SUMMARY

The purpose of the Timor-Leste Agricultural Rehabilitation, Economic Growth and Natural Resource Management project is to strengthen the human and institutional capacity of the Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries (MAFF).

The objective of the project is to enable the Ministry’s research and extension staff to continue to assist the nation's agricultural sector beyond the life of the project to: (1) Increase agricultural productivity and food security, (2) Diversify and intensify crop production to generate new income and employment opportunities, and (3) Improve watershed productivity and sustainability through the adoption of sound natural resource management practice.

To enable the MAFF to achieve these objectives, the project will train the Ministry's research and extension staff to apply modern biophysical and socio-economic methods to produce, process and market farm and forest products for local and international markets. In order to produce quick results, the project will focus its efforts in the Seical watershed and work with rural communities situated at low, medium and high elevations to increase agricultural productivity across a range of agro-climatic zones. The lessons learned in the watershed will be the basis for transferring successful technologies to similar agro-climate zones in the nation’s 26 watersheds.

A key and primary aim of this project is to enable MAFF in the years ahead to transform the existing subsistence farming system into a market driven economy. For this to occur, subsistence farmers must be full partners in the process of change. One of the critical tasks of the project will be to ensure full and willing participation of farmers in the project.

Because crop yields are now so low, increasing crop yields should not be difficult. One bottleneck to rural development has been the lack of markets for surplus production. To circumvent this bottleneck the project will collaboratively work with MAFF and local merchants to discuss the possibility that they will purchase locally grown rice instead of imported rice. It is likely local farmers can produce rice of equal quality and price as the imported rice. The German food security project plans to introduce new rice milling equipment in the Seical watershed and has expressed a desire to join forces with this project to produce higher quality rice.

Two secondary aims of the project are (1) to increase the yield and stability of maize production to enhance food security, and (2) to join forces with local and international partners to produce, to process and to market locally grown rice to increase household incomes. Ascertaining the economic feasibility of the two aims will be an important part of the project’s training program. The project will also explore with local merchants and buyers the feasibility of marketing surplus maize, soybean and other crops not only for human consumption but also for other uses including feed for poultry, swine and beef cattle.

There is also a high global demand for candlenut oil. Farmers now receive low prices for the candlenut, but can obtain higher prices if the oil rather than the nut were exported. The project will explore local and external interest in the possibility of extracting the oil for export. Adding value to locally grown commodities and experimenting with import substitution are part of the overall training strategy of the
project. In the future, MAFF personnel will need to look for other means to broaden the market base for continued economic expansion.

In the end, agricultural intensification that leads to income and employment generation must be accomplished without compromising environmental quality. Here again, the participation of the farming community is essential. Past efforts show that projects designed to persuade people to adopt practices for the good of the environment but at some personal cost are likely to fail. The key to success is to promote practices that are economically beneficial for the adopter. The training and institutional capacity building component will promote the application of a participatory approach that offers farm households' options and enables them to exercise choice in how sustainable land management is attained.

Finally, the project provides opportunities for MAFF to join forces with projects of NGOs, the National University, Peace Corps, local organizations and private sector to sustain this effort into the future.