



CARE Australia
Lvl 8, 406 Collins St,
Melbourne, 3000
tel 03 9421 5572
fax 03 9421 5593
ABN 46 003 380 890
info@care.org.au
care.org.au

Impact Brief

CARE's Safe Motherhood Project in Timor-Leste

CARE's Safe Motherhood Project is working in nine villages in south-western Timor-Leste to reduce the number of mothers dying in childbirth by teaching them about health and nutrition, improving the skills of local health staff, and the services they provide, and ensuring more women can access these services.

The Context

In Timor-Leste, the number of women who die during pregnancy or within 42 days of giving birth is shockingly high. It is estimated that as many as 570 women die per 100,000 live births. In Australia, this number is less than 7 per 100,000 live births. So why is there such a huge disparity between the experiences of women in Timor-Leste and Australia? Well, Timor-Leste has a high fertility rate (an average of 5.7 births per woman); less than half the women use a modern contraceptive; and less than a third of women give birth with a skilled professional, such as a midwife or doctor. Of course, the reasons are more complex than simple statistics, and relate to a lack of skilled medical professionals, a lack of transport and poor road conditions, as well as a woman's ability to have control over her sexual and reproductive health.

CARE's approach

To address the factors that contribute to these shocking statistics CARE has been focussing its work in two remote locations of Timor-Leste - Ermera and Covalima municipalities. The Safe Motherhood Project builds the knowledge and confidence of women, their families and communities to practice positive sexual, reproductive and maternal health behaviour and encourages them to use their local government health service. We have created space for the communities to come together with the health providers to discuss their needs and jointly identify and remove the barriers to accessing and using these health services; and we are supporting doctors, nurses, midwives and the health system overall to be more effective and responsive to women's and communities' needs.

Building on earlier activities in these locations, the project began in 2014 and operates in 9 villages. To date we have directly supported almost 4,000 women, men, girls and boys and benefitted more than 10,000 people in total. No small feat in a country with a population of a little more than 1.2 million people. The project is funded by Australian Aid under the Australian NGO Cooperation Program (ANCP).

What have we achieved?

In mid-2016 we conducted a review of our progress and found that since we started in 2014:

- More women are now accessing antenatal checks (an increase from 78% to 85%). Antenatal checks during a women's pregnancy are very important for detecting problems with the pregnancy and providing relevant vaccinations and supplements to keep a mother and baby healthy.
- Home births have decreased from 81% to 73% and there has been a significant increase in the number of births assisted by a skilled health professional - from 28% in 2014 to 47% across both municipalities in 2016.
- There has been a big increase in women accessing postnatal care - from 36% to 63% - which means both baby and mum are getting better care in the few weeks following delivery and any problems with the baby's development or mum's recovery, can be identified and treated
- Both government health service providers and communities report improved relationships and this means community members are more confident to seek assistance from health service providers.

How did we achieve this?

Mother's Caring Groups (MCGs). We set up 43 MCGs across the 9 villages we work in. The MCGs are supported by CARE but run by local mothers themselves. We train two group leaders in each group to educate women about maternal health, the danger signs to look out for during child birth and the benefits and methods of family planning. This was also an opportunity for women and their families to develop **birth preparedness plans**, so together they agree when and how they will seek medical assistance and make arrangements for this before the big event.

An unanticipated impact of training local mothers to lead these groups, is that they have used their new found leadership skills and confidence to get more involved in local government. Nine women who were all previously part of our Mother's Caring Groups, are now representatives for their villages.

CARE brings communities and government health service providers together for a better understanding (which hopefully leads to better cooperation and service) of the maternal health needs of communities and the challenges health service providers face in meeting those needs. We call this the **Mutual Accountability Process** because once communities and health services providers have an opportunity to learn about each other's needs and challenges, they are more likely to work together to find a common and shared way of addressing those issues. CARE has found this process to be very effective in increasing participation, accountability and transparency between service users, providers and decision makers.

CARE set up **Kitchen Gardens** to develop knowledge and positive behaviours about nutrition. Kitchen gardens are owned and maintained by the community. They usually include local produce that communities are familiar with but are also an opportunity to introduce produce that is nutritionally valuable but may not be known to that community. Overwhelmingly, project participants identified kitchen gardens as being the most popular activity of the project. Communities saw the gardens as being both a nutrition and an income source, with one project participant referring to the benefit of the gardens as being “not having to buy food, as we can eat what has been planted, and can add to the income of the family by also selling some of the produce”.

Family Health Days. Family Health Days are an annual event where communities are linked to the primary healthcare network of services through a fun and participative day for women, men, girls and boys. These events have been hugely popular and have attracted people who weren't directly part of the project – thus extending the reach and impact of our project.

Training of health professionals. In addition to working with mothers and their communities, CARE acknowledges the importance of supporting the professional development of health service providers. So we worked with the National Health Institute (NHI) to provide training to doctors and midwives on Safe and Clean Birth Delivery. This also included a certification process that supports this training, to ensure professional standards are met and maintained.

Want to learn more?

Please visit our website <https://www.care.org.au/country/timor-leste/> or contact Cathy Boyle at cathy.boyle@care.org.au