

## PRIORITY ACTIONS FOR THE HATUTAN PROGRAM: CARE'S RESPONSE TO MIDLINE RECOMMENDATIONS

### 1. GENERAL

The midterm evaluation results provide a clear picture of the negative impact of the COVID-19 crisis on Timorese students' learning, attendance, nutrition and living conditions. It is important to note, however, that the issues outlined in this study are primarily resulting from the 2020 lockdown, associated school closures and reduced school hours after classes resumed, as the number of cases in Timor-Leste remained relatively low until February 2021. As the evaluation team completed fieldwork for this evaluation, however, the country experienced its first major outbreak of COVID-19, prompting a second lockdown and closure of schools, including in the municipalities where HATUTAN is operational. As of June 5, 2021, Timor-Leste had recorded 7,511 cases and 17 deaths<sup>1</sup>. Prolonged restrictions to movement (i.e., 'sanitary fences' isolating certain municipalities and the capital Dili) and services are having a severe negative impact on the economy and food security, despite safety nets provided to the most vulnerable families. Additionally, the country faced a heavy rainy season in January-April 2021, damaging roads and other infrastructure, with a major impact on rural households in HATUTAN's target municipalities. This already fragile situation was dramatically worsened by cyclone Seroja, which hit Timor-Leste on April 4-6, 2021, resulting in the displacement of 13,554 people, 42 deaths, and widespread damage to infrastructure, primarily but not only in the capital Dili<sup>2</sup>. The target municipalities of Manatuto and Liquica also experienced damage to infrastructure. The disaster has also accelerated the spread of COVID-19 due to the fragile conditions faced by displaced households and contributed to a spike of cases in municipalities such as Ermera, as survivors fleeing floods in Dili temporarily breached the 'sanitary fence'.

Therefore, HATUTAN's proposed priority actions are not only a response to the evaluation findings, but to the expected deterioration of education outcomes, food security and health indicators resulting from the multiple crises currently faced by Timor-Leste. Proposed actions are also informed by ongoing coordination with the Ministries of Education, Health and Agriculture and Fisheries and by the priorities set by those to address the impact of the ongoing crises. The following sections outline the project's proposed adaptive management actions for each project activity.

### 2. RESPONSE TO RECOMMENDATIONS

#### Training School Administrators

External Evaluator's Recommendation: *Future program activities may benefit from attempting to strengthen the relationships between school administrators and teachers in order to better enable administrators to improve teaching practices, and thus overall literacy scores.*

The project is already providing technical assistance to school administrators to provide feedback to teachers during teacher working group meetings<sup>3</sup> and following individual classroom observations, working in coordination with central school staff. Furthermore, the project provides mentoring to school administrators on facilitating PTA activities and supporting SFP implementation. The project

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<sup>1</sup> Ministry of Health of Timor-Leste, COVID-19 Cumulative Report to June 5, 2021

<sup>2</sup><https://reliefweb.int/sites/reliefweb.int/files/resources/TL%20April%20Flood%20Response%20Flash%20Update%203%20%289%20Apr%2021%29.pdf>

<sup>3</sup> As per agreement with the MEYS, the project is providing mentoring to groups of teachers during Teacher Working Group sessions (a regular meeting of teachers from all filial schools associated to a central school to discuss pedagogical and subject-related topics and issues). The project is also providing individual mentoring to teachers during school visits, working jointly with school administrators while doing so.

proposes to strengthen those activities by working with the municipal education officials and school inspectors to focus on low performing schools. Namely, HATUTAN will provide specific support to administrators on mentoring teachers in the use of the MEYS reader for early grades, *Matadalan Alfabetu*, and in the implementation of book lending systems (further details below). Furthermore, following the identification of high absenteeism and dropout rates in some schools after classes resumed in August 2020, HATUTAN has been working with school administrators and PTAs to implement protocols developed by the USAID-funded School Dropout Prevention Pilot Program (SDPP) to trigger an early warning and case management system for at-risk students who are often absent from class.

