



Putting food in bowls

Australian scientists participating in ACIAR's Seeds of Life project discuss their experience in East Timor

BY GIO BRAIDOTTI

For many Australian members of the joint ACIAR–AusAID-funded Seeds of Life (SoL) team in East Timor, the project is fulfilling a long-standing desire to engage with the developing world and share with its people knowledge that can lead to food security. Program leader Rob Williams calls it “putting food in bowls”.

He describes his five years based full-time in East Timor as “living the dream”, for it happens that agricultural aid combines two of his great passions in life: a need to mediate against the brutality of the world's food poverty and a love of green, growing things ... some of which happen to be edible.

“I can remember as a child being fascinated by green things,” he says, recalling an early botany experiment he ran in the backyard to prove to his father that peanuts really do grow underground. “As a teenager, questioning what direction to take, I realised that aid to developing countries was my passion and the way to achieve that dream was through agricultural science.”

He enrolled at the University of Queensland in 1981 and went on to specialise in plant

breeding and crop physiology. On campus, he met Catharina van Klinken, the woman he would marry upon graduating in 1987. Of the pair, it was Catharina who blazed the move to East Timor when in 1999 she became involved with the United Nations-sponsored referendum that delivered independence to the East Timorese. A linguist, Dr Williams-van Klinken has since written a grammar and course book for learning Tetun, the newly official language of independent East Timor.

In 2002, Mr Williams left behind a career as an agricultural scientist to New South Wales's rice farmers to join his wife in Dili. He was immediately recruited by ACIAR to help rehabilitate the agriculture faculty at the National University of East Timor.

“In 1999 most of the technical expertise left the country, stranding it with a huge vacuum at all levels of research, training and management,” he says. “SoL got underway in 2000, with Brian Palmer and Brian Monaghan setting up the means to improve crop varieties, but even back then there was a focus on training and rebuilding technical expertise.”

Projects such as SoL are designed like a four-

dimensional jigsaw puzzle that, over time, add new layers of infrastructure, each a platform for further gains and improvements to the nation's farming capacity. The task in the earliest stages can seem daunting.

Brian Monaghan was on the ground in those early years with Brian Palmer, building a network of research stations to improve locally adapted varieties and for long-term agricultural R&D efforts.

His first base was a 60-hectare plot in Betano, which once housed a government station dating from Portuguese times. It was destroyed in 1999. He devised the layout of the new station and the plans for the buildings, laboratories and the research farm that now operates over 20 ha. The set-up is geared for the evaluation of new varieties and bulking seed, but there are also livestock facilities.

“When I arrived there was nothing; no buildings, just four local farmers and me,” Mr Monaghan says. “Initially my office was under the shade of a tree and on the motorbike; then I worked out of the car. Now we have an operational research station, with a generator, and a staff of 15.”

An agricultural scientist and farmer who grew up on a sheep and wheat property in Victoria, Mr Monaghan originally arrived as a volunteer with Australian Volunteers International (AVI). He married a Timorese woman and they now have a three-year-old daughter and nine-month-old son and are living in Same, four hours from Dili.

"You would never believe it now, but originally I had to be talked into going to East Timor," he says. "I'd previously spent time in Botswana and I was on my way back to Africa. East Timor was meant to be a minor detour. That was seven years ago."

Mr Monaghan is not the only team member whose involvement with SoL began through volunteering with AVI. Rebecca Andersen saw her initial stint with AVI cut short in May 2006 when gang-related violence caused the shutdown of Dili. On her return to Melbourne she looked for work, but acutely felt the disconnection from East Timor. Through a chance encounter with Rob Williams she learned that ACIAR was sponsoring curriculum improvement at the National University of East Timor, and she volunteered immediately to work with the SoL team.

An energetic 26-year-old, Ms Andersen put her horticultural science degree to good use at the university in Dili for 10 months, working with the agricultural department's lecturers, researchers and students. She has since been offered a position as research and extension adviser and is now working outside Dili in the

northern districts, liaising between research stations and farm trial sites.

The Australians all speak Tetun. With the help of his three-year-old daughter, Sarah, Mr Monaghan is also learning the local dialect of his district, something other team members also aspire to since it facilitates communication with farmers.

"I'm mainly working with staff at the research stations or directly with farmers," Ms Andersen says. "We are getting information out about the new varieties, how to grow them, and monitoring the field trials. I rely on a four-wheel drive to get around. The going is rough, with bad roads and river crossings. But it is beautiful country, full of interesting people, and there is so much that needs to be done."

Since 2005, when SoL entered the on-farm trial phase, with Mr Williams as Australian program leader, the SoL extension team—which includes 24 newly fledged East Timorese graduates from the National University—has been running small packets of seeds out to villages across the country for testing.

"The willingness of farmers to try the new varieties has generally been quite good," Mr Williams says. "In some places we did get laughed out of town, at least initially. It was the volume of seed. It was so small. But the idea was for farmers to help test the new varieties and then bulk up the best varieties and distribute seed to family, friends and neighbours themselves. Now that the new

varieties have proven themselves, everybody wants seed!"

There are downsides to the job—bad roads, repeated bouts of dengue fever and power outages spring readily to the minds of several team members—but somehow the overall experience remains vitally, even passionately, positive. In turn, team members report that local communities are happy to have the agricultural R&D activity and the Australian contribution is welcome.

One of the most prominent indicators that the aid action is having an impact is that it now takes less land to produce enough food to support a family. "With the farmers, we now talk about what to do with the extra yield," Ms Andersen says. "They had not considered the possibility of planting a cash crop."

With forward progress, another set of limiting factors comes to the fore, and the project responds by implementing the next layer of infrastructure. Mr Monaghan says the next limitations looming for farming in East Timor are labour, a need for roads and markets, and pressure on the land from population growth.

"The realistic view of agricultural development is that it takes a long time to get results," he says. "You need to build reliable information about the agricultural situation, recalling that, on farms, no two years are the same, and even five-year blocks are never alike. The farmers need options. There is a fair way to go, but the people here can do it." ■



Left: Rebecca Andersen at a farmers' field day in Liquica district.
Below: Rob Williams (second from left) at the National University of East Timor.

