



# **AETFA NEWS**

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## **2005 Peace Appeal – Oxfam Australia**

# **Food crisis in Timor-Leste**

**Six years after the bloodshed and violence that swept through Timor-Leste following the vote for independence, the people are facing a new crisis — malnutrition. Maureen Bathgate traveled to Timor-Leste to find out how Oxfam Australia is helping families survive.**



Zulito sits on the ground tucking into a big bowl of rice, a small hand clasped around a big silver spoon. He looks barely nine months old. He is actually two.

His mother, Meliana, sits beside him, occasionally helping to steer the spoon towards his mouth. Nearby is his older brother Taziso, aged four, who has finished his rice and is now devouring a fresh banana.

infections, skin diseases, diarrhoea and gastroenteritis run rife among children here. Sadly, those who are severely underweight stand little chance of surviving.

What's worse, right now in Timor-Leste, it's the hungry season — the period when household stocks of maize and rice have finished and the maize harvest has not yet begun. This lasts from November to March, each year, leaving 90% of the population without enough food to eat. Compounding the problem are the drought-like conditions that the Timorese have endured for the past four years, resulting in poor harvests that don't cover their dietary needs.

To respond to the food and malnutrition crises, we have initiated nutrition promotion, food processing and agriculture projects in communities across Cova Lima. These three projects work together to support communities to grow and cook nutritious foods, process fresh produce so it lasts

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Both Zulito and Taziso are severely malnourished. They are among 20 malnourished children, aged between six months and five years, who have gathered under a large shady tree in the tiny hamlet of Kader Obucmil, in Timor-Leste's Cova Lima District, to take part in a nutrition program we are running in conjunction with local partner Juventude Esperanca Ba Futuru (JEF).

These children are not alone. A recent assessment conducted by Oxfam, CARE International and the Cova Lima District Health Services, found 45% of children aged less than five in Cova Lima are not growing at the proper rate, 58% are underweight and 16% are severely malnourished.

Diseases such as malaria, respiratory

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longer, improve rice and maize yields, grow a wider range of crops and access foods such as fish and eggs that are high in protein.

Oxfam Australia's Cova Lima District Nutrition Program Coordinator Edi Setyo explains that much of the program is about re-educating the community about simple things like including more fats and proteins in their diets and eating a wider variety of fruits and vegetables to ensure they are getting all the essential nutrients.

"A lot of these people don't know that their children should eat three times a day or that they should eat a variety of food and prepare it well; they don't know they should be using their water to wash their children's hands before eating; they don't eat very much animal protein, even though they have a lot of pigs, goats, cows and chickens," Edi says.

"Our program is about educating the parents about giving their children more staple foods, more nutritious foods, using foods that are in season, showing them ways of processing the food to make it last longer, promoting personal hygiene, especially hand-washing and keeping the nails clean.

"It's also about getting the community to do food planning; to think about what they need, look at growing different fruits and vegetables, look at the different methods available for growing and planting rice and perhaps use a more suitable method."

A new approach we are using in Timor-Leste is called "The Hearth" — a 12-week nutrition program in which 20 children who have been identified as being malnourished, their parents and trained volunteer community educators come together to practice new cooking, feeding, hygiene and caring behaviours.

These intensive two-hour sessions, known as "Pos Gizis", take place every day for 12 days and involve weighing the chil-

dren, washing their hands and cooking nutritious recipes, as well as playing feeding and health education.

The sessions then stop for 12 days during which parents are encouraged to continue what they have learned at home. The community educators visit the parents to see whether the new practices are being incorporated into the families' daily lives. This process continues for several more cycles and when the children's height-weight ratio has returned to normal they "graduate" from the program.

Meliana knows how important it is that she brings Zulito and Tartziso along to every session. "I come every day," she said. "I want my children to be healthy."

We currently support 58 Pos Gizis across Cova Lima, working closely with the Cova Lima District Health Services, which conducts regular monitoring visits and supplies Vitamin A and de-worming tablets to help boost the children's immunity to disease.

Senor Joao Cardoso Moruk, from the Macauter Community Health Centre, travels between Pos Gizis on his motorbike to monitor the activities and make sure the children are attending. "The Pos Gizi has been running well. Even the people who are not involved in this program are asking Oxfam's help to set up posts in other villages," Senor Moruk says.

JEF Coordinator Benjamin Dos Santos Barreto is also finding the program popular with local communities. "The people are changing their behaviours," he says. "The program is working and because of the success of the program, more people in the community want to come. As more people have become aware of the program, numbers have increased."

In each village, there are often children with normal nutritional status as a result of their carers using positive nutritional practices. These practices are identified and then promoted within the wider community.

This is done so that families with malnourished children can use existing practices within the community to help make their child healthy.

