

RAPID FOOD SECURITY ASSESSMENT

Timor-Leste

9 JUNE 2020

This brief summarizes the findings of the Rapid Food Security Assessment conducted in May 2020. The nationwide survey was designed to rapidly assess the effects of COVID-19 restrictions as well as recent agricultural shocks, such as crop pests, livestock and poultry diseases, and variable rains on rural households. The 2020 Rapid Food Security Assessment was led by the Department of Food Security, Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) with data collection carried out by: ADRA, CRS, Mercy Corps, Oxfam, TOMAK and World Vision, with funding from the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and Australian Aid, and with additional technical support provided by the FAO and WFP. A full report is available from the MAF Department of Food Security and from lead agencies Mercy Corps and Oxfam.

Data was collected from 1,217 respondents representing households across all 13 municipalities of Timor-Leste between 5 - 18 May 2020. In order to rapidly inform the Government of Timor-Leste and agency responses, a purposive sampling methodology was used. Respondents were selected from among the areas where the agencies collecting data implement programs, and where the effects of the target shocks were thought to exist. The data is therefore a snapshot of how these shocks are affecting households, but cannot be generalized across the whole population of Timor-Leste.

Survey responses came from an approximately equal number of female and male respondents. Overall, 17% of respondents considered themselves a member of a female-headed household, over 90% were engaged in agriculture, and the average household size was 7.1.



To reduce unnecessary travel during a global pandemic and Timor-Leste's State of Emergency, each data collection partner selected sucos where they currently work and that were thought to have been impacted by COVID-19 restrictions and/or recent agricultural shocks.

Key Findings

- **Households are experiencing food insecurity at what should be the most food secure time of the year:** Harvest of staples means April and May should be the months with the highest level of food security in a typical year, but over 40% of households are already engaging in coping strategies that reduce the amount of food they are eating at least once per week. Severe hunger was found to be low, but all respondents reported relying on at least one income source that they said they 'only rely on in times of stress'.
- **Rural households are absorbing more people:** 14% of surveyed households have increased in size, by an average of 3.2 members, in the last two months. Beyond their own households, 32% of respondents observed people returning from cities in their communities.



- **Household food security is impacted by COVID-19:** 81% of households reported the restrictions around COVID-19 had affected their food/income sources. For 75%, more than one food/income source had been affected. 50% had experienced a food shortage in shops and in markets, and 35% reported shortages of non-food items in shops due to COVID-19.
- **Food insecurity is not universal:** 34% of respondents noted they had not shifted to consumption of less preferred or less expensive foods. Between 43 - 47% reported that they were not borrowing food, consuming seed stock or purchasing food on credit. Households are generally not relying on sending household members to eat with neighbors or relatives as a coping strategy (93%).
- **Household savings and food stocks are limited:** 64% of households have two months or less of food stored, including 18% who have no food stored. 58% of households rate their food storage levels as less than this time in a typical year. Only 22% of respondents said that any member of their household had savings of any kind, and among those with savings only 7% reported having more than \$250.
- **Livestock levels have dropped dramatically compared to 12 months ago:** Households were found to have less than one third as many pigs, and less than half as many chickens as a year ago. 82% of respondents reported being impacted by African Swine Fever, and all municipalities were affected.
- **Economic shocks are severe and diverse:** 92% of households indicated they had not been able to travel to market in recent months, 82% were affected by the closure of markets/shops and 74% had experienced reduced/unavailable food in markets. The impact of those economic shocks was severe; 49% - 64% of respondents said the impact was 'strong' or the 'worst that had ever happened'.
- **Agriculture shocks are widespread:** 88% of households were impacted by livestock disease (including African Swine Fever), 77% of households were impacted by crops pests (including Fall Armyworm), 73% were impacted by unseasonal or erratic rain, and 67% of households were impacted by a very bad harvest.
- **Affected households are struggling to recover:** Between 42% and 69% of respondents rated the impact of the top-three agriculture shocks (livestock disease, crop pests, and unseasonal/erratic rainfall) as either 'strong' or the 'worst that had ever happened'. Between 35% and 51% of these households said that they had 'not at all' or 'partially' recovered from these shocks.
- **Most households are aware of COVID-19 prevention behaviors:** 99% of respondents had received information on COVID-19, and 97% felt that information had helped them to understand and prepare for it. Television (71%), community leaders (54%) and radio (52%) were the top three sources of information. Unprompted, 99% of respondents mentioned washing their hands regularly and/or washing their hands regularly with soap was a way that they could keep their household safe from COVID-19, 76% mentioned wearing a mask and 76% stated physical distancing.



Representatives from 1,217 households and 81 sucos from across Timor-Leste's 13 municipalities were surveyed.

Conclusion

Food security and fragility already exist in Timor-Leste. At a time of year when households are traditionally most food secure, many households are showing low levels of food storage, savings, limited recovery from shocks, and are practicing coping strategies associated with reduced food and income. Traditional wealth indicators such as livestock are at low levels, and rural households are absorbing members back from the cities.

While the State of Emergency and COVID-19 restrictions have been critical for ensuring the health and safety of the Timorese population, this has had an impact on households' livelihoods and food security. Agricultural and environmental shocks are widespread at this critical harvest time. In the coming months, as the dry season emerges and the 'hungry season' nears, families will face difficult decisions on how to manage their food security. With the next significant harvest nearly a year from now, many households may have little resilience to face additional shocks. Coordinated interventions now could improve food security for people across rural Timor-Leste, and prevent households from moving towards more drastic coping strategies, the effects of which are difficult to reverse.

Recommendation

It is strongly recommended that stakeholders engage in a consultative process to create a set of recommendations for actions tailored to key actors (including government, development agencies, civil society organizations and private sector stakeholders) in order to move forward with a unified and comprehensive approach to improving the current food security situation in Timor-Leste.

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