

WORKING TOGETHER TO FIGHT POVERTY

The Millennium Development Goals in our lives

In the year 2000, world leaders agreed that we should all work together to fight income poverty, hunger, disease, lack of adequate shelter, and exclusion - while promoting gender equality, education, & environmental sustainability. They agreed on eight global objectives, now known as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

Every day, ordinary people are involved in development and are working to help Timor-Leste create a better future. In this series, we meet farmers, fishermen, market vendors, tais-weavers, nurses, journalists, local NGO's, and politicians (to name only a few), who are working together to help Timor-Leste achieve its development goals.

THE GOALS

*Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
Achieve universal primary education
Promote gender equality and empower women
Reduce child mortality
Improve maternal health
Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
Ensure environmental sustainability
Develop a global partnership for development*

Agapito da Silva, District Health Worker in Manatuto talks about his work in health

If health is one of the success stories of independent Timor-Leste, then it's people like Agapito da Silva, 44, district health representative Manatuto, who have made it possible. Working tirelessly for nearly 20 years to change centuries old habits of superstition, ignorance and harmful health practices, he has helped raise awareness of community health issues in Manatuto, and demonstrates how ordinary people can make a difference in helping Timor-Leste be a healthier society. Today, the district of Manatuto leads in meeting the country's health targets: there has been no case of polio since 1996 and no confirmed case of measles.



**Agapito da Silva
District Health Worker**

Agapito has made sure almost all children under five are protected in his district: immunization rates for BCG are "Not a hundred percent but very close," he says. "Polio coverage now extends to about 90% of kids while the number of births attended by midwives is 60%." But it wasn't always so. Time was when the health condition of the people was terrible and "under the Indonesian occupation, they didn't care anymore if they died of disease because death was always present in our daily lives. People became fatalistic." But not Agapito - he had seen grandmother Martha Soares save lives as a midwife and paramedic as a young child and made up his mind to follow in her footsteps. "I had just graduated from nursing school in Dili and was getting ready to leave for Indonesia to study medicine in 1983 when my grandmother died. I decided to return to Manatuto and look after the families who I knew would have no access to health care at all."

And so it was in a derelict health post in Lacló that he began his life's work - literally from scratch. "Leave aside medical equipment and medication, I had to beg and borrow furniture from local schools to get started," he recalls. But he didn't need much to go from village to village, spreading health awareness among people. "I still go to schools, markets and always make time to speak to community leaders about health programs, sanitation,

housing and the importance of seeking medical help when you are sick. Earlier, people would visit a doctor only when they were so sick there was no more hope. Slowly, we got them to change their habits".

As a veteran of Indonesian times, he is also in a unique position to compare the health system in the country pre and post Independence. "It's true we have a smaller health network and infrastructure than in Indonesian times," he says, "but we are re-building something better. The community health Centers are much better designed and constructed and have better medical equipment and facilities."

Ask him the secret of his success and he says "It's having informal discussions with groups of people everywhere. I always make time to meet community leaders and I am happy to see attitudes change with time. Earlier, if someone was depressed or mentally ill they would say he/she was being punished by the spirit of their ancestors but today, I have over a hundred mental patients under treatment and they are being cured."

While the years of conflict have left their own challenges for the medical community, recent progress in development has brought new ones. "The biggest is the high population growth rates, we simply cannot reach our targets with the number of babies being born every day." Agapito has now turned his attention to family planning and has motivated some 200 couples in the district to use contraceptive pills and injections, which is an important beginning in a country where the desire for large families is almost universal.

What is his goal in life? "I want everyone to realize, that their health is in their own hands. If they know how to take care of their health, we don't need to chase people in the remote mountain areas, they will come to us. And remember preventing disease is cheaper than curing it."

