

Recovery and risk reduction through livelihood support in Timor-Leste

Summary

Timor-Leste is emerging from decades of conflict that led to its independence from Indonesia in 2002. The country's location and topography have made it vulnerable to a range of natural hazards that threaten lives and livelihoods. The newly established Timor-Leste Red Cross Society has been working with communities to reduce and mitigate the impact of disasters and to aid their recovery, with a focus on livelihoods.

Background

Timor-Leste is South-East Asia's youngest country, born in 2002 following a long and bitter struggle for independence from Indonesia. Timor-Leste is ranked 150 in the Human Development Index.¹ The population of about 1 million² lives mainly in small rural villages in remote mountainous areas of the country and relies mostly on subsistence agriculture.

¹ United Nations Development Programme, *Human Development Report 2007/2008*, 2007, <http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/global/hdr2007-2008>.

² Census report, 2004.





International Federation

Timor-Leste is prone to natural disasters, including earthquakes, tsunamis, floods, landslides and drought. In addition, many villages are exposed to strong winds that each year destroy homes and crops. The country is also prey to human-induced disasters, such as forced displacement, violence and intimidation.

The government of Timor-Leste has made disaster risk reduction an urgent priority, with emphasis on strengthening community capacities.³ However, it is still struggling to provide basic services and to meet the needs of the population in terms of food, shelter, security, health care and employment.

The Cruz Vermelha de Timor-Leste (CVTL), Timor-Leste's National Red Cross Society, was recognized by and admitted to the International Red Cross and Red Crescent Movement in 2005. In recent years, it has been developing its disaster management programme, which has gradually expanded to encompass community preparedness, disaster risk reduction and emergency response. The basic strategy of its risk reduction component is to support the most at-risk communities in developing livelihood skills and to provide them with basic tools to help generate self-employment.

Disaster risk reduction in practice

In 2004, in the remote village of Manumera, in Hatu Builico sub-district in the south-west of the country, about 4,000 people suffered food shortages as a result of a prolonged drought. The CVTL responded by distributing food to 754 beneficiaries identified as being particularly in need. The following year, the situation deteriorated further with the failure of the potato crop, the community's only cash crop, as a result of drought-related disease. The affected communities faced malnourishment and hunger, with children and lactating mothers the hardest hit.

Prompted by the worsening crisis, the CVTL launched a livelihood project in 2005 to support the community in addressing the chronic food insecurity. The aim of the project was to increase food security at household level through increased agricultural productivity and income generation.

A coordination meeting was held for all stakeholders, attended by village chiefs, local government officials, CVTL staff members, volunteers and board members, and representatives of other non-governmental organizations. Recommendations were made for possible interventions in the affected communities.

³ Government of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, *National Disaster Risk Management Plan*, October 2005.

The CVTL and community members jointly organized a participatory risk analysis in two hamlets in Mulo village: Maula-Hulo and Manumera. In all, 72 community members participated in the exercise, which resulted in a decision to develop market gardens. Through this process, the community's key priorities were identified and, on that basis, a one-year Community Action Plan was drafted, specifying the respective roles and responsibilities of the community and the CVTL. Accordingly, the community agreed to contribute the necessary labour and locally sourced materials. The CVTL committed to provide training in relevant gardening skills, supply agricultural implements and seeds, and help upgrade irrigation systems.

The community established four farmers' groups, each comprising 20 members, of whom 20 per cent were women. Each group then developed its own structure, work schedule and monitoring plan and defined the roles and responsibilities of the group coordinator and individual members.

The CVTL worked in coordination with the Ministry of Agriculture to facilitate the training of the group members in agricultural skills to improve productivity, focusing on the preparation of the seedbeds and the planting of the vegetables. The CVTL livelihood officer, who was based in the community, provided the groups with ongoing support and coaching in other gardening techniques, such as composting. In line with the Community Action Plan, the CVTL and the community jointly carried out work to protect a spring, to pipe water for irrigation and drinking in Maula-Hulo, and to repair an existing water scheme.

On the recommendation of the Ministry of Agriculture, the CVTL distributed two varieties of potato seeds, to replace the local variety of potato that had been affected by disease in the previous three years. Ministry officials also supported the community in planting new varieties of vegetables. By the end of the first year of the project, the groups had reaped a good harvest. They were able to sell part of the produce in the local market, thereby generating a small income to cover their everyday needs. Out of their income, the groups decided to buy other vegetables seeds for the next season. They also resolved that some of the funds generated would be put aside for emergency food support in the event of a future disaster.

Thus, the project provided a sustainable way for people to recover from disaster and reduce future risk.

Project outcomes

- The number of community groups engaged in market gardening grew spontaneously from 4 to 21 in less than two years. Each group owns a market garden, growing a variety of vegetables, such as cabbages, carrots and potatoes.
- The vegetable gardens yielded a good harvest. This enabled the groups to generate a small income from selling vegetables (ranging from US\$ 45 to US\$ 260 per group) and increased their access to fresh vegetables for personal consumption.
- The groups acquired new knowledge of and skills in market gardening and in disease-resistant crop varieties and were able to grow vegetables out of season as a result of the new irrigation system. The agricultural inputs and skills acquired also strengthened the community's overall capacity.





- Group members created and maintained mutual support structures and acted as “contacts” for other groups wishing to learn from their experiences.
- People recognized the role of the CVTL in enhancing their livelihoods; in areas where the project was implemented, there was increased interest in Red Cross membership.

Lessons learned

- The participatory planning and implementation process was useful in designing a project that was in line with people’s needs and priorities. The process helped the community to look closely at its available resources, opportunities and limitations and to rank priorities accordingly. The CVTL’s role was defined at the outset as a facilitating agency.
- Government support was instrumental in enhancing the community’s gardening skills. The project forged lasting links between the community and government agricultural workers.
- On the downside, while vegetable production increased significantly in the area, demand remained the same in local markets. The groups therefore faced a problem in marketing their produce. Marketing skills would need to be integrated alongside agricultural skills in such livelihood projects.

- It was observed that group members planted only a quarter of the new hybrid seeds supplied by the project, saving the remainder for the next season. This was of no use as hybrid seed cannot be saved from one year to the next. This problem can be resolved by educating farmers in the correct use of hybrid seeds before distribution.

The way forward

- Building on its success and the lessons learned, the project will be expanded to new areas. The participatory planning and implementation process will be maintained.
- The groups involved in the project are keen to share their knowledge and skills with other interested groups in neighbouring areas. This support to the other community members will be enhanced.
- The lessons learned from this project will be integrated into the community-based disaster preparedness and risk reduction programme for better results.
- The most pressing need of the farmers’ groups now is for an integrated approach to pest control. The CVTL has formed a partnership with a local university to develop this aspect.

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