



HART visit to HIAM Health, Timor-Leste

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Timor-Leste is a mountainous country which understandably makes feeding its population of 1.3 million difficult. It is estimated only 11% of its area is farmed and, of that 40% is on slopes with the various problems of cultivation including soil erosion. 70% of the population depend on subsistence farming. The country is dependent on food imports but earns little international currency and its food supply is dependent upon fluctuations in the international markets.

Dealing with malnutrition in Timor-Leste entails tackling several long-standing problems, such as:

- an inadequate understanding of nutrition;
- a lack of water, or absence of irrigation and water management;
- widespread food taboos, meaning that people can be malnourished when there is perfectly good food available;
- the common mistake of denying breast-milk in the first ten days of an infant's life because the discolouration of the colostrum-rich milk is seen as 'impure';
- traditional agricultural practices which fail to make use of compost, mulching, crop rotation;
- poor hygiene, leading to gastric problems and diarrhoea.

We travelled out into a wide range of remote villages where Rosaria (Founder & Director), Antonio (Project & Centre Manager), Jill (Financial Advisor) and the staff of HIAM work with both communities and individuals. We participated in a few of the discussions that involve communities in the planning, meetings which take place at the beginning and as the projects develop. HIAM staff establish gardens, enabling them to train people in crop diversification, rotation and nutrition.

We spoke with communities planning the next step of their agricultural development; galvanized to pool their resources, including land.

About HIAM Health

HIAM seeks to combat malnutrition by giving women more control over their lives and their families, increasing their nutrition and diversifying their family's personal food production.

HIAM's work includes:

- establishing gardens and smallholdings to teach irrigation and new agricultural techniques and supply equipment such as water-tanks and pumps, pipes, compost bins, seed, etc.;
- teaching good nutrition and hygiene to communities while giving agricultural instruction;
- being available to advise women on best early nourishment of their children and assist them in how to take some control of their reproductive life;
- teaching and updating the country-wide government-paid Agricultural Extension Workers (AEWs) in nutrition and the diversity of cultivation which is the basis of good nutrition;
 - nearly 500 trained and over 100 of those updated;
 - they have an immediate outreach of over 120,000 people.
- introducing, or rather encouraging, the cultivation of the moringa plant, which can make an important contribution to a balanced diet; it is also useful as a natural pesticide and fertiliser; and HIAM is investigating a commercial use of the moringa, including how to market and transport it to external communities.

When people are asked by HIAM's staff to name some nutritious foods, they say meat, fish, and eggs (which they can rarely afford). HIAM teaches them that they can grow crops like beans, cabbage and various fruits, which are equally nutritious and contain high levels of protein and vitamins.

Importantly, HIAM establishes irrigation for communities. This is crucial, as despite Timor-Leste having 3-6 months of heavy rain per year and natural water storage from its mountains; the country suffers from a terrible water shortage. HART saw the simple irrigation and water storage technology in the villages which HIAM has supplied. We saw plants growing in the dry season which would not usually be possible but now help communities through periods of especial malnourishment. We also saw fish farms which had been newly established to provide extra protein for the communities.

During the visit, we were pleased to hear of HIAM's intentions to provide residential care for severely malnourished children within the next twelve months. This is an initiative that HIAM used to offer in the past but a lack of funding caused the project to end. Fortunately, the relevant infrastructure remains at HIAM's Malnutrition, Rehabilitation and Education Centre (MREC). This will enable parents or carers to reside at the centre with their children in order to care for them and receive education in nutrition, hygiene and horticultural techniques such as how to create compost. In the past, these parents then return to their villages to be the evangelists of this new knowledge gained and HIAM continues to support them with a new agricultural garden.

It is amazing to see the progress over the past five years. A huge thanks to Isle of Man COPG for continuous funding and support.