



HATUTAN Baseline: Hunger and Food Security Brief

Timor-Leste

HATUTAN Education and Nutrition Program

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HATUTAN Baseline: Hunger and Food Security Brief

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Key Findings: Hunger and Food Security

The HATUTAN baseline supports existing evidence that much of the rural population faces issues of food insecurity. Households use multiple strategies to cope with food insecurity which includes reducing the quality and quantity of food consumed. Qualitative findings indicate that production may not be enough. Buying nutritious, locally grown food in rural locations is a challenge with quantity and variety being limited in rural markets and access to larger markets being difficult.

1. The HATUTAN Program

HATUTAN (*Hahán ne'ebé Atu Fó Tulun ho Nutrisaun no Edukasaun*, or Continue and Support Food for Nutrition and Education) is a program funded by the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) McGovern-Dole Food for Education initiative in Timor-Leste. HATUTAN seeks to improve literacy outcomes for primary school children and increased use of improved health, nutrition and dietary practices in 440 schools and surrounding communities in the municipalities of Ainaro, Ermera, Liquica and Manatuto. The program is implemented by CARE International, Mercy Corps and Water Aid in partnership with the Ministries of Education, Youth and Sports (MEYS), Health (MOH), Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) and KONSANTIL, between 2018 and 2023. HATUTAN uses a quasi-experimental evaluation design to assess the impact of its intervention on education, health and nutrition outcomes in treatment schools, compared to the regular progress observed through time in a set of matching comparison schools not exposed to similar interventions. HATUTAN's baseline study, conducted in February-April 2019, collected data from 189 schools and respective communities, including 99 treatment and 90 comparison schools.

2. Background

Much of the rural population in Timor-Leste faces issues of food insecurity at the household level with most households dependent on subsistence agriculture strategies for food consumption. According to the Integrated Food Security Classification (IPC) Report released in January 2019 approximately 36% of the population is chronically food insecure. Contributing factors to food insecurity include low agricultural productivity, poor quality and quantity of food consumption, low income livelihood strategies and lack of access to sufficient cash to buy food during the hungry season. The HATUTAN results framework highlights hunger and access to food as two sub-factors that contribute to student attentiveness. HATUTAN's planned activities will address hunger and food access with the anticipated results of improved nutrition, attentiveness and literacy in school aged children.

3. Key findings from baseline

Food insecurity impacts not only hunger but the amount and diversity of the food consumption. Results from the HATUTAN baseline show that only 10% of women of reproductive age (WRA) consume a diverse diet, defined as five or more of the nine food groups a day. The average WRA consumed just 3.3 food groups. Results also show that children (aged 6 to 23 months) also lack dietary diversity. Just 6% of children consumed the

recommended four or more food groups a day, with the majority consuming just 1.9 groups (*See Health and Nutrition Brief*). Furthermore, households and school children are not getting the appropriate amount of food, 13% of students reported they had not eaten the day of the baseline survey. A lower but substantial portion of caregivers (6%) said they went without eating for a full day in the last 30 days. This highlights the importance of the provision of quality school feeding, enabling children to eat at least one nutritious meal a day.

When there is limited food in the home, due to hungry season or other challenges, households described coping strategies such as: borrowing food from neighbors, restricting types of food eaten and the amount of food consumed, eating only once a day, selling livestock and doing seasonal work (weeding, planting) to earn money to buy food. Even those able to earn some money through work or selling animals implied they face challenges to food access during the rainy season, given the distance and the limited accessibility of markets.

We cook less food, count what we eat and drink until it is time for the harvest. [Father, Ermera]

We have livestock such as chicken and pigs and can bring them to the market to sell, so we can get money to buy food for the household. During the rainy season though, the rivers are full and we cannot get there. [Father, Ainaro]

Qualitative findings from the HATUTAN baseline indicate that production may not be enough. Buying nutritious, locally grown food in rural locations was mentioned as an issue with quantity and variety being limited in rural markets with access to larger markets being difficult. Only 30% of comparison schools and 48% of the treatment schools reported that they buy food from local farmers all the time. The most common categories of food procured by schools from farmers when school feeding is operational were dark green vegetables (90%), pumpkins, carrots or purple potatoes (76%) and potatoes, taro or cassava (75%). However, the baseline indicates schools have high demand for local foods and are willing to buy from farmers. Schools reported their primary challenge was accessing sufficient amount of local produce efficiently, as it was difficult to go farmer by farmer and marketplaces were limited. It was also noted that only 21% of households reported being part of a farmer group. There is evidence from the baseline that shows demand for foods and willingness of schools to buy from farmers.

