



Food and Agriculture  
Organization of the  
United Nations

# Community ownership can create change:

## Experimental participatory learning brings better life in Timor-Leste

*By Nichola Hungerford, Timor-Leste*

FEB  
2023

of **Stories  
Change**

*Connecting traditional knowledge and  
innovations for fair and sustainable  
food systems*

United Nations  
Decade of  
**FAMILY  
FARMING**  
2019-2028





Community Ownership can create change: Experimental participatory learning brings better life in Timor-Leste By **Nichola Hungerford**, Timor-Leste

## Writers

Alethea Kordor Lyngdoh, Bhargavi Nagendra, Brighton Govha, Diana Mapulanga, Edwin Abwino, Georgina Catacora-Vargas, Joseph Karangathi Njoroge, Kushal Poudel, Laura Tabet, Magdalene Amujal and Gillian Avako of Kulika, Nichola Hungerford, Preeti S. Virkar, Doon Valley, Rafal Serafin, Sarah Appiah, Shalini Pathi, Smita Magar, Sostain Moyo.

## Technical Coordination

Nathalie Santini

Family Farming Knowledge Platform  
Family Farming Engagement, Parliamentary  
Networks and ComDev Initiatives Unit  
Partnerships and UN Collaboration Division  
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

Zdravka Dimitrova

Agroecology Knowledge Hub  
Scaling up Agroecology Initiative  
Ecosystem approach to crop production intensification  
Plant Production and Protection Division  
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

## Editorial team

Doug Reeler & Cristina Temmink  
Barefoot Guide Connection

## Layout and graphic design

Ricardo Rivera, Jorge Leiva & Érika Ortega Sanoja

Prosperous and Inclusive Rural Societies Regional Initiative,  
FAO Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean

- [Family Farming Knowledge Platform](#)
- [Agroecology Knowledge Hub](#)
- [Family Farming & Agroecology Community of Practice](#)
- [Family Farming & Agroecology Community of Practice for the Africa Region](#)
- [Family Farming & Agroecology Community of Practice for the Latin America and The Caribbean Region](#)



©FAO

## Stories of change: *Connecting traditional knowledge and innovations for fair and sustainable food systems*

In December 2017, the [United Nations General Assembly proclaimed the United Nations Decade of Family Farming \(UNDAF, 2019-2028\)](#) thus constituting a framework that recognizes the importance of family farmers, which includes peasants, indigenous people, traditional communities, pastoralists, fisherfolks, upland farmers, and many other groups of food producers that possess a unique potential to promote transformative changes in the way food is grown, produced, processed and distributed.

All over the world, there are thousands of stories of distinctive work carried out anonymously by family farmers, including women and youth, on successful transitions to more inclusive, sustainable and fair food systems. Those stories are based on co-creation and sharing of traditional knowledge and innovations that are helping to make food systems sustainable, leaving no one behind.

In this context, the [Family Farming Knowledge Platform](#) in collaboration with the [Barefoot Guide Connection](#) organized a series of “writeshops”, writing classes to support practitioners to write their own experience, generating knowledge which highlight the practices, changes, innovations and impacts of what they do in support of family farming.

These writeshops represented an opportunity to share the creative process through which identify, recognize, write and exchange stories and experiences from young people, women, farmers, small-scale producers who work to promote, improve and strengthen family farming and achieve prosperous and inclusive rural societies.

This initiative was conceived to provide a space to highlight the human, cultural and social dimensions of family farming, including the human rights embedded in family farming and its social and economic organization.

The stories presented in this compilation - selected among those written during the writeshops, highlight the different ways in which family farmers responsibly and creatively manage their natural resources, landscapes and ecosystems as well as the cultural and symbolic values that define their identity.

---

Cover photo by FAO

# Community Ownership can create change: Experimental participatory learning brings better life in Timor-Leste

*By Nichola Hungerford, Timor-Leste*

It was another hot and humid day, another power cut, the generator groaning in the background. Fans were spinning and pumping hot air around as the A/C didn't work with the generator. I looked around the office, everyone seemed bored, scrolling through Facebook, chatting occasionally. I felt sad that there was a listless feeling throughout the building – like people were waiting for something to happen. The staff were as lethargic as the air around them, but it wasn't just today. It was like this every day.

George (my then co-worker) was busy with his work with the FAO on the campaign to prevent Avian Influenza from coming into Timor-Leste. We shared offices with the Extension Workers and other Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (the Ministry) staff. I commented to him that there was so much potential in the room that felt wasted with people just sitting there. All the study they did at university or agriculture school, the hope of starting a career in agriculture. The dream that their work could create some change for the country working with farmers and their livestock.

Fast forward 12 years. George is now working as a Project Officer with the Ministry, working on a sustainable agriculture project. He is now based in the centre of Timor-Leste in a little town called Ainaro, high in the mountains, surrounded by cliffs shrouded in clouds. Much less need for A/C there.

The rural environment in Timor-Leste is under severe pressure, with rain-fed land used for unsustainable small-scale subsistence farming. Agriculture is the primary source of livelihood in Timor-Leste, with over 80% of the population engaged in it.

