

Summary Report on Mission to Timor-Leste

Glenn Denning¹ and Sarah Curran²

July 23-28, 2012

Mission Objectives

1. To introduce the mission and capabilities of the Earth Institute to representatives of organizations working on food and nutrition
2. To assess the level of local interest and support for increased investments in nutrition
3. To assess the potential and challenges for introducing a multi-sector approach to improving nutrition
4. To identify opportunities for increased Earth Institute partnership in the area of food and nutrition

Agenda

Meetings were held with representatives of the following organizations:

- **Government:** Ministry of Health (MoH), Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAF), Ministry of Finance (MoF)
- **Bilateral Donors/Donor Projects:** AusAID, European Commission, Irish Aid, Seeds of Life Project (ACIAR), CAP (USAID), GIZ (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit)
- **Multilateral Agencies:** World Bank
- **UN Agencies:** FAO, UNICEF, WFP, WHO
- **NGOs:** HIAM Health, CARE, Mercy Corps, Alola Foundation, Child Fund, Bairo Pitte Health Clinic, HASATIL, BESIK

Principal Conclusions

We begin with the premise that good nutrition enables individuals, households and nations to reach their full social and economic potential. A well-nourished society provides the foundation for more effective investments in education, health, and infrastructure. By investing in better nutrition, Timor-Leste will improve the value of its most important asset for sustainable and equitable development: the intellectual capital of its people. After a successful decade of peace-building and effectively dealing with emergencies, Timor-Leste now turns to the challenges of social and economic development. Improved nutrition must be central to the national development agenda.

There was broad and consistent agreement on the need to improve nutrition in Timor-Leste. However, we concluded that more emphasis is being placed on improving “food security” rather than improving

¹ Professor of Professional Practice and Director of the Center on Globalization and Sustainable Development (CGSD)

² Program Manager, CGSD. The team was accompanied throughout this mission by Mr. Nicolas Maennling, Earth Institute resident advisor at the Ministry of Finance, Dili.

nutrition *per se*. With a reported stunting rate of 58%³ (DHS 2009/10), Timor-Leste ranks as one of the most malnourished countries on earth. There is no clear consensus on the core cause(s) of malnutrition or on the large variations among districts. Among the reasons given for high levels of malnutrition were: the lingering effects of civil war and related disruption of livelihoods and government services, extreme poverty, low agricultural productivity, overemphasis on staple foods (especially rice), poor health services, lack of clean water, inadequate sanitation and hygiene, poor accessing to health care services, low public investment and capacity in nutrition, insufficient public knowledge of what is good nutrition and the consequences of under-nutrition, and a plethora of “traditional” or “cultural” attitudes and beliefs and taboos around certain foods and eating practices. Many of these explanations are related, being causal or consequential to others. On the basis that there is some validity to all of these explanations, **we concluded that a comprehensive, integrated, multi-sector approach would be an essential part of any national nutrition strategy.**

The Government and many of Timor-Leste’s development partners are tackling undernutrition through a range of programs and projects. For example, the Ministry of Health, supported by UNICEF and others, pointed to the recent deployment of SISCAs and voluntary PSFs; the Ministry of Agriculture, supported by FAO, highlighted the spread of home gardens, and also pointed to the highly successful Seeds of Life Project; AusAID is active in extending water and sanitation infrastructure; and a major new EC project will support nutrition supplementation, among other interventions, in 4 priority districts. NGOs were active in a wide range of nutrition related activities, from the promotion of exclusive breastfeeding to home gardens and nutrition education. **We concluded that there is much good work already going on to improve nutrition. However, there are clearly opportunities to build on the success of existing efforts that have shown promise, and increase investments to expand the scale and reach of the interventions. Greater coordination of efforts across several sectors would likely achieve synergies across interventions. Timor-Leste can also draw valuable lessons and inspiration from other countries that have successfully improved nutrition levels (e.g., Brazil).**

There was wide agreement that the Government is aware of the nutrition challenge and is committed to improving nutrition. The Comoro Declaration (2010) committed ministries to work together towards better nutritional outcomes. The Government’s Strategic Development Plan strongly emphasizes *food* security, though is less specific with regards to nutrition. We were informed that UNICEF is in the process of preparing a revised national nutrition strategy⁴. More recently, the new President of Timor-Leste made reference to nutrition in his inauguration speech: **“also in Maputo, CPLP began a process of cooperation between member states for food security and against malnutrition. This grave problem is also a priority for Timor-Leste.”**⁵ Amid the many competing priorities of the Government, most persons consulted felt that nutrition should be more prominent in the national development agenda and be

³ Although it was noted that the DHS survey had made some methodological errors in certain districts.

