



Stories from the field



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Timor-Leste fisheries data

Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste is a new nation, having become a sovereign state in 2002. Its young institutions are relatively weak and the country faces many challenges, including ensuring that the growing population has sufficient food and nutrition while also generating sustainable economic growth. The marine resources of Timor-Leste have an important role to play in this regard. However, management of marine resources has been difficult. One reason has been the almost total lack of data on the fisheries sector. Accurate data is essential for developing smart policies and effective management.

For this reason, the main focus in Timor-Leste of the Regional Fisheries Livelihoods Programme for South and Southeast Asia (RFLP), an initiative of FAO and the Government of Spain, has been on increasing the capacity of the National Directorate of Fisheries and

Aquaculture (NDFA) to gather and manage fisheries-related data. The establishment of a National Fisheries Statistical System – a first for Timor-Leste – is the result of those efforts.

A key part of this process has been enhancing the relationship between the NDFA and fishing communities. Most data gathering activities have provided clear and tangible benefits to communities, and this approach has helped the NDFA to gain the trust of fishers and forge closer relations.

Prior to RFLP, little fisheries-related information was being collected or stored in any systematic manner. Data that existed was usually kept on individual computers with no backups. As a result, data was lost to viruses, computer failures and theft. Sharing of information was rare and few management decisions were made based upon it.

With RFLP support, NDFA staff undertook a variety of data gathering activities. They launched a mobile licensing service to register and license almost every fishing vessel, and disseminated information on fishing regulations, much of which was unknown to fishers.

Fishers and NDFA staff worked together to document and map areas where illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing takes place, and also where saltwater crocodiles and other dangers are found.

They loaned GPS sounders to fishers to collect information on where fishing was being conducted as well as water depth data. This has allowed production of 3D bathymetric maps of nearshore areas. Personal locator beacons were also provided to fishers. These devices can be used to both call for help in an emergency or anonymously report illegal fishing.

A website was launched, www.peskador.org, as the public entry point for fisheries-related information in Timor-Leste.

In all these activities, building the capacity of government staff and communities was a major priority for RFLP. This approach brought many benefits, including making the results more sustainable.

Better availability of reliable fisheries data has facilitated and supported better understanding of the fisheries sector and may lead to more investment. Fisheries resources management and planning has improved while transparency has increased. Better information has enhanced safety for fishers and fishing communities, and aided search and rescue operations.

Taking part in data gathering activities has also built trust and relationships between fishers, local authorities and fishery officials.

An important element in the programme's approach was the use of *Tara Bandu*, traditional laws to regulate relations between people and groups, and people and the environment. *Tara Bandu* were rarely written down. RFLP documented them for the first time. Using *Tara Bandu* built trust and made the data gathering process less alien to local communities. That was a significant part of the programme's success. And with data already collected and the gathering process continuing, the foundation for a fisheries sector that will help feed the people of Timor-Leste and boost its economy is now in place.

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