Timor-Leste and FAO
Partnering to achieve sustainable agricultural development

FAO has been working in Timor-Leste since 1999. From 1999–2011, FAO was mainly supporting the Government in the areas of emergency operations and early recovery from recurrent crises and natural disasters. In 2012, FAO established its representation in the country as a response to the Government request to focus more on developmental activities for furthering food security interventions. Since then, FAO has enjoyed a close collaboration and partnership with the different technical offices of the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries while working together towards shared development goals. In 2014, Timor-Leste became the first country in Asia-Pacific to launch a national United Nations’ Zero Hunger Challenge campaign.

Matching FAO’s expertise to Timor-Leste’s development priorities

The Country Programming Framework 2013-2017 (CPF) has been prepared in close consultation with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF), other key Government agencies and the country’s development partners. Throughout the consultations, there was a general consensus that the country must give high priority to developing the agriculture sector in order to address the pressing problems of food insecurity and widespread unemployment in the rural areas. The five key priority areas for FAO collaboration are:

- Support to improve institutions and coordination mechanism for changes, policies, laws and regulations, and programmes and plans to ensure 100 percent equitable year-round access to adequate nutritious and affordable food for all
- Support to first agriculture census and enhanced capacity for statistics, information and knowledge management systems for agriculture sector and food and nutrition security
- Support to improve farming livelihoods, food availability and diversity of household diets through increased productivity, production and consumption of under-utilized food crops
- Support to smallholder fishing and aquaculture households to become more resilient in the face of climate change and to sustainably improve their livelihoods and free themselves from hunger and malnutrition
- Support to renewal, realignment and development of Timor-Leste’s cash crop economy, particularly the coconut industry and the coffee industry

The CPF implementation will require close collaboration among relevant agencies at national and decentralised levels, interacting with the MAF and FAO for a coordinated operational framework. A set of principles has been developed to guide implementation, including alignment to national priorities, mutual accountability/joint partnership and centrality of capacity building.

Community based data gathering and co-management of marine resources

Timor-Leste has 706 km of coastline and a marine exclusive economic zone (EEZ), over which it has fishing rights of approximately 75,000 km². According to the government of Timor-Leste’s Strategic Development Plan (2010-2030), this fishing area has the potential to provide valuable animal protein to feed the population as well as to provide employment, income earning opportunities and foreign exchange from fish exports. However, weaknesses in policy and limited capacity to manage, monitor and protect its fisheries resources has resulted in the sector remaining undeveloped with most fishing traditionally done from small boats close to shore. Illegal fishing by foreign fleets, particularly off the south coast and in the area of the Sahul Banks, also threatens to deplete fish stocks.

The Regional Fisheries Livelihood Programme for South and Southeast Asia (RFLP) is an FAO programme that set out to strengthen capacity among participating small-scale fishing communities and their supporting institutions in Cambodia, Indonesia, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, Timor-Leste and Viet Nam. By doing so RFLP sought to improve the livelihoods of fishers and their families while fostering more sustainable fisheries resources management practices.
“By building resilience to climate change in agricultural systems, we can achieve food and nutrition security for all.”
José Graziano da Silva, FAO Director-General

Through the RFLP, FAO introduced a model for community-based Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing reporting system in Timor-Leste that enables fisherfolk to report to the Fisheries Department any suspected IUU fishing activity in the national water. The project supported the establishment of a National Fisheries Statistical System, while raising awareness and understanding of Timor-Leste’s fisheries laws. It supported community data gathering and a community-based bathymetric survey, as well as the development of a community-based IUU strategy and a mobile licensing service for Timor-Leste’s small-scale fisheries. FAO also worked with fisherfolk to incorporate Tara Bandu—traditional laws used by communities in Timor-Leste to regulate relations between people, groups and the environment—into the management of marine resources. In 2014, the Timor-Leste model of community based data gathering and co-management of marine resources was selected by the International Monitoring Control and Surveillance (MCS) Network as the best model among 30 competitors.

Enhancing food security and nutrition through climate change adaptation

Agriculture is the mainstay of the non-oil economy of Timor-Leste and the main source of livelihood. The agricultural Gross Domestic Product (GDP) of Timor-Leste (which is about one-third of the country’s non-oil GDP) grew by three percent between 2000 and 2007. The major food crops (maize and rice) and cash crop (coffee) continue to exhibit erratic production levels and the productivity of all crops grown in the country is considered low. The country is also suffering rapid land degradation due to its mountainous topography, extreme and changing weather conditions and deforestation and other unsustainable practices that are negatively affecting the country’s arable land.

In June 2012, in line with Timor-Leste’s Strategic Programme for Promoting Agricultural Growth and Sustainable Food Security, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries requested support from FAO to provide the necessary assistance to prepare a project proposal to address land degradation and low crop productivity in the uplands of Timor-Leste. The pilot project will make stakeholders aware of the advantages of conservation agriculture, introduce and test conservation agriculture equipment, select suitable cover crops, train farmers and subject matter specialists in using conservation farming practices to sustainably improve crop production, and develop land management policies accordingly.

The overall objective of the project is to enhance household food and nutrition security and improve rural livelihoods through a reduction in crop losses caused by the increasing frequency and severity of droughts (associated with climate change and variability), leading to a sustained increase in agricultural productivity. To this end, FAO is currently supporting the Government in adjusting existing crop management towards conservation agriculture technologies and practices, and promoting production intensification and diversification of smallholder farming systems in the Baucau, Ermera, Manatuto and Manufahi Districts of Timor-Leste. A key aspect of the project is to ensure that core groups of farmers validate specific new and improved conservation agriculture technologies and practices, after which the Government can prepare an expanded programme for smallholder farmers living in neighbouring municipalities and districts.

Supporting preparedness, prevention and response to biosecurity threats

Southeast and East Asian countries have been severely affected by Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza (HPAI) since 2003, following the emergence of a new virulent strain of virus in southern China in 1996 and its subsequent spread in the region from 2003 onwards. While Timor-Leste is still free from HPAI, in Indonesia (the country’s nearest neighbour with which it shares a land border) the disease is endemic in 27 of the 33 provinces as of 30 March 2007. Although Timor-Leste is a small country, it is particularly susceptible because of its farming systems that include close contact between people, poultry and swine. Improved biosecurity practices play an important role in preventing and controlling HPAI and other zoonotic and emerging diseases in Timor-Leste.

To help strengthen biosecurity in the country, FAO, in collaboration with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, developed a project with the end goals of providing HPAI education and communication, improving disease surveillance, establishing a laboratory, drafting animal health legislation, improving pig and poultry health and production, and supporting research on HPAI and other emerging infectious diseases. Laboratory capacity building and active disease surveillance on priority animal diseases were the principal activities addressed during Phase II.

The project supported the establishment of an animal disease investigation and reporting system and its implementation throughout the country. A national investigation and response team was developed to run the system, supported by 13 district level teams. In addition, various capacity building activities were conducted, including short-term trainings on animal health reporting, outbreak investigation, outbreak communication, wild bird catching and sampling, pig restraining and sampling and veterinary epidemiology. The project also established and equipped a Biosafety Level 2 (BSL2) diagnostic laboratory. As a result, Timor-Leste now has the human assets, technical knowledge and facilities to undertake active and passive disease surveillance for HPAI and other important diseases.