

Fish in school meals, a nutritious initiative for children in Timor-Leste

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A new pilot program, 'Fish in School Meals,' was launched in Timor-Leste to enhance fish consumption in rural areas. Over 1,200 students from 10 schools in Ermera will now receive a wholesome fish dish every week as part of the National School Feeding Program, aiming to improve the nutritional status of children in Timor-Leste.

The four-month pilot, running from July to October, is led by the Partnership for Aquaculture Development in Timor-Leste Phase 2 project. The project is funded by the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade (MFAT) and the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), and implemented by WorldFish in collaboration with the Timor-Leste Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Forestry. The PADTL2 project's mission is to increase the availability and accessibility of farmed tilapia, with a focus on genetically improved farmed tilapia, while also encouraging greater fish consumption.

Highlighting the nutritional benefits of tilapia, Nick Borthwick, Deputy Head of Mission of New Zealand to Timor Leste emphasised, "The introduction of fish into school meals is a significant step towards enhancing the nutrition and well-being of young learners. Fish is an excellent source of essential nutrients, including protein, omega-3, vitamins and minerals. By incorporating fish into school meals, we aim to improve the children's growth and overall health, and increase fish consumption in communities."

As part of the pilot program, and in close collaboration with Mercy Corps, the project organised 14 nutrition sessions for PADTL2 farmers and community members in Ermera, reaching 182 people, including 86 women and 96 men. These sessions promoted the nutritional benefits of fish and educated 14 school cooks on preparing delicious and nutritious fish recipes while maintaining high standards of sanitation and hygiene.

The 10 participating schools received a well-equipped starter kit, which included a cool box, cooking pots, chopping boards, knives, and a fish recipes cookbook developed by Mercy Corps as part of PADTL2's activities. These endeavours were

undertaken in consultation and partnership with the agriculture and fisheries, education, and health ministries.

Rofino Soares Gusmao from the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Fisheries and Forestry, expressed his support, saying, "The 'Fish in School Meals' pilot exemplifies the collaborative efforts of our ministries and partners, underscoring the government's commitment to creating a healthier future for the children of Timor-Leste. This pilot will test strategies to increase annual fish consumption among school children in rural areas, thus supporting improved nutrition outcomes."