## **Establishing and Strengthening PTAs**

External Evaluator's Recommendation: *Data also suggests that participation in PTAs remains relatively low in many areas. Activities that seek to strengthen PTAs may thus have particular relevance for improving school infrastructure, SFPs, and student and teacher attendance, and for reducing the incidence of abuse or violence against students.*

HATUTAN agrees with the recommendation, which is in line with the project's ongoing activities, as demonstrated by the major contributions made by PTAs to school infrastructure - including WASH and SFP-related facilities - and to the SFP (e.g., school feeding monitoring and parents' contributions to meals). Teacher and student absenteeism remain major issues, however, and the project proposes to work with school administrators to create a welcoming environment for parental participation and facilitate PTA actions to follow up on cases of student absenteeism and dropout. As noted above, this will be achieved by using the early warning system protocol developed by the USAID-funded SDPP initiative. The project is also providing gender training to PTAs to facilitate shifts in traditional gender norms contributing to high rates of dropout among boys - including perceptions of appropriate behavior for boys and the normalization of violence towards them. This is taking place in tandem with efforts to reduce gender-based violence and high workloads at home contributing to the absenteeism and dropout of girls.

## **Training Teachers**

External Evaluator's Recommendation: *Data at midline suggests that this may still be the case, with only a limited increase in the use of engaging teaching practices among intervention schools. Data on literacy scores and subtask scores also suggests that current teaching practices may not be effectively imparting knowledge on phonemes and the relations between letters and words to young students, and that overall reading fluency remains low. Given these results, teacher training remains of high relevance to the program. It may, however, be useful to analyze the design of teacher training activities to make sure that trainings target best practices for improving student fluency and helping young students read not just letters, but words.*

HATUTAN agrees with the recommendation, noting that issues with decoding -or the ability to read entire syllables and forming words- had been identified at the baseline. This resulted in the development and implementation of strategies to support teachers and parents to help students to learn to decode words using engaging teaching practices. Still, this is a slow process that involves breaking the habit of focusing on letter identification – common among staff, teachers and school administrators who often lack experience with phonics or whole word reading methodologies. Prolonged school closures in 2020-21 have also interrupted coaching activities. Therefore, the project proposes to continue to roll out teacher mentoring activities focusing on decoding and improving student reading fluency, but also to emphasize the need for remedial support to early grade students on decoding to mitigate learning losses due to school closures (given the major decline in grade 2 reading fluency); and the structured use of the MEYS reader, *Matadalan*

*Alfabetu*<sup>4</sup>, both in the classroom and at home (see next activity for additional details on book lending). The project also proposes to strengthen mentoring activities that support teachers to deliver literacy instruction in multi-grade and multi-level classes, recognizing there can be a large range of children’s literacy abilities within a single classroom. This mentoring will include strengthening the use of diagnostic/formative assessments to identify the different learning needs of students and adapting appropriate literacy activities that align with and can advance students’ reading abilities. Extracurricular activities will also include reading and word games to strengthen decoding skills and to make reading fun, while also increasing students’ exposure to literacy learning. Another key area of support to teachers is mentoring on inclusive education strategies to create a learning environment where all children can actively learn and participate in class activities. This will include the use of adapted instructional modalities teachers can apply in the classroom to support students with disabilities, including students facing mild cognitive disabilities – noting that 39% of the intervention students have memory-related disabilities, according to their parents<sup>5</sup>.

### **Production of Books and Supplementary Reading Materials**

External Evaluator’s Recommendation: *Provision of reading materials remains a relevant program activity, particularly given that at midline, 21% of treatment schools reported that the school did not lend story books for students to take home, and 24% of treatment schools reported that there were not enough books to lend to students. Furthermore, 31% of treatment households at midline were not observed to have any children’s books or magazines in the house. The provision of reading materials may also improve teaching practices, as teachers are more able to incorporate activities that use the reading corner or have students read alone or in groups; this may then further improve learning scores.*

In addition to the recommendation above, the predictive analysis indicates that book lending by schools is a predictor of improved literacy outcomes for students in mid-primary (grades 3-4), reflecting the benefits of increased time on task for those who have already acquired foundational skills (letter identification and decoding). Given the escalation of the COVID-19 crisis and related school closures in 2021, as well as the possibility of new outbreaks in the near future, the project proposes to work with municipal education officers to increase school administrators and teachers’ compliance with book lending in schools where this is not occurring, and to increase book lending to early grade students in all schools, shifting perceptions about younger students not being able to take care of books. HATUTAN will use the midline finding to encourage schools to expand their book lending practice to a wider variety of school books and not limit lending to only the HATUTAN provided books. Additionally, the project will work with school administrators and early grade teachers to increase schools’ lending of the MEYS reader, *Matadalan Alfabetu*, to students in grades 1-2, helping them to develop stronger decoding skills. HATUTAN is coordinating these activities with MEYS, municipal officials and other development partners to ensure alignment with remote learning strategies and the overall emergency response to the COVID 19 pandemic.

