

# Oxfam Working Lives

## Restoring the Heart of East Timorese Society

Following more than 2 decades of extreme violence and brutality in East Timor, Oxfam is working with Movimento Cooperativo Economico – Agricola (MCE–A) in remote rural areas with rice and coffee farmers to rebuild rural economies, increase farmers' resilience and aid their ability to grow surplus food for sale and storage.



### Background

In a country the size of Fiji, East Timor has struggled since independence to feed itself and maintain food reserves during hungry seasons. This is for a complex mix of reasons, including:

- The removal of agricultural tariffs which have opened markets to cheap imported rice undermining the local rice market.
- Broken roads, bridges and irrigation channels.
- A lack of draught animals and hand tractors to cultivate arable land.

### The challenge

These factors put Timorese farmers at a considerable disadvantage. Adding further woe to this tough scenario are the growing effects of



Food shortages and lack of basic facilities remain a serious concern in East Timor – a young girl stands next to her abandoned school. **Photo credit:** Tom Greenwood/Oxfam



Seven year old Dalia do Carmo Mial, with corn seeds her parents grew with support from Oxfam's partner, Movimento Cooperativo Economico–Agricola. **Photo credit:** Tom Greenwood/Oxfam

climatic change through increasing dry periods, flash floods and locust attacks. Even the most robust and entrepreneurial New Zealand farmer would find this situation unbearable.

### Who we work with

Oxfam's partner, MCE–A is an agricultural co-operative movement which has tapped into a national desire to make this newly independent nation succeed.

### Our objectives

- To assist small farmers and women's groups to organise and access commercial and profitable markets, including Fairtrade markets.
- To enable small farmers to respond to prolonged dry periods, made worse by the effects of climate

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change, with effective and sustainable practices. This means increased yields and better nutrition from crops and livestock, allowing communities to be more resilient and self-sufficient.

- To secure human rights for marginalised people (women, ethnic and cultural minorities and other groups) and give them an effective voice in influencing decisions affecting their lives.

## What we are doing

Working with government departments and with Oxfam financial and technical assistance MCE–A has sparked a rural renaissance in which:

- Farming communities with the will and initiative are supported in organizing co-operatives.
- Rice co-operatives are assisted to write business plans to bring more land into production through the use of hand tractors and improved techniques.
- Coffee co-operatives are assisted to process red cherries to add value and increase incomes.
- Milling machinery has been installed in central co-operatives to process rice to a standard which is equal in quality to imported rice.
- Regular markets have been found for surplus rice, thus rewarding farmers with extra income.
- Co-operative communities participate in Saturday



Movimento Cooperativo Economico–Agrícola members from the Liquica district replanting their paddy fields. “Since the establishment of the co-operative the farmers have got deeply involved. Before the farmers worked separately, now they are working together.” – Haburas Sare Co-operative chairman, Luis Manuel. **Photo credit:** Tom Greenwood/Oxfam

literacy classes which inform people about the practice of democracy, human rights as well as improved farming practices.

- A model bio-gas plant has been built providing electricity and gas to a remote rice co-operative.

## What we have achieved so far

Results so far have been encouraging despite bouts of civil unrest, rising fuel costs and dropping commodity prices. For example:

- Rice production in co-operatives has increased from 1 tonne/hectare to 3–5 tonnes/ha – the national average is 1.5 tonnes/ha for a ‘normal year’.
- Farmers have brought more land into production, increasing from an average of 1 ha/farmer to 2–3 ha/farmer.
- The price per kg of rice is expected to be 34 cents, an increase from 12 cents/kg paid the previous year.
- Significantly, MCE–A has noted an increase in farming populations as people are drawn from urban areas back to the land as guaranteed markets and improved incomes provide greater livelihood security.

## What we need

This year, Oxfam and our partner have committed to raise NZ\$50,000 for this ambitious and important programme.

For further information please contact [oxfam@oxfam.org.nz](mailto:oxfam@oxfam.org.nz) or call 0800 400 666.

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