We buy whatever is planted by the community as long as they have enough to sell. For example, if they plant vegetables, they may have a direct contract with the cook, if they keep livestock they come and we can buy from them. [Coordinator, Male, Liquica]

Hunger affecting school attentiveness: Interviews conducted with teachers and coordinators indicated that many students struggle to pay attention in class and participate in activities. In all focus groups conducted with teachers, the issue of disengaged and withdrawn students was a key point raised by the respondents. Some students were described as ‘unable to get the information’ or ‘unable to focus attention’ on what is being taught. Both parents and teachers described how short-term hunger affects students’ ability to pay attention to content and to engage in class.

Sometimes they are hungry, when it is time for the break they don’t have time to rest. They don’t want to study; they don’t want to listen to the class. [Mother, Ermera]

Hunger is known to be related to learning outcomes and performance with hunger negatively affecting the working memory needed for reading comprehension.¹ Caregivers indicated that about four in ten students (36%) have at least some difficulty remembering things or concentrating (*See Table 42 Baseline Report*). The results indicate that this is the most common type of disability and may be linked to working memory issues, potentially arising from a history of malnutrition and/or persistent illness.

As a result, teachers resort to focusing almost exclusively on classroom management in order to engage students. They are working extra hard in order to compensate for student hunger, which takes away from effective literacy instruction and ultimately student learning.

4. Exploring the Issue

Agriculture practices are strongly linked to food insecurity. Agriculture productivity is limited in Timor-Leste due to limited use of improved agriculture practices, limited market actors linking producers to sellers, and value addition processing. The noted lack of both quantity and quality of foods in rural areas restricts consumption of a diverse diet. Most households in rural areas depend on subsistence agriculture and lack of access to cash and minimal income to buy food especially in the hungry season contributes to food insecurity. They lack access to appropriate financial services such as savings and loans necessary for investment in agriculture growth and reduced vulnerability.

The school feeding program is an important program to ensure one fully nutritious meal is provided to a student in a day however it suffers from systemic inefficiencies and transfer delays. The first trimester of school coincides with the beginning of the fiscal year and ministries and municipal governments experience delays in state budget approval and the transfer of funds to the municipalities which means schools are not able to deliver school feeding in the hunger season when it is most needed.

Gender Dynamics play a role in both hunger and food security. Respondents (particularly male) noted that providing enough food for the family is a man’s responsibility; men are expected to farm to feed the family however other evidence shows the workload falls on the women. Although this area was not explored in this study, the added pressure on men to provide for the family may exacerbate domestic and intimate partner violence during times of food insecurity. Findings show disparities of women regarding workload which is linked to

¹ Cowan, N. Working Memory Underpins Cognitive Development, Learning and Education. *Education Psychology Review*. 2014 Jun 1; 26(2): 197–223.

poor care and hygiene practices of their young children. In efforts of families trying to prevent food insecurity findings showed how families depend on children to help during the coffee harvest with maize farmers also describing how they depend on their children's contribution of which both can be linked to student absenteeism.

Access to markets, clean water, sanitation, healthcare and food preparation and storage equipment were all mentioned in the baseline as lacking. **Access to food** in the right quantity and quality was mentioned in focus group discussions as challenging especially for schools and accessing larger markets was difficult.

5. What this means for HATUTAN

1. Prioritize investment in the School Feeding Program to deliver a nutritious meal to all students every day of school. Evidence shows school feeding attracts students to school, helps keep children in schools, and will enable them to perform better while at school. In addition, utilize the School Feeding program as an opportunity to offer children learnings about diet diversity and trying different foods than they get at home.
2. Work with the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries to develop the agriculture private sector, building the capacity of farmers to adopt improved agriculture practices, such as climate smart agricultural technologies and nutrition sensitive agriculture that can improve their productivity as well as home consumption.
3. Develop the MAF supported agriculture private sector for sustainable links between farmers, with an incentive to produce more, and institutional buyers, such as schools, with an incentive to purchase high volumes. Focus activities on sustainably increasing farmer's access to critical farming production inputs and linkages to markets especially schools. Creating opportunity for farmers to sell foods to markets coupled with membership in a savings and loan groups will allow farmers access to the necessary cash needed for purchase of inputs and to invest in transitioning out of subsistence agriculture.
4. Develop a HATUTAN Social Behavior Change Strategy that is in line with Ministry of Health priorities and approaches for addressing improved nutrition, hygiene and gender equality to ensure that the food calories are well utilized and not lost due to health related issues such as chronic diarrhea.
5. Partner with KONSSANTIL for cross ministerial engagement and align HATUTAN activities with KONSSANTIL sector priorities to improve nutrition outcomes.
6. Improve basic infrastructure to support food security including operational markets, a functional value chain, improved post-harvesting technology and storage facilities both at home and at the schools.