

What is ERA Agro-Forestry Doing for Contractors in Timor Leste?

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Capacity Building for Contractors, especially for local small and medium Contractors is a “buzz word” in developmental circles owing to the colossal amounts that are spent on infrastructure, its impact on employment and the realization that true development is best achieved through local capacity. Many contractor development and employment creation models exist, but what is clearly becoming evident is the need to provide basic principles on the technical, business and employment creation aspects and provide an opportunity for participants to execute real works that impact on communities with coaching and mentoring. While this is the basic prescription, customizing to local context is where the challenges and lessons lie. It is against this background, ERA Agro-Forestry project in Timor-Leste seeks to share on challenges and lessons learnt in developing contractors who in-turn stir employment.

ERA Agro-Forestry (ERA-AF) project is a component of the Partnership for Sustainable Agro-Forestry (PSAF) between the Government of Timor-Leste, the European Union (EU), Germany and the International Labour Organization (ILO), which seeks at contributing to a peaceful, inclusive and sustainable development in Timor-Leste, through improved rural access, the creation of employment, economic and domestic revenue opportunities through agro-forestry development, and a durable reduction in food insecurity and malnutrition in rural areas. The programme is jointly planned and delivered through two components, one being technical cooperation from GIZ to support agro-forestry development and another being technical support from ILO through a 4-year project to strengthen local training institutions and local authorities to train and contract local construction companies to rehabilitate/maintain rural roads which service agro-forestry areas in order to facilitate market access. The ERA-AF project which is fully financed by the European Union (1 June 2017 to 31 May 2021) builds upon the success of its predecessor ERA I project (2011-2016).

Contractors trained by the ERA-AF Project, recently completed their classroom and field practical training that started on 29 January 2018 and finished on 13 April 2018. The identification of contractors, selection, classroom and field training has been achieved within a short period since the project effectively started operations in late November 2018. All this was made possible by a sound foundation laid by its predecessor ERA project, co-operation with stakeholders, listening and responding to feedback, customization to the local context and teamwork that is worth sharing.



As is usual, prior to commencing training, the project went about listening to both stakeholders and contractors who provided feedback, which was incorporated in project implementation. Based upon the feedback, the project had to reduce the number of trainees being trained as contractors complained on the huge costs they incur which was seen true based on the works. Clients complained of lack of participation and commitment of directors and staff, and the project had to introduce Commitment Agreements which bind the participants. The training certification is also to be issued after trial contracts, instead of after the classroom and practical training which also binds the trainees.

Participation of the various interest groups was of paramount importance, and involvement of the Women Entrepreneurs Association enabled the project to even exceed its target of 30% women-



owned forms, where the project managed to engage 5 of the 10 contractors as women-owned firms. Also feedback and reference checks from stakeholders was instrumental in ensuring the contracting firms were indeed trainable, geared towards development and not opportunists. This exercise led to 4 of the initially selected contractors falling off the selection list owing to recommendations from stakeholders.

Another laudable initiative of the former project was establishing capacity within local training institutions to implement the training. Don Bosco Training Centre (DBTC) based in Comoro Dili carries out labour based rehabilitation and maintenance training with Instituto de Apoio ao Desenvolvimento (IADE) implementing also contracts and business management training. When mobilizing contractors, from a district in the eastern part called Baucau, a request was made for the training to be carried in Baucau to minimize participants cost. Though not initially designed in the programme, the local training institutions were able to factor mobile training approach into the ERA-AF training where DBTC carried out classroom training in Dili but field training in Baucau and IADE were able to conduct the contracts and business management training in Baucau. Indeed, this was a transformation for DBTC who were used to having clients come to them, rather than themselves going to clients.

On the training content, while primarily basing the training on the structured and nationally accredited certification programme, as much as possible the training was adapted to deal with issues that are also persistent challenges to contractors. This was particularly evident with the contracts and business management training, where the training was also able to address a number of issues that were raised by participants on day one of the training. Training was found to be very participatory and interesting. As much as possible, external practitioners were also invited to share with participants on their experiences, including formerly trained contractors which participants found valuable. The feedback was positive with one of the participants who is a director stating, "Indeed, prior to this training I thought that remittances as a result of claims were earnings for the company, instead of as working capital for subsequent works in the course of executing a contract". It is responses such as these that push the ERA-AF Team to seek to be more attentive to addressing the contractors' problems in a participatory manner, rather than "off-the-shelf" solutions.



Contractors are now preparing for Trial Contractors with continued refresher training including Pre-Bid Training planned for May 2018 so as to prepare them adequately in preparation of bids and eventual execution of the works that are expected to commence in July/ August 2018.

As Contractors on an Agro-Forestry related project, the contractors have strong synergies for incorporating green jobs and environmental aspects into their works. The project is currently in preparatory stages of establishing a partnership with a local NGO so as to advocate and monitor sustenance of bio-engineering interventions that will be done on the trial contracts that are to start soon.