### **Provision of School Meals or Take-Home Rations**

External Evaluator’s Recommendation: *Results suggest that the provision of school meals may have helped mitigate the negative impact of COVID-19 on learning by increasing student attentiveness and decreasing dropout rates. The provision of school meals continues to be highly relevant for*

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<sup>4</sup> Provided by HATUTAN to schools in 2020.

<sup>5</sup> Responses to the Washington Group question on functional memory losses, including ‘some difficulty’ in remembering, ‘a lot of difficulty’ and ‘cannot do at all’.

*students in Timor-Leste, helping to improve nutrition and literacy—both of which remain at relatively low levels throughout the country.*

The project proposes to continue the provision of school meals in the first trimester of the school calendar year and if applicable, continuing until all of the commodities have been consumed, ensuring that vulnerable students receive one nutritious meal during the lean period, particularly in the aftermath of various natural shocks and the economic crisis in 2021. Take home rations remains a back-up option if schools close due to COVID prevention measures, however the preferred option is to provide meals at schools. Additionally, HATUTAN continues to advocate with the GOTL using midline and monitoring data to ensure a timely release of funds to schools for the implementation of the national SFP. As of 2021, funds were received by schools in most municipalities in March – the earliest release in recent years. While characterized as ‘early’ relatively speaking, March still marked a substantial delay, particularly considering the high level of vulnerability of students during the initial months of the school year. HATUTAN will continue to liaise with the Ministry of Finance, the Prime Minister’s Office and MEYS to support the development and roll-out of efficient transfer mechanisms for SFP funding under Timor-Leste’s legal framework, in line with the studies conducted by the project in 2020.

### **Partnering with Farmers’ Groups**

External Evaluator’s Recommendation: *The demand for local produce among schools remains low due to feeding program budget limitations, which may affect the sustainability of the school feeding program. As a result, farmers will not produce for schools because there is no demand and schools tend to look to other sources, which may incur higher transportation costs if hiring a vehicle or increased labor if walking longer distances. Ensuring consistent and sufficient demand and supply of goods for the school feeding program will help in serving well-balanced, nutritious meals to students.*

HATUTAN agrees with the recommendation, noting that school demand for farmers’ produce is closely tied to the availability of national SFP funds for local purchase of food items. As noted in the report, the main barrier to local purchases, as pointed out by school administrators, is the lack of government funds. The project will continue to work with farmers to increase availability of nutritious foods, but as noted above, the main intervention to increase school demand for local purchases is the advocacy with the GOTL for timely release of SFP funds and the use of efficient transfer mechanisms to mitigate the risk of delays. The project will continue to coordinate with the Ministry of Finance, Prime Minister’s Office and MEYS to seek the implementation of more efficient fund transfer processes, while also working with municipal authorities, school administrators and PTAs for increased transparency and efficiency in SFP fund use and reporting, in parallel with farmer-focused activities to increase the quantity and quality of local produce.

### **Forming VSLAs**

External Evaluator’s Recommendation: *Because VSLAs whom also function as HATUTAN’s farmer groups are the foundation for other trainings, their continued establishment and support is of strong relevance to program activities. However, it is worth noting that households that are not involved in VSLAs may also not be able to receive trainings if this is the primary mechanism by which training participants are recruited. As such, it may be worth exploring other mechanisms to recruit households for trainings outside of VSLA participation and, even more so, how to increase VSLA coverage among parents of schoolchildren.*

During data collection, the parallel data checks conducted by CARE on interim datasets showed a low coverage rate of the VSLA component among parents of grade 2 students. This prompted an immediate adaptive response, leading CARE to liaise with Mercy Corps in mid-February to facilitate

the formation of new VSLAs among parents of early grade students in intervention schools' catchment areas. CARE has also identified that a substantial proportion of VSLA members did not implement keyhole gardens or permagardens, despite being trained on both techniques. While it is not expected that all VSLA members would implement nutrition-sensitive, climate-smart agriculture techniques due to limited access to land and engagement in livelihoods other than farming, Mercy Corps conducted a study with Community Development Agents (CDAs) to reflect on their role as market actors. The research explored CDAs' experiences, skills and the business (including marketing) models they use to create market linkages with suppliers and buyers. The research also identified enabling and limiting factors to implementation and revised training procedures and coaching of CDAs to address findings. A new farmer study will be conducted on agriculture adoption of keyhole gardens/ permagardens in August-September 2021 to allow for the identification of low-performing areas and ensure immediate support to CDAs and VSLAs in order to maximize impact.