## Doing what they have always done

Since Independence in 2000, Timor-Leste has had a continuous stream of international agencies and NGO's wanting to help the “new” country with various projects. They would come to a district or suku (village) with great ideas: trying to get the community involved, handing out grants or seeds, running training workshops - often telling them what is the “right” way. But then when the project was over, they would leave again. Sometimes there was change, but often things would return to the way they were. The same could be said for the Ministry – doing what they have always done, sometimes trying these “new” things, but when the project was completed, or the budget cycle was over, things often reverted to the way things were.

George and I were chatting about his new job. He said he felt he was having déjà vu from all those years ago about the Extension Workers. Another location with different faces, but that same feeling of nothing happening.

He felt resentment from the Extension Workers aimed at him, from yet another project being imposed. They seemed reluctant to join in. He detected cynicism from the local head of the Ministry who saw it as just another project that probably wouldn't work and then they would leave again. He said there were different people linked with the project wondering what they could get out of it; from local authorities to farmers wanting handouts to supplement other unrelated things.

## Trying a different approach: learning by doing

But George hoped that this project was going to be different, it was why he decided to take up the position. It was taking sustainable watershed planning as the foundation for agricultural development, not something that had been done in Timor-Leste before. Approaching sustainable agriculture through the entire catchment of Bealulik River: sustainability through agriculture, the environment, economically, as well as with a community approach of working together. It was a project by Timor, for Timor, taking agriculture to the next level. Though it was funded by the World Bank, they would be somewhat hands-off.

The aim of the project was close to George's heart, it was learning by doing. It included everyone in the community, especially village leaders, to be actively involved from the beginning and playing the vital role as collective decision makers rather than just as implementers of top-down project planners. George said that it was about building the capacity of Extension Workers, in collaboration with experts from MAF, to be facilitators of the farmers "experimental learning". Rather than giving ineffective recommendations that cover large geographic areas that may not even be useful or relevant to farmers, this method trained Extension Workers and the Ministry staff to work with farmers in testing, assessing, and adapting a variety of options within their specific local conditions. It was also about increasing the knowledge of farmers to make informed decisions on what works best for them, based on their own observations through demonstration plots, and to explain their reasoning for such decisions. There was also hope that the spill over effect of this project would strengthen the Ministry's planning, monitoring and evaluation functions. There was hope that the project would act as

a catalyst for a more effective and responsive agriculture sector for the whole of Timor-Leste.

### He said at least we have hope this could happen

Four years later, a different sense of change and hope.

It is now four years into this six-year project. George is sensing change, positive change: in the Extension Workers, in the attitude of the farmers, the Village Chiefs, the senior staff of MAF in Ainaro, even with the driver of the project.

While this part of the project was huge, (175 groups from the 12 suku's in the catchment), he felt the new approach of being inclusive with ownership was starting to pay off. This project seemed fairer than other ones, as everyone from the community had the opportunity to be involved. They all have the same access, which is not often the case in Timor-Leste.



*The aim of the project was close to George's heart, it was learning by doing. It included everyone in the community, especially village leaders, to be actively involved from the beginning*

I can see in his mannerisms and attitude, that George has a sense of pride with this project. Much of this was from seeing things coming to fruition and now there were tangible outputs, and a shift in attitudes of all involved.

George could see that the Extension Workers were seeing their work as something worthwhile. Previously they really didn't understand their function; they just did their jobs: distributing seeds or tractors, or giving fertiliser, and never really seeing any change. But now they have activities to do and have learnt new skills and techniques. They felt appreciated and instead of criticism from the government, they were feeling involved in the community. They started to really understand what it meant to be an extension worker. They were happy and busy; they have found their feet. He was surprised and proud of the change in the Extension Workers.

He was determined to include the driver in his work because of his interest in farming; and instead of sitting in the car waiting for a meeting to end, the driver was in there learning too: now sharing advice and ideas with the farmers, deep discussions about the decisions they were making. He was finding his feet too.

### **People participating in their own process**

George saw a new positivity that he hadn't seen for a long time. He saw that people were empowered and had control over what they were

doing. He believed that this new participatory approach was key to this. While it has been a long, hard few years for everyone involved, with many ups and downs, people were sensing a change and maybe long-term success.

It is very common in Timor-Leste for people to expect certain things in return for going to meetings associated with big projects, like food and transport, t-shirts etc. But now when George and the Extension Workers visit projects or meetings, food from the people's own gardens and coffee are served. No-one asks for handouts.

Everyone always talks about having ownership of a project and when you feel part of a process, truly part of it, then you will get the change you want. But you don't often hear about inspiring government staff who can create that change.

There are many pathways to sustainable agriculture, but maybe one is through the empowerment of Extension Workers that has the potential to be a fabric for long term sustainability in specific context. As George sees it, this project might actually be making that real long-term change, or he is really hoping, but time will tell, the early signs are there. Maybe ownership does create change.

 Family Farming Knowledge Platform

 Agroecology Knowledge Hub

 Family Farming & Agroecology Community of Practice

 Family Farming & Agroecology Community of Practice  
for the Africa Region

 Family Farming & Agroecology Community of Practice