



Oxfam's community-based adaptation to climate change case study:

## ENGAGING WITH CUSTOMARY LAW TO BUILD CLIMATE CHANGE RESILIENCE IN TIMOR-LESTE

Bairo Aoserok, Timor-Leste: a traditional marker signifying that Tara Bandu regulations are in place. Photo: Dui Rahardani/Enok naeo Lifau.

### CLIMATE CHANGE IN TIMOR-LESTE

Communities across Timor-Leste are highly vulnerable to the impacts of climate variability and change due to high levels of poverty, poor environmental management practices, and high reliance on rain-fed agriculture. A lack of access to accurate climate information, and a limited capacity of government and non-government actors to support adaptation measures, places them at further risk.

As the impacts of climate change intensify in coming years, existing poverty and food insecurity will worsen. The projected increase in extreme weather events in Timor-Leste — including more extreme hot days and more extreme rainfall events — could have serious implications for agricultural production and livelihoods.

*"While ... we are one of the smallest carbon dioxide emitters in the world, and we make only a tiny contribution to climate change, our nation is particularly vulnerable ... [Climate change] will also have profound consequences for agricultural production, food security, the tourism industry, the incidence of natural disasters, and the well being of our people."*

— H.E. Kay Rala Xanana Gusmão, Prime Minister of Timor-Leste

### WHY IS OXFAM WORKING IN TIMOR-LESTE?

While the impacts of climate change are already evident in Timor-Leste, the concept remains relatively new at the community level. Recent Oxfam-supported research found that while many communities recognise climate change as a major issue, they are not aware of the causes, and may see changes as either beyond their control or of a temporary nature.

The diversity of terrain and agro-ecological zones in Timor-Leste means that specific climate change impacts may differ widely between locations. Therefore, climate change education, planning and action need to be highly localised.

### WHAT ARE WE DOING ABOUT THESE PROBLEMS?

In response to these challenges, Oxfam and partners developed the Improving Land and Water Management to Reduce Impacts of Climate Change on Communities in Timor-Leste project.

The project, which is supported by the Australian aid program, aims to improve community and local government capacity to plan and implement local adaptation actions, and increase understanding of — and action on — the links between climate change and food security.

A key element of the project has been the creation of community action plans, which are developed by community groups and based on a mix of scientific information and local traditional environmental knowledge. The action plans identify the challenges climate change brings to the community and outline strategies to manage these impacts through adaptive practices.

One way to help increase community ownership of adaptation planning and action, as well as ensuring the issue is localised, is to embed climate risk and adaptation into existing traditional knowledge and practices through Tara Bandu (customary laws).

Tara Bandu refers to a traditional Timorese custom that facilitates public agreement to define social norms and practices, in terms of the relationships between people, animals and the environment. The Tara Bandu system has a long history in Timor-Leste, but it became significantly weakened during the period of Indonesian rule. Since gaining independence in 2002, communities have begun to re-establish Tara Bandu regulations in order to strengthen natural resource management, and to reduce conflict within communities.

## HOW HAVE THINGS CHANGED FOR THE BETTER?

Helping communities to include climate change and environmental sustainability as key issues addressed by Tara Bandu has increased local-level understanding of these issues and helped convince communities of the need to take action to adapt to climate variability and change in order to protect their livelihoods.

Participatory workshops in communities across the country have helped re-establish Tara Bandu practices and have ensured sustainability of their actions.

For example, the project recently engaged with women and men in the sucos (villages) of Tashilin and Bobometo to facilitate the adoption of Tara Bandu and implementation of community action plans. The communities were able to determine specific issues and actions, such as prohibiting slash-and-burn agricultural practices, introducing mandatory fencing of livestock, and conserving forest resources. They then drafted local regulations, detailing the reasoning behind the rules as well as infringement penalties, to ensure that all villagers understand the reasoning.

*“Sacred places are protected and the community no longer light forest fires and are prohibited to cut trees. They must also consult the Kablehan before digging holes and changing the earth, thus preventing deforestation and erosion.”*

— Batista Boboeko, suco Bobometo,  
Oecussi district

## WHAT ARE WE LEARNING?

A key lesson from the project is that harnessing local wisdom, through Tara Bandu, has redefined social, political, economic and environmental governance. Community laws can facilitate increases in awareness of sustainability and climate change.

While Tara Bandu has now been trialled in a number of projects, including this one, understanding of how to make effective use of this technique is still relatively underdeveloped. Oxfam’s implementation of this approach in 16 communities represents a significant attempt to harness Tara Bandu to help increase the resilience of people and ecosystems in Timor-Leste.

Under the program, Oxfam has funded research into Tara Bandu as it specifically relates to climate change adaptation. This work was carried out in partnership with The Haburas Foundation, a Timorese NGO, and resulted in the publication *Tara Bandu: Strengthening the Resilience of Communities Facing Climate Change*, which has been presented at international conferences in Germany and Dili. The publication documents the history and tradition of Tara Bandu, its revival in the years since independence, and how it is now being applied to issues related to climate change by communities around Timor-Leste.

Traditional laws around natural resource conservation, protection of livelihoods, and conflict prevention are being re-established after periods of dormancy during the years of occupation; and new issues such as rubbish disposal and land clearing are also beginning to be addressed. The work of Oxfam and partner organisations helps to document the Tara Bandu regulations and to assist communities seeking formal recognition of traditional law by local and national government bodies.