

Challenges and Possibilities of Working with Women in Timor Leste

The activities of International Organisations working with Women in Timor Leste fall into 4 strategic areas:

- Training for capacity building in productive activities or activities which contribute to household food security (food processing, financial management, literacy and health education)
- Building the economic capital of Women (income generating activities such as kiosk, sewing and agriculture)
- Building social capital for women through training and support to strengthen community based organisations and cooperative development. For example, Concern works with 11 Community Based Organisations comprised wholly of women, giving them the space to make their own decisions and generate their own incomes.
- Increasing the political capital of women through training and support to stand as candidates in local elections.

These activities are designed to

- increase the participation of women
- ensure women have opportunities to analyse their situation and identify interventions to improve their livelihoods
- ensure equal access to skills development
- ensure women have the skills and control to make decisions within the family and community sphere.

To date the impact of this work has been:

- Through increased incomes women are better able to support themselves. However, some of these activities do increase the burden of work.
- Increase the sharing of responsibility in the household and community and reduce the patriarchal system, which is very strong in Timorese culture.
- A greater involvement of women in the political process such (members of parliament, ministers, suku (village) chiefs etc.)

The response from Women in Timor Leste depends on their experience and education:

- Women with low levels of literacy and education (note that 79.4% of women will not have completed primary education¹) are less willing to support cultural change or understand (be able to conceptualise) problems related to gender. Therefore, they are more receptive when the activity has a clear relationship to their lives and issues are often better addressed through practical livelihoods activities (for example small scale agriculture and jam and preserve making are combined with literacy in Luro).
- Women who know how to read and write and have higher education, may not have a conceptual understanding of concepts like human rights and democracy but are quicker to acknowledge their rights to be involved in development and to increase their own skills.

¹ Demographic Health Survey, Ministry of Health, 2004

The Challenges and Possibilities in Implementing Gender Sensitive Programmes for Concern in Timor Leste

Concern Worldwide a non-governmental, international, humanitarian organisation dedicated to the reduction of suffering and working towards the ultimate elimination of extreme poverty in the world's poorest countries, has been working in Timor Leste since 1999. Concern supports two livelihoods programmes in Timor Leste which have been running since January 2003 with the overall objective of:

"creating an enabling environment in which poor Timorese women and men in rural areas have improved livelihood security"

The programmes use participatory approaches to engage with rural communities to increase their livelihood assets and opportunities in two of the most isolated areas in Timor Leste; Turiscai in Manufahi District and Luro in Lautem District.

Although the programme objectives and indicators are designed to ensure the programme has a positive impact on men and women, after the first year, it was clear that women were not participating meaningfully and there were inequalities in terms of access and control of benefits. Concern invited a gender expert to spend 3 months with the teams and the key challenges and recommendations may be common to many programmes:

- Participatory methodologies which are used in problem analysis and identification can often be limited to those issues which were on the surface (i.e. a lack of water, poor harvests, hungry seasons). A much more thorough and ongoing social analysis is needed to understand the social and cultural factors which impact on the position and condition of women. If not, only the visible constraints to the participation of women will be noted (i.e. women are shy) the structural (social and cultural) will remain "invisible" and will not be addressed.
- Gender analysis must form part of the planning, implementation and monitoring stages.
- Beware of the assumption that activities are gender neutral - (i.e. there is no differential in the impact on men or women).
- Field staff must be able to use a gender perspective when facilitating activities in the field.
- There must be specific gender expertise within the teams but care must be taken not to delegate responsibilities to "gender experts".
- Programmes must have activities specifically directed to improve women's condition and position.

In response, the Concern team developed a log frame for gender. The goal was to mainstream gender principles and practices in all objectives of the programme in order to enhance access, participation, control and benefits of the programme for women. In order to achieve this, Concern placed an emphasis on staff capacity building through training (social analysis with a gender perspective) and discussions. Each staff member was given responsibility for gender and gender issues became a regular discussion topic in team meetings. The teams are now much more gender aware, they consciously monitor change from a gender perspective and can talk about impacts on the condition and position of women in a more meaningful way. Their approach is very much a gender and

development method where men are as involved as women in the change process. As well as increasing the awareness of the staff team, activities have been started to directly build skills to empower women, improve women's wellbeing and address attitudes and behaviours. Through advocacy, health education, training and literacy the teams are trying to address issues of access to maternal health care, domestic violence and skills development. The organisation will move into nutrition programming as a means to have a direct impact on maternal and child health.