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José Ramos-Horta

Timor Leste benefits from our partnership with Australia

East Timor's former President and Nobel Peace Prize recipient José Ramos-Horta looks back at the role agricultural science has played in East Timor's recovery since achieving independence in 2002.

Timor Leste has experienced robust, double-figure economic growth in recent years and our budget surplus is about 300% of GDP. This should be viewed within the perspective of our journey from a Least Developed Country to a Middle Income Country.

Achieving this growth has been the result of a mix of policy options: investment by the Government in public infrastructure, cash transfers to the poorest of our people and investment in agricultural equipment. Much of the credit for the successes to date is also due to the astute management of our Petroleum Fund; the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative ranks Timor Leste's management as number one in Asia.

Investment in agriculture is vital to achieving our goal of food security within the next five to 10 years. This is a key foundation needed to build a modern, diversified economy that is not wholly reliant on extracting our petroleum and mineral wealth.

The key challenges in agricultural policy are improving productivity per hectare and expanding areas of farmland. Timor Leste cannot achieve this first aim on its own. Bilateral support from a number of countries is essential.

Agriculture accounts for around one-third of our economy. However, 90% of our population of 1.1 million people rely on agriculture for employment. For many of these people the challenge is moving beyond subsistence

farming to producing surpluses. The journey to a modern economy cannot occur until we are able to achieve lasting food security, freeing up labour for other industries.

Australia has played a leading role in helping begin this important transition in agriculture. The relationship between our countries is strong. We have had our differences, but remain good friends.

One of the most pleasing aspects of this friendship is the provision of strategic aid to areas where it is most needed, particularly agriculture. Australia's resolve to increase its aid program, as part of its promised commitment to the United Nations Millennium Development Goals, is welcomed by Timor Leste, which remains a beneficiary of that decision.

Australia's support for Timor Leste has played an important role in helping overcome the sense of fragility that followed independence and threatened the confidence of our people in our institutions. Today that fragility is being replaced by a cautious, but growing sense of optimism.

The expansion of improved productivity in agriculture is part of that optimism. There is no more basic human institution than food security. Helping people have enough to eat is the foundation of confidence in all other institutions.

So too is the belief amongst our people that we can grow without exploiting our petroleum and mineral wealth in the short term, at the expense of long-term growth and sustainability.

A key component of this improved agricultural productivity is the Australian aid delivered through the Seeds of Life program. This program dates back to our first year as an independent nation. The Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR) recognised the need to improve our staple crop production and designed a research program to help identify those crop varieties.

In the past nine years, nine new staple crop varieties—adapted to growing conditions in Timor Leste—have been released. The Seeds of Life program has grown, with ACIAR and AusAID now co-funding a partnership with our Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries.

The benefits have flowed throughout the country. New varieties are helping farmers grow surpluses. These are helping to create markets, tapping into an entrepreneurial spirit amongst our young population. Families achieving these surpluses are reporting that they no longer have extended periods of hunger, nor do children miss out on education because they are helping forage for food.

One of the greatest challenges facing the Government is education. It is one of our top priorities. We are providing dozens of scholarships to our students to study in Australia and elsewhere. The aim is a highly educated young population able to compete regionally and internationally.

ACIAR and AusAID have helped through the provision of training and scholarships, including for scientists involved in the Seeds of Life program. One of the reasons for the widespread success of Seeds of Life is its commitment to educating our agricultural scientists so that we are not dependent on foreign expertise.

The next step in that process is the signing of the first trilateral aid initiative between Timor Leste, Australia and Indonesia. We have requested this cooperation as it helps build stronger ties with our closest neighbours and allows Timor Leste to benefit from Indonesian as well as Australian expertise.

This relationship will address some common agricultural problems. It is important in marking the next phase in the transition from subsistence agriculture to food security. Through Australian support we are moving beyond a focus on the most basic elements of food security, to those problems limiting further increases in production.

Australia's role in this transition has been a small, strategic and consistent factor in the growth of our young nation. As we continue our journey towards a Middle Income Country competing in our region and beyond, the friendship we share with Australia will remain important. ■