

## CRS F2F Timor-Leste

### Volunteering under COVID 19: How an East Timorese Volunteer's Support of Vegetable Growers Resulted in a 400% Sales Increase at His Own Employer

PROJECT LOCATION	Timor-Leste
TIMEFRAME	2019-2023
COUNTRY PROJECT	Modernizing Agriculture
HOST	Timor-Leste Organic Fertilizer (TILOFE)

#### PROGRAM STATISTICS

**191**

Number of assignments conducted

**10,073**

Number of people directly trained

**120**

Number of hosts supported

What do you do during a global pandemic when you can't send out volunteers under a volunteer program? This was the scenario the USAID funded Farmer to Farmer (F2F) program faced in March 2020, when news of the COVID-19 pandemic broke globally. Farmer to Farmer typically sends American volunteers for 2-3 week trips to assist agricultural organizations in developing nations, yet this was not possible under the pandemic. Instead, the program decided to search for experts who could volunteer in their own countries, pairing them with remotely supporting Americans to provide additional training resources and mentorship. This was the approach that CRS F2F staff Jose Maria Alves and Celestina took as they reached out to their networks in search of a local vegetable production volunteer in Timor Leste.

Thirty-two-year-old East Timorese Zaquiel Martins was excited to hear of an opportunity to volunteer under the program teaching vegetable production. As the director and marketing manager of an organization that F2F had recently agreed to support, Timor-Leste Organic Fertilizer (TILOFE), Zaquiel was already familiar with F2F, and was eager to share his knowledge by volunteering with another organization, Hamahon Feto Timor (HAFOTI), which means "Shelter for the Timorese Woman."

HAFOTI is an organization made up of 27 rural women's vegetable grower groups which aims to help rural women increase their ability to make money to support their families by working together to support each other in business. The organization provides training in business skills and access to revolving credit, and offers opportunities to jointly market products. However, HAFOTI's vegetable growers were facing vegetable production problems caused by pests and diseases. With less vegetables to sell, incomes suffered. Understanding the problems of the HAFOTI group, Zaquiel decided to use the expertise he gained through F2F and the support he received from another USAID program, Avansa Agrikultura (Advance Agriculture), to create a helpful training to assist HAFOTI. Zaquiel was paired with a remotely supporting American volunteer, Chuck Mitchell, who is a soil expert.



Figure 1. Zaquiel (first from the left) with TILOFE staff holding the compost which ready to be sold.

In November 2020, on the first day of the assignment, Zaquiél and Chuck revisited the main problems the group was facing. Based on the results of this problem analysis, they decided to prepare training materials related to organic liquid and solid compost, pest identification, production of organic pesticides, and ideal application rates. Zaquiél used these training materials to enhance the knowledge of the group and guide them on the production of the fertilizer and the use of pesticides during the growing season.

Since the assignment concluded, HAFOTI has continued applying the knowledge they learned from both Zaquiél and Chuck, such as not cutting and burning down trees to clear farming land. This method, called slash and burn, kills beneficial microorganisms that enrich the soil and damage the environment. Zaquiél also trained HAFOTI not to directly apply cow manure as a fertilizer, because it must first be mixed with other ingredients to create a balanced compost, or else the manure may burn or kill the plants. Zaquiél is pleased to see that the group is using better practices and is confident that HAFOTI's vegetable production will continue to improve.

Through the experience of collaborative volunteering with US counterpart Chuck, Zaquiél learned several new techniques on how to prepare and use quality compost. Before the assignment, Zaquiél had good, but limited knowledge on different types and uses of compost ingredients to produce both liquid and solid fertilizer. Through his collaborations with Chuck, he learned to add milk to produce liquid compost, and rice straws and husks to produce solid compost. This new knowledge informed his trainings with HAFOTI, but also helped his work under his employer, TILOFE.

**“In the past [TILOFE was] more focused on the quantity of the fertilizer that we produced, whereas now we are emphasizing its quality,” states Zaquiél. “We do not sell quantity, but quality. We improved our fertilizer, which we named Superorganic Fertilizer.”**

An improvement in the quality of the compost has also resulted in higher sales of the product. Before the assignment, TILOFE used to sell between 200 and 425 kilograms of compost (15 to 25 bags) per month leading to a total net profit of \$111. TILOFE can now sell between 1,700 and 2,550 kilograms (100 to 150 bags) per month, enabling them to earn an income of \$442-\$663. The increased earnings are used for operational costs such as staff incentives, fertilizer bags, rental cars to transport fertilizer, promotional activities on social media, and to purchase fertilizer ingredients such as cow manure, chicken manure, green leaves, dry leaves, and ash. “Before, we used to buy only two carts of cow manure per month but now we can buy more than six carts of cow manure. In addition, the capacity of the group to purchase bags for packaging of the fertilizer has increased from 10 to 500 bags,” explained Zaquiél. “We have made a big difference in purchasing the material and producing and selling the fertilizer.”



Figure 2 TILOFE workers turning over to compost



Figure 3. Zaquiél (seated in the middle) with HAFOTI women group holding liquid organic pesticide