Food Security Assessment

Timor-Leste

A Look at the Impact of Cyclone Seroja in Times of COVID-19

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Highlights

- A total of 50,000 people affected by floods would need humanitarian support until the next harvest in May/June 2022. This represents 4 percent of the entire population.

- The Government food assistance '*Cesta Basica'* program provided the key source of food across all households and accounted for 5 to 10 percent for all food consumed.

- Despite the floods, the increase in rice production is likely to boast income levels for rice growers, but remittances, casual labour prospects are hampered by COVID-19 pandemic

- Nominal price of imported rice was observed to be much higher than the same time last year. However, a continued downward trajectory is projected for the next six months.

1.0 Background
1.1 Background and Purpose

Following the heavy rains across Timor-Leste in early April 2021 that resulted in flash floods and landslides in all the 13 municipalities, the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries (MAF) requested the assistance of World Food Programme (WFP) to carry out a Food Security Assessment. The key objective was to assess the impact of Cyclone Seroja, Fall Army Worm, and African Swine Fever (ASF) on food security in the face of COVID-19 pandemic.

Officially, the flooding affected close to 143,000 people with the capital Dili and other low-lying areas being the worst affected. Given the Covid-19 pandemic, the assessment could not physically field international team of experts as such in-country experts provided the assistance with remote technical orientation from the Regional Bureau.

1.2 Methodology

A three-day training with twelve-research assistants was conducted in the last week of April 2021. It included lectures, translations, respect for ethical rules, informed consent, and COVID-19 preventive measures. The tools composed of key informant checklists, focus group discussions and individual household questionnaires which included modules on food consumption, coping strategies, expenditure, food assistance and shocks.

However, the training coincided with increased number of COVID-19 infections, and some members of the team were found to be positive leading to postponement of the field mission. Unfortunately, the resumption of the field mission after three weeks led to more increased cases in the research team. As a result, to still get a broader picture of the food security situation, a switch to telephone interviews was made considering the rising number of COVID-19 cases and their related measures to contain it under the State of Emergency that was prevailing at the time that included travel restrictions, social distancing and municipal sanitary fences.

Telephone interviews were conducted in the last three weeks of June with final follow ups in early July. These interviews could only be made to key informants who willingly provided consent.

They included 12 Government food security focal points, and 12 nutrition focal points, 12 food retail traders, and 12 Non-governmental Organisations (NGOs) food security focal points, and 12 traders. The 11 field-based food security officers from NGOs were from Mercy Corps, CARE International, TOMAK, and Plan International.

The Key Informant tool had Seven modules included sources of income, changes in household expenditure, food sources, labour market, coping strategies, food assistance programs, nutrition, and food prices (Annex 1). Each module was administered to a subject specific expert within the municipality and took about eight to ten minutes to complete with uninterrupted call. Overall, 12 out of 13 municipalities were covered, except Manufahi due to network challenges.

Triangulation with secondary data from Secretariat of State for Civil Protection (CP), and programme information from NGOs implementing food assistance and nutrition programmes in the municipalities has also been used to get a much broader picture.

1.3 Limitations

One key limitation is that the mission could not collect face to face data at an individual household level as originally planned as well as focus group discussions due to travel restrictions, unavailability of household phone numbers, and the urgency of doing the assessment. To cover for this shortfall, plans are under-way to implement telephone household surveys to monitor household consumption and coping strategies on regular basis using Mobile Network Operators' (MNO) call centres. The livelihood coping strategy and Food Insecurity Experience Scale (FIES) modules have been included in the second version of the Social Economic Impact Assessment (SEIA II) which will provide a further layer on the current food security situation.

The use of telephone interviews also brought along network challenges which hampered full coverage of the study area even after several attempts leading to not be able to reach some key informants in Manufahi municipality.

Due to the intrinsic nature of telephone interviews, researchers are limited on the depth of the interviews as one is usually limited to around 20 minutes per slot to have meaningful conversation. Lastly, direct observations by researchers could not be done to ascertain some of the issues discussed.

2.0 Findings

2.1 Number of people affected

The number of people that will require food assistance support between now and the next harvest in May/June 2022 is estimated at approximately 50,000, about 4 percent of the entire population[1]. The estimate is based on triangulation of findings from the following:

- Primary information emanating from food security key focal points interviewed in the study.
- Secondary data from Civil Protection department on the number of people affected and supported

The capital Dili has the highest proportion at around 83 percent of the population that will require support while the municipality of Emera has the lowest percentage at 0.3 percent. Since the pandemic and associated measures to contain it remain a threat to various livelihood activities, the number of vulnerable populations may go up during the reference period once the ability to cope become under severe strain hence need for regular monitoring of the food security situation including household consumption and coping strategies patterns.

Table 1. Number of people in need of food assistance due to floods by municipality

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[1] Population estimated at 1,344,000 by UNESA, May 2021

Municipality	People in need of assistance due to floods
Lautem	128
Baucau	153
Ermera	171
Covalima	226
Manufahi	230
Bobonaro	249
Aileu	281
Ainaro	489
Liquisa	1,041
Viqueque	1,081
Manatuto	2,072
Oecusse	2,550
Dili	41,330
Total	50,001

2.2 Impacts of 2020 and 2021 shocks contributing to reduced household resilience in 2021 and likely beyond!

In March 2020, the country went into its first lockdown as a preventing measure to the spread of Covid-19, no case had been detected at the time. By the end of the 2020, less than 30 cases were officially confirmed. However, as more and more cases were being detected in the first quarter of 2021, the Government instituted municipal health fences and other measures to curb the spread. These measures included the closure of all schools, restrictions on movement to only essential services.

Many businesses, particularly those in urban and peri-urban areas have had to curtail hours, let staff go, or shut due to limited business and/or an inability to operate within the current context. Along with the mitigating measures came increased risk through the disruptions in the supply chain of essential food and non-food items.

Although it is not yet possible to fully account for the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, farmers have already started to see reduced levels of income as they could no longer sell or it became difficult to sell in the commercial capital, Dili,

where profit margins are much higher. Agriculture provides the backbone of Timor-Leste's household economy, with 70% of households depending on subsistence agriculture for livelihoods. Recently, the Government and private sector has had to halt several infrastructure developments projects across various municipalities due to lockdowns leading to reduced or no income for casual workers and all associated businesses.

In September 2019, Timor-Leste, where pigs are kept by more than 70 percent of households, became the eleventh Asian country to report African Swine Fever (ASF). Some research indicates that while national pork consumption is low, pigs hold tremendous monetary value for smallholders within the economy of ceremonies. Pigs serve to buffer families against shocks and pressures, especially for health and education expenses. As of 2020, the African Swine Fever is known to have led to a death toll of almost 28 percent of the pig population.

In addition, the recent presence of Fall Army Worm which was confirmed around 2019 and has continued spread throughout 2020 and 2021 due to its highly migratory nature is another shock to the food security sector. FAW is now known to nearly contribute more than 15 percent of the maize losses.

All these shocks, Covid-19, African swine fever, fall army worm greatly reduced (and continue to reduce) household resilience at the time devastated floods occurred in April 2021.

2.3 Source of income
Among the key sources of income, sales from food crops, coffee, cash crops, and fish remain top sources in addition to remittances and casual labour for the