Each mother brings 100 grams of rice or maize per child to the Pos Gizi, as well as vegetables from their garden or some water or firewood. If the child cannot eat all the food at the Pos Gizi, they take it home. Today's meal consists of boiled rice mixed with eggs, garlic, fish, white spinach and oil, followed up by a delicious ripe banana, a fruit that is plentiful in these parts. It is a meal that is very rich in the essential proteins, fats and other vitamins and minerals that the children are lacking.

"Families here would not normally give bananas to their children to eat. They aren't really seen as food for the children. Instead, they sell them," Edi says. "By giving them bananas we are promoting the idea that there are foods readily available that they can use."

Zulito and Tartziso eagerly tuck into their big bowls of rice. At least they are getting lunch today. Usually they eat only breakfast and dinner and even then it might be just some boiled rice or a cake-like food made from cassava flour,

Meliana says the program has made a big difference to her family. "I am learning very many new things — like cooking healthier food for my children, washing their hands, cutting their nails and how to care for my children so they don't get sick," she says.

"It is good because we are also able to use the things we learn here at home with our families in our daily lives."

The good news is that Zulito and Tartziso are gaining weight and their health is improving.

Reprinted from *Oxfam News, Summer 2005*.  
Maureen Bathgate edits *Oxfam News*

## **Oxfam 2005 Peace Appeal helps children in Timor-Leste.**

You can help bring health and happiness to the people of Timor-Leste by donating to the *2005 Peace Appeal*.

Call **1800 088 110** or donate securely on-line at **[www.oxfam.org.au/donate](http://www.oxfam.org.au/donate)**

# Timor women create history

History was created in Timor-Leste this year, when women were elected to village councils for the first time. Maureen Bathgate met some of the inspirational women who have broken new ground.

It's not often you can say that you have been a part of history, but that's just what happened for 90 women who became the first women to be elected onto their Suco (village) Councils in Timor-Leste's Cova Lima district earlier this year.

The Timor-Leste Government paved the way for this change in 2003, when it passed an electoral law which provided two seats on each council specifically for women and enabled women to stand for any other positions, including village chief.

It's a big change for Timor-Leste, whose culture and customs are traditionally patriarchal. Previously, men occupied all community leadership positions in rural villages and women had no voice in decision-making.

In order to encourage as many women as possible to stand as candidates in the 2005 elections, we joined forces with local partners Fokupers and Aliansi Feto, to conduct a series of workshops to encourage women to become leaders in local government.

In Cova Lima District, more than 5,000 women from all seven sub-districts attended these workshops, receiving information on their right to stand as candidates and what the nomination process involved.

From this, 400 women registered as candidates, with about 80-90% participating in subsequent candidate training sessions on running election campaigns, planning and having community discussions.

At the Suco elections in May 2005, 90 women were elected as Suco Councilors, an average of three women per village. In the village of Fatululik, Lucia Guterres was elected Cova Lima district's first-ever woman Suco Chief from a field of five candidates, including men.

Cariana Barreto Amaral was elected as a



Some of Timor-Leste's first woman village councilors, (back row from left) Maria de Fatima, Ana Maria Pereira, Feliberta de Jesus, (Front row from left) Celesthina Madeira with daughter Christiana Madeira, Cariana Barreto Amaral and Aliansi Feto District Coordinator Avelina da Costa. Photo: John Sones/OxfamAUS.

Suco Councilor in the village of Matai, near Maucatar, after initially attending one of the workshops. As a mother of three young children, she now fits the twice-monthly council meetings and other councilor commitments around her usual work caring for her family, cooking meals and doing household chores.

"There has been some negative response from the men in the village. They say that the woman councilors are not able to do anything for our village, but we say that we can do something very important for our village as a councillor," Cariana says.

"The biggest problem is domestic violence. Domestic violence is very threatening everywhere, especially our district, every day. If there is any conflict between husband and wife, sometimes the men just protect their fellow man. So if the woman has problems with her husband, I want to help my fellow women to resolve their problems."

Feliberta De Jesus, who was elected as Suco Councilor for Suai Loro, says childbirth difficulties was one of the many things she wished to address in her role as coun-

cilor.

"Sometimes the women are far away from the health centre and they get problems when delivering children. They cannot go to the health centre for many reasons, because lack of information or maybe lack of transportation," Feliberta explains

"As a woman and a councilor, if some woman or some mother has to deliver children, we are the ones linked with the health centre and we can give information to help the mothers."

Aliansi Feto District Coordinator Avelina Da Costa says that traditionally, women's needs had been neglected in their villages, largely due to the men's monopoly on councils.

"As councilors, if these women are very active and help their fellow women, then maybe these positive activities can encourage other women to become candidates in the next election," Avelina says. "In the next five years, I believe there will be more women involved in every structure in government in Timor-Leste."

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