⁴ The revised national nutrition strategy is expected to be available at the end of August 2012.

⁵ <http://presidenttimorleste.tl/2012/08/speech-full-text-inauguration-of-the-new-government/>

more explicitly budgeted to meet specific targets. **To this end, we concluded there is a need to complete a National Nutrition Strategy and operational Work Plan (with district-level costing and quantitative nutrition improvement targets and evaluations to track progress).**

There was wide agreement that nutrition requires a “champion” in Government who has the authority to allocate resources and mobilize sustained action to achieve ambitious nutrition improvement targets. Sustained high-level leadership on this issue can inspire the whole nation and its international development partners to rally behind a program that could effectively end malnutrition in Timor-Leste by 2030. A solid foundation for that ambitious goal must be laid now.

Recommendations

We make the following recommendations with full recognition of the on-going commitment of the Government and the development partners. We recommend that:

1. The Government adopts nutrition security as a core priority for the next 5 years and uses all opportunities to elevate the importance of good nutrition as the foundation of social and economic development. To that end, we encourage the Government to launch a highly visible national program and campaign with a theme such as “Nourished Nation”.
2. The Prime Minister establishes and chairs an Inter-Ministerial Nutrition Council that would meet quarterly to review progress and coordinate action. At a minimum this Council would include the Ministers of Health, Agriculture, Education, Public Works and Finance. Alternatively, the issue of nutrition could be addressed on a regular basis by the Council of Ministers.
3. The Prime Minister appoints a high-level National Nutrition Coordinator who would be responsible for facilitating, monitoring and reporting on action across several key ministries and the development partners.
4. The Government completes a National Nutrition Strategy and Work Plan in support of the SDP; this document would incorporate technical and cost details, as well as national and district-level measurable targets for increasing the number of well-nourished citizens.
5. The Government commits to a national media campaign to raise public awareness about the benefits of good nutrition (e.g. through billboards, radio and television).
6. The Government (with the support of development partners) begins an intensive capacity/institution building effort on nutrition at all levels and across multiple sectors.
7. The Government (with the support of development partners) undertakes a program to identify and map, through GIS, nutrition “hot-spots”, enabling more strategic investments and effective monitoring and evaluation of nutrition efforts.
8. The Government expands the scope of the Human Capital Development Fund to include increased multi-sector investments in nutrition.
9. The Government elevates the status of nutrition in the ministries of Agriculture and Health by establishment of divisions and appointment of directors of nutrition in each ministry.

10. The Ministry of Finance establishes systems and procedures to enable budgeting and accounting of nutrition-related expenditures.
11. The Government signifies its commitment to nutrition by joining the global Scaling Up Nutrition (SUN) Movement within the next 6 months.
12. The Government hosts an International Conference on Food and Nutrition Security. The Earth Institute commits to co-organizing the Conference with the Government. Recognizing the special role of Timor-Leste in the G7+ and the unique food and nutrition challenges faced by those nations, we suggest inviting G7+ members to share their experience.

Earth Institute Contributions

We have identified several possible areas of Earth Institute support to a national nutrition program in Timor-Leste:

1. Information sharing and technical support to the Government in; (1) developing the National Nutrition Strategy, with a costed and operational Work Plan, (2) developing a mass communication strategy for nutrition improvement; (3) developing systems for the monitoring and evaluation of progress, including geo-spatial analysis of key malnutrition hot-spots and mapping of progress (4) strengthening the government's existing community health system.
2. Capacity building: development and implementation of nutrition training and nutrition-sensitive development, including the facilitation of cooperation with other countries working to improve nutrition at national scale.
3. Support in planning and resource mobilization for the proposed International Conference on Food and Nutrition Security in early 2013.

Contact

Center on Globalization and Sustainable Development (CGSD)
The Earth Institute | Columbia University
475 Riverside Drive, Suite 825
New York, NY, 10115
www.cgsd.columbia.edu
Tel: +1 212 851 9603
Email: cgsd@ei.columbia.edu