enabling the development of sustainable vegetable gardens,
- Access to high yielding and disease resistant vegetables during dry season increased enabling the community to increase production
- People's enthusiasm increased leading to an expansion of activities including the development of four new gardens and off-season gardening
- Current groups will act as contact farmers to surrounding communities enabling the new farmers to learn skills from current practitioners.
- The community fund generated through sales will be partially used for emergency



support creating a contingency buffer stock.

Lessons learned

- Livelihood options promote community resilience to disaster risks.
- Livelihood promotion is a context specific process; therefore, community-led planning and decision making process coupled with some external inputs is a must for success.
- Livelihood promotion activities should be planned ensuring that the project will optimise use of available human, physical, social, financial and natural capital. Likewise, it is important to assess community capability and develop assets that could be used when needed. Good community organisation and participatory facilitation process is a key to this.
- Links with market mechanisms (or financial incentives management) is crucial for a livelihood project to succeed.
- It was observed that farmers planted only a quarter of new high-breed seeds provided by the project and saved the remainder for the next season, which is of no use. Therefore, it is important to educate farmers about the use of high breed seeds.



Market ready: sacks of vegetables about to be transported to be sold.

community gardens and generated a small community fund which was used to develop four new gardens in 2007. With the use of new skills, people have also started small private gardens. A local women's group is also keen to start off-season vegetable gardens. Other groups may also become involved if initial interest is an indicator. Thus, with new tools and skills, the community has developed livelihood options that are considered as sustainable.

The most pressing need of the farmer groups is for an integrated approach to pest control. CVTL has formed a partnership with a local university to develop this skill.

The way forward

The project outcomes and prospects for sustainability have been reviewed through a review of relevant literature, interviewing important stakeholders and discussions with relevant focus groups. It found that the community has: developed new skills in vegetable gardening; maintained simple agriculture tools; developed vegetable gardens; and accessed irrigation facilities.

As a result, farmer groups have grown produce in four

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