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## East Timor: A Look to the Future

The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, also known as East Timor, is a tiny island nation in Southeast Asia. East Timor has suffered a violent history resulting in many of its current problems. In the mid-16th century, Portugal colonized the island of Timor. After years of conflict with the Dutch in the region Portugal gave up the western half of the island in an 1859 treaty. Japan took over East Timor as part of their imperialist campaign in World War II. Japan remained in control until the Japanese defeat by the United States, at which point Portugal regained control. On November 28, 1975, East Timor declared its independence from Portugal. This independence lasted nine days at which time it was occupied by Indonesian forces. In July of 1976 East Timor became a province of Indonesia, and for the next two decades Indonesian forces ran a campaign to pacify the Timorese. Anywhere between 100,000 and 250,000 Timorese are estimated to have died during this time. On August 30, 1999, the UN supervised a referendum in which a vast majority of the Timorese people voted to be independent from Indonesia. Peace keeping forces were sent to East Timor in late September 1999; however before they arrived, Indonesian supported Timorese anti-independence militias killed approximately 1,400 Timorese, and forced some 300,000 into West Timor. These militias also reportedly wiped out between 70% and 80% of the country's infrastructure including nearly 100% of the electrical grid. Although land boundaries are still contested to this day, East Timor was officially recognized as an independent nation on May 20, 2002 making it the world's newest independent state.

East Timor's per capita GDP is the lowest in the world at only \$400. Agriculture makes up 25.4% of the GDP, with industry accounting for 17.2%, and services making up 57.4%. Major industries are: printing, soap manufacturing, handicrafts, and cloth weaving. Major agricultural products are: coffee, rice, corn, cassava, sweet potatoes, soybeans, cabbage, mangoes, bananas, vanilla. East Timor exports 10 million dollars worth of coffee, sandalwood, and marble to Indonesia who is their only export partner. They import 202 million dollars worth of food, gasoline, kerosene, and machinery from various countries, but have no national debt due to the approximately 550 million dollars worth of aid they receive per year.

The typical Timorese family rarely eats meat. The wealthier ones may eat it up to once a week, the poorer families only a few times a year. Their diet is composed mainly of fruits, vegetables, corn, and rice. Although whole grain corn and corn on the cob are

offered at the marketplace, corn is usually bought in powder form so that it may easily be mixed with peanuts and beans and then cooked. Research has been conducted on rice and sweet potatoes, and superior varieties are believed to have been found. These advancements will provide the Timorese with a greater variety of food options.

Over 80% of Timorese families rely on agriculture for their food and livelihood. Many families are still struggling to meet subsistence levels. Nearly 50% of the population is still unemployed. According to Pip Courtney: “Only half the population of the world’s newest nation has safe drinking water. 46% of children are malnourished. Both infant mortality and illiteracy is high, and poverty, particularly in rural areas, is severe, with nearly half the country’s people living on less than US \$1 a day.”

East Timor contains poor shallow soil, steep terrain, and a varying climate. Along with slash and burn farming these factors limit the number of arable hectares to 174,000 (430 acres). Having over half the population under the age of 18 causes increased difficulties in farming the limited available land. Another barrier to food production is the lack of education. The National University of East Timor was severely damaged following independence, but has since been repaired and reopened. The Hera Field Station is the only agricultural laboratory in East Timor. Any advancements that these two places or any other research program achieve are limited by poor extension programs, which means that even if the progress is being made it is difficult to get it to the people who need it most.

With a population growth of approximately 3% yearly, more food will be required to feed all of the new people. This is made all the more difficult by the fact that major food production has stayed at nearly the same level for the past twenty to thirty years. Tension between farmers and foreign researchers caused difficulty in introducing new ideas, however this distrust was quickly overcome, and now farmers are much more eager to cooperate with researchers making advancements more accessible.

There are many groups that aid East Timor in various ways. Some provide money; others provide research, while some go out and teach the farmers how to use the money and the research. Two of these groups are: the Australian Center for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR), and USAID.

The ACIAR has concluded one project in East Timor, and has several current projects in place. The ACIAR finished its first project on September 30, 2005. This

project, Seeds of Life, was designed to research and develop improvements on Timorese staple crops making them better suited for the East Timorese climate. Seeds of Life provided a strong foundation of research for other ACIAR projects; including Seeds of Life 2.

Seeds of Life 2 is a project meant to continue where the original Seeds of Life left off. In this project the improved seeds selected in the Seeds of Life project are being tested with current farming methods used by the Timorese people. It is also meant to find ways to improve seed storage, and distribution.

Another of ACIAR's projects is an attempt at improving Cassava production in East Timor. The first year of this program was mainly devoted to making necessary institutional arrangements. This program uses discoveries made by the Seeds of Life project, and also uses previous experiments as test subjects. This project involves high levels of input from the Timorese farmers who would be using the improved cassava the most; thereby developing new strains that best suit the farmers' needs.

The third major project that the ACIAR is currently working on involves weed management. One weed plaguing Timorese farmers is the *Chromolaena odorata*. This weed is highly toxic to livestock, and has been known to kill goats, cattle, and buffaloes. Biological control agents have already been developed to combat this threat, and the scientists involved with this project are currently teaching Timorese scientists about biological control theory and practice.

USAID is a program in place to improve East Timor's economic security. One of their major projects is the Cooperative Café Timor (CCT). The CCT is a federation of Timorese-owned cooperatives that produces and exports premium organic coffee. Its goal is to improve production, processing, and marketing of coffee products, and also pays about 66% more to Timorese coffee farmers than its competitors.

Their second project is expanding employment opportunities. This program provides technical and training support for the development and strengthening of the Purchasing and Distribution Cooperative (PDC), which was created in 2001 by small-scale Timorese traders and retailers. Today 11 out of Timor's 13 provinces benefit from this cooperative.

A third project is based on improving worker productivity. This project provides

health care to Timorese workers through the use of 10 clinics and supports 25 mobile teams. These teams provide access to a range of medical services and preventive care and treat almost 175,000 patients a year. This project has also led to a strengthening of government health care policies.

The final major project that USAID is working on is involved with strengthening policy and legislative frameworks. This project is working toward providing free market economic opportunities to the Timorese people. This project is implemented by funding the placement of a senior investment advisor to the Director of Investment in the Ministry of Development and Environment and a senior economic advisor in the Office of the Prime Minister.

Based on my research of the problems facing East Timor, and the programs in place I conclude that those programs are on the right track, and the best way to improve East Timorese agricultural conditions is to continue with what is already being done. The people are being educated, which is the first step They are receiving the money they need to get by while programs are being implemented to discover new ways to improve their condition, and they are involved in the research process which means developments are more likely to be helpful, rather than useless. East Timor's economic troubles are being alleviated by USAID and other such organizations, but could also be improved by diversifying trade partners, rather than sending all exports to Indonesia.

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