### **Training on Good Health, Hygiene and Nutrition Practices**

External Evaluator's Recommendation: *Given that knowledge of health, hygiene, and nutrition appears fairly high, it may be worth pivoting program activities to focus on behavior change, rather than knowledge.*

HATUTAN fully agrees with the recommendation. This recommendation is in line with adaptations already in progress of hygiene-focused project activities, following the identification of major issues in handwashing practices in early 2020 and the project's contribution to the national push for behavior change in coordination with the GOTL/ MEYS response to the COVID-19 crisis. As a result, the project has piloted handwashing 'nudging' (installation of attractive handwashing spaces and 'nudges' such as mirrors, footpaths leading to taps, etc, by local volunteers); sensitized PTAs to prepare tippy-taps; produced local videos showing how to make tippy-taps; and worked with municipal and central authorities to provide feedback on hygiene practices to school administrators and teachers. While there has been a major increase in the availability of handwashing stations with soap in schools in relation to the baseline, handwashing practices at school and particularly at home remain poor. The lack of reliable access to water is a barrier, associated to the limited understanding of the importance of washing hands with soap (16% of the mothers in intervention areas and 21% of those in comparison areas affirmed that there is a benefit in washing hands without soap at the midline). In response to this finding, the project will expand hygiene nudging activities and also focus on the dissemination of illiterate-friendly messaging on handwashing with soap (focusing on the large subgroup of illiterate mothers – 39% in intervention areas) through PTAs and VSLAs.

HATUTAN fully agrees with the recommendation of focusing on nutrition practices rather than knowledge. It is important to note, however, that the decline in dietary diversity is related not only to knowledge or practices, but primarily to the economic crisis and natural disasters faced by communities in 2020-21 as well as continuing gender-based power disparities in the household. Given the escalation of those crises in April 2021, the project proposes to expand VSLAs and keyhole gardens among parents; promote the increased consumption of eggs and plant-based protein, such as tofu and tempeh; reach more remote communities around target schools with health messages through Family Health Promoters and coordinate with national level safety nets to mitigate the impact of food insecurity and increase dietary diversity.

### **Extracurricular Activities**

External Evaluator's Recommendation: *Given the low number of contact hours in most schools over the past year, extracurricular activities may be particularly useful to help students catch up after the challenges of the past year.*

HATUTAN agrees with the recommendation. The project proposes to roll out literacy-focused extracurricular activities both at the school and community (through the mobilization of parents, PTA, local youth, and older children at the school), using simple games, storytelling and drama and leveraging the books and magazines provided to schools and students. The use of extracurricular activities will increase contact time with reading and also provide an opportunity for at-risk students who may be facing exclusion in the classroom to develop foundational literacy skills in an engaging, welcoming environment, including for those with mild cognitive disabilities related to malnutrition (noting that 39% of the grade 2 students in intervention areas are facing memory issues, according to their parents).

### **Capacity Building and Advocacy**

External Evaluator's Recommendation: *After delays due to the COVID-19 pandemic, national budget issues further delayed provision of school feeding supplies to schools. This remains a highly relevant issue for school feeding across Timor-Leste; program activities should continue to advocate for flexible funding for the SFP and build capacity for SFP implementation.*

As noted above, HATUTAN proposes to continue to advocate with the GOTL for timely disbursement of national SFP funds as well as for the establishment and roll out of efficient fund transfer modalities. In parallel, the project continues to build the capacity of schools, PTAs and municipal authorities to implement and monitor the SFP and increase accountability on the use of funds.

### **3. RESPONSE TO SPECIFIC FINDINGS**

Mitigating learning losses: Midterm results indicate that HATUTAN has been successful in mitigating learning losses due to COVID-19 school closures. Still, the results also show a dramatic decline in the acquisition of foundational literacy skills among second graders, which is likely to have been aggravated by the new school closures in 2021 and escalation of the COVID-19 crisis. HATUTAN will increase support to teachers to provide remedial learning to early grade students, with a particular focus on decoding; use of inclusive strategies to help students who have mild cognitive disabilities and other students who may be excluded during learning activities to decode common phonemes in Tetum; and use of the MEYS approved reader, *Matadalan Alfabetu*. These interventions will be reinforced by messaging to parents (through the Lafaek Community Magazine and VSLAs) on the use of simple games and activities at home to boost decoding, as well as on the importance of regular attendance. In parallel, the project will support PTAs and school administrators to roll out an early warning system approach to identify and address cases of student absenteeism, thus increasing contact time, particularly among the most vulnerable students.

