



# Timor-Leste

When ACDI/VOCA began work in Timor-Leste in 2005, the country was still emerging from a complex crisis rooted in 400 years of Portuguese colonialism followed by 24 years of Indonesian occupation. After a popular referendum for independence in 1999, the country spiraled into intense political violence until military command was transferred to the United Nations in February 2000. By February 2002, when Timor-Leste's independence was formalized, more than 205,000 refugees returned to find their country in a state of widespread poverty, where not only the physical but also the political, economic and social infrastructure had been largely dismantled.

Despite the massive support of international organizations since then, many communities have still been unable to meet their basic needs. The government has faced immense challenges in rebuilding the country and bridging the poverty gap between rural areas and urban centers. Ineffective local governance, weak government-public linkages and severely degraded physical infrastructure are impediments. Local communities often feel disenfranchised from the central government's efforts to rebuild.



## ACDI/VOCA in Timor-Leste

Since 2005 ACDI/VOCA has played a significant role in Timor-Leste, helping rural communities rebuild and position for their economic and social development. Our work has spanned many contexts, such as strengthening networks between community-based organizations (CBOs) and NGOs, diversifying the local aquaculture economy and rendering legal assistance for land claims. Broadly, ACDI/VOCA has focused on the integration of rural communities in the broader political, social and economic recovery and development of the new nation.

## Local NGO Strengthening

ACDI/VOCA began its work in Timor-Leste in 2005, supporting local NGO partners by

seamlessly continuing the USAID-funded **NGO Strengthening Sector Program (NGOSSP)**. Under this program, ACDI/VOCA, in collaboration with Columbia University's Center for International Conflict Resolutions (CICR), worked with BELUN, a local NGO that focuses on reducing underlying civil tensions that can lead to violent conflict. The country's unstable political history demonstrated that successful projects would first need to strengthen the central government's social and physical infrastructure.

Over the next three years, NGOSSP successfully enhanced operational, technical and financial capacity in the CBO/NGO sector. The project also established BELUN as a significant and credible player in Timorese civil society, integrating conflict resolution and prevention into its portfolio. Additionally, NGOSSP increased service delivery and leveraging of funds for local service delivery by CBO/NGO partners and finalized SUCO Council conflict assessments in 53 villages.

By the end of this program, ACDI/VOCA provided support to more than 150 local NGO partners across Timor-Leste, expanding linkages among NGOs as well as between NGOs and private sector institutions. Our work also strengthened the Small Grants Development Network, which brought together donors, international and local NGOs and CBOs, and successfully leveraged funds from donor agencies such as DFID, AUSAID, Irish AID, CIDA, the UNDP and the World Bank. An important product of this collaboration was the development of the National Database of Community Development Projects, a tool to

facilitate linkages between CBOs, NGOs, government and the private sector.

### Land Tenure and Property Rights

In 2007, ACDI/VOCA began implementation of the five-year USAID-funded **Strengthening Property Rights and Land Tenure (SPRTL)** project, which supported the government of Timor-Leste in its efforts to strengthen property rights and resolve conflicts. To achieve this, ACDI/VOCA implemented public awareness and conflict mitigation and reconciliation activities including a national multimedia campaign reaching urban and rural, literate and nonliterate populations. ACDI/VOCA coordinated public displays, led gender and property rights workshops, broadcast public service announcements on the radio and television and carried out awareness-raising on the value of conflict mediation.

ACDI/VOCA also helped mediate conflicting claims to land, immovable property and natural resources, ensuring that the necessary procedures for resolving and mediating conflicting land claims are in place throughout the cadaster, registration and titling phases of the programs. The value of the program was such that it was eventually integrated into the country's Ministry of Justice operations. In total, SPRTL mediated 5,520 land disputes.

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## Launching the Mud Crab Industry and Supporting Aquaculture

In 2010, ACDI/VOCA was awarded a USDA grant to develop the **Mud Crab and Fish Cultivation (MCFC)** program, an innovative, four-year project designed to strengthen aquaculture economies in rural coastal communities through the cultivation of mud crabs, fish and other aquaculture products. Cultivating mud crabs is a high-return economic activity in Timor-Leste that depends on healthy mangrove forests. Thus, ACDI/VOCA's work to strengthen the mud crab industry creates economic opportunities that are closely tied to sustainable mangrove forest use and management.

MCFC has established more than 60 producer groups representing more than 400 producers, and will soon supply producer groups with crablets produced from a Mud Crab and Aquaculture Hatchery constructed in partnership with the Ministry of Aquaculture and Fisheries. Through MCFC, ACDI/VOCA also supports the rehabilitation of existing fish ponds, construction of new mud crab and fish polyculture ponds, and enhancement of women's livelihoods through seaweed production. Through the remainder of the project, ACDI/VOCA will continue to support mud crab and fish production in Timor-Leste, strengthening producer group capacity in production, post-harvest handling and market distribution.

## The Future

Significant progress has been made in Timor-Leste, marked most recently by the end of UN peacekeeping operations in December 2012. However, while the Timorese have claimed ownership of the country's political and administrative processes, there remains a large gap between the central government and rural communities. Furthermore, climate change poses a new threat to coastal livelihoods. Linking coastal communities with economic activities that mitigate the risks of ecosystem degeneration will be critically important to their continued social and economic development.

Developing a sustainable smallholder aquaculture industry will require a focus on building productive business associations and strengthening value chains, both domestic and international. In addition, there is potential in combining climate change-mitigating activities with those that offer market potential, such as seaweed production that also serves as a natural barrier to storm surges, or developing inland fisheries that reduce the pressure on overfished marine resources and lessen degradation of the nation's pristine coral reefs. Keeping such circumstances in mind, ACDI/VOCA's future work in Timor-Leste will continue to strengthen local governance and civil society in rural coastal communities.

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