



Community resilience in rural East Timor

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East Timor's tumultuous history of colonisation and military occupation has been accompanied by waves of displacement and relocation of communities. Many of those forcibly relocated have had to adopt a variety of strategies to secure a viable existence in their new surroundings.

Daisua village in Manufahi district and Waitame village in Baucau district were two communities of people driven out from the mountainous interior in 1975-79 during the Indonesian occupation. 'Resettlement villages' were created on accessible lowlands to isolate them from contact with the remaining resistance fighters in mountain hide-outs.

The villages, however, were located in areas with poor water supply and infertile land. Separated from immediate family relatives, and receiving no external support, displaced households turned to their extended kin networks or created new relationships to negotiate access to land which would enable them to grow food.

Daisua villagers sought access to land from a neighbouring village with which they had marriage and indigenous political ties, and were given user rights to establish gardens in the communal land. Waitame villagers, on the other hand, did not have such ties with their host community, and this greatly limited their ability to negotiate land rights. However, the host community had large tracts of rice fields. Taking advantage of a labour shortage, displaced households from Waitame entered into sharecropping contracts with the hosts. Tenants are responsible for tilling, planting and weeding the rice paddies. Rice harvesting is a shared task, and the rice yield is divided equally between the land owner and tenant. The East Timorese government's

push for agricultural mechanisation might, however, adversely affect such land-labour exchange practices.

Daisua's case illustrates the persistence and reaffirmation of kinship relations while sharecroppers from Waitame demonstrate the mutual benefits reaped by land owners and displaced people, with more rice fields cultivated than would otherwise be possible.

Some tension is inevitable. One host community, Tekinomata, lodged a petition to the national courts in 2001 requesting that the Waitame 'newcomers' vacate their land: "Where will our grandchildren live? They [Waitame] have their own land. They promised when the Indonesian flag comes down, they will return." The case is still pending. Others in Tekinomata feel differently now: "We used to have clashes. But now my son married a girl from there. So we are now family. All land in East Timor is for us to live on."

What proportion of the East Timorese remain in similar protracted displacement situations remains unclear. The majority of displaced households are reluctant to abandon their now well-established livelihoods to return permanently to their isolated and inaccessible former homes. The challenge in addressing protracted rural displacement is to think beyond return and repatriation. The myriad of livelihood strategies and associated land tenure arrangements which have evolved at the local scale must be respected. In particular, social networks which are integral in the pursuit of land and livelihoods cannot be overlooked.

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