Preventing dropout: HATUTAN has been successful in reducing dropout rates, reflecting the incentive of having school meals, as well as the increased engagement of PTAs; 46% of the PTAs in intervention schools are following up on dropout cases, compared to only 34% in comparison schools. The result is particularly important given the contrast with the sharp increase in dropout rates in comparison schools. Still, qualitative data and monitoring results from September-November 2020 highlight a major risk of increased dropout rates following school closures, particularly if classes operate in shorter shifts, parents consider that children are not learning as expected, and students are not motivated to attend if they are lagging behind and face corporal punishment from

teachers<sup>6</sup>. The project will work with municipal authorities, school administrators, teachers and PTAs to roll out the early warning system protocol developed by the USAID-funded SDPP initiative in order to mitigate the risk of dropout among at-risk students, focusing particularly on low-performing schools and PTAs which are currently not monitoring dropout cases. The project will also continue to share data on dropout rates with the MEYS and municipal authorities to facilitate timely monitoring of the most affected schools and support to administrators to identify and address issues contributing to dropout.

Inverted gender gap – declining literacy results among boys: Male students have significantly lower literacy results. Additionally, male students also have higher dropout rates and significantly lower attendance rates. If not addressed, the emerging inverted gender gap in the Timorese education system is likely to exacerbate in the near future the issues currently faced by women and girls, including gender-based violence, as boys who drop out of school before acquiring foundational skills will have limited opportunities for personal and economic development. The project will work with PTAs, teachers and school administrators to identify and address gendered practices contributing to this situation, including the tolerance of violence against boys; child labor; social acceptance of boys' truancy and perceptions of the value of education for boys; and the exclusion of boys regarded as being 'less intelligent' due to mild cognitive disabilities.

High use of corporal punishment by teachers: The use of corporal punishment by teachers is banned by law in Timor-Leste, but largely normalized by Timorese communities. It is considered as an 'acceptable' behavior provided it does not result in severe physical injury according to qualitative data collected at the project's baseline. While the reinforcement of legal provisions and training on positive discipline and classroom management techniques have been implemented by HATUTAN as well as other initiatives in country, most interventions are not addressing issues related to teachers' mental health and the ability to manage emotions while facing severe shocks. The escalation of mental health issues during the COVID-19 crisis in Timor-Leste has been documented in a study conducted by Asia Foundation<sup>7</sup> and is likely to be a major reason contributing to the increased use of corporal punishment. Teachers, as well as other community members, have limited awareness of mental health issues, and are even less likely to seek help to manage them. HATUTAN proposes to continue to work with administrators, municipal authorities and PTAs to reinforce the teachers' code of conduct as well as mentoring teachers on positive discipline, but also to develop and roll out a psychosocial first aid package for teachers in coordination with MEYS and the Ministry of Health (MoH). The MoH is currently conducting a campaign to increase the awareness of healthcare-seeking behavior on mental health issues<sup>8</sup>). The project will also facilitate dialogues during Teacher Working Group sessions on teacher mental health, the impact of shocks on teachers' ability to manage stress and emotions in their interaction with students, and the 'normalization' of violence (particularly against boys).

Teacher absenteeism: The decrease in teacher attendance is not unexpected due to an exceptionally severe rainy season and the vulnerable condition of HATUTAN's schools, including a higher proportion of schools in remote areas, in relation to the comparison group. The project is already working with the MEYS, municipal education officers and school administrators to address the increased teacher absenteeism rates observed after schools reopened, particularly in cases

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<sup>6</sup> Poor performance and behavioral issues in class were identified as predictors of dropout by the USAID-funded School Dropout Prevention Pilot Program in Timor-Leste.

<sup>7</sup> Asia Foundation (2020) Timor-Leste COVID-19 Survey, Tetum version, p.3

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.facebook.com/MinisteriodaSaudeTL/videos/263551678896933/>

where schools have implemented multiple, shorter shifts, or split grades, providing classes only two to three times per week.

Use of commodities and accountability on SFP implementation: The majority of the respondents highlighted the successful implementation of the SFP. Results included: 98% of the parents agreed that the food was available every day; 93% that it was prepared in a hygienic manner; 91% that the food was sufficient; and 90% that the food is tasty. Still, in two focus groups, issues were raised on (1) the collection of parents' contributions to purchase items for the SFP and (2) food items other than rice being eaten by teachers instead of students. HATUTAN staff are conducting investigations to assess the actual practices in the communities and will coordinate with MEYS and municipal authorities to take follow up actions as appropriate.