



Adolescent Nutrition in Timor-Leste

A Formative Research Study



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Abbreviations & acronyms

DPHO	District Public Health Officer
FGD	Focus group discussion
INS	National Institute of Health (<i>Instituto Nacional da Saúde</i>)
KII	Key informant interview
LMIC	Low and middle income countries
MoE	Ministry of Education, Youth and Sports
MoH	Ministry of Health
PCW	Participatory community workshop
PME	School Feeding Program (<i>Programa Merenda Eskolar</i>)
PSE	School Health Program (<i>Programa Saúde Eskolar</i>)
SBC	Social behaviour change
SSI	Semi-structure interview
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WHO	World Health Organization

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Executive summary

Adolescents represent a population segment of critical importance, as numerous regions of the world (including Asia and Africa) experience youth bulges through a demographic transition (Haddad, 2018). This is the case for Timor-Leste, with one of the youngest populations in the Asia-Pacific Region (UNDP, 2018), and where adolescents constitute one in every four citizens (Census, 2015). Adolescence is a period of significant brain development (Blum et al, 2014) and fast physical growth at a pace only exceeded by the first critical 1000 days (Thurnham, 2013). Adolescence is also a time of intense learning where many behaviours are shaped, and where boys and girls aged 10 to 19 increase their agency and independence to later become adults. Recognising the speed and intensity of these changes, adolescence is increasingly being referred to as a ‘second window of opportunity’ to improve nutritional status and mitigate early undernutrition (UNICEF Office of Research-Innocenti, 2017).

Despite being a prominent population group, adolescents are neglected in nutrition data and programming in Timor-Leste. Adolescents face considerable malnutrition challenges, represent an important part of the nutrition life cycle, and have the ability to affect national nutrition outcomes as agents of change. Nutrition interventions, particularly in countries suffering from high rates of malnutrition like Timor-Leste, require a life cycle perspective to reach Sustainable Development Goal 2, Zero Hunger (Bergeron, 2017).

The purpose of this study was to inform the development of interventions, activities and materials targeted at supporting adolescents’ nutrition from a social behaviour change (SBC) perspective. Key findings and recommendations from the study are summarised in the following pages:

Eating habits - frequency & dietary diversity

Key findings

- Adolescents largely eat rice and dark green leafy vegetables for lunch and dinner.
- Most adolescents skip breakfast, sometimes because they wake up late for school.
- Adolescents prefer to eat breakfast at home so they do not have to share it with their friends at school.
- Adolescents want to eat more fish, fruits, and meat.
- Adolescents like traditional dishes like *batar da'an* and *marotok* (which often include a diverse mix of corn, beans, peanuts, ripe pumpkin and greens).
- Adolescents' favourite flavours are sweet and sour.
- Community members see barriers to adolescent dietary diversity to be the same barriers as the wider community: infrastructure (roads, water), purchasing power, and allocation of animals for cultural exchange.

Recommendations for SBC approaches

- SBC approaches should promote available and affordable animal source and plant-based protein rich foods to increase dietary diversity of adolescents at home.
- Given financial limitations, emphasise that even small quantities of protein rich foods positively contribute to improved nutritional status.
- Promote iron-rich foods to adolescents and their key influencers.
- Promote the benefits of eating breakfast using adolescents' aspirations for the future (breakfast is the most important meal of the day, increased focus in learning).
- Promote the importance of eating breakfast to adolescents, and target their influencers to prioritise consumption of breakfast.
- Promote traditional dishes that adolescents like to eat. Target mothers as food preparers, and grandmothers as promoters of local foods for 'strength' (see section 3.5)
- Consider adolescents' flavour preferences when describing and promoting foods as a way to appeal to them.

Snacks at school

Key findings

- Adolescents have full decision-making power over their snack purchases at school (unlike lunch and dinner).

Recommendations for SBC approaches

- SBC approaches should provide examples of healthy snacks and snack combinations based on what is available around schools.

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