Twenty years after achieving independence, the Southeast Asian nation of Timor-Leste is coming into its own. After enduring centuries of colonization, this young country faces a central issue of land: who owns it, who has a right to live on it, and what recourse do people have when the government takes their land.

Land is an economic resource and a means for production, but owning land means more than that for one’s place in society in Timor-Leste. Securing the right to land grants political power and community representation. Oxfam is supporting a local organization called Rede ba Rai, a network of 24 groups that advocate for just and sustainable land rights, which is critical in a country where more than 90% of the population is involved in agriculture.

Rede ba Rai is ensuring that laws are equitable; that there are clear and accessible processes for people to claim their rights and register for land; and that there are mechanisms in place to hold the government accountable. Thanks in large part to Rede ba Rai’s work, Timor-Leste passed its first-ever land law in 2017—a remarkable achievement. But the work continues.

“As a young country, the new policies sometimes fail to consider the people’s rights, nor do they give priority to their right to live on the land, to form their families and communities, or to use the land to generate household income,” said Pedrito Viera, national advocacy network coordinator for Rede ba Rai.

Oxfam’s land and inclusive development programming in Timor-Leste seeks to mobilize communities to access clear and transparent information about projects that will impact their access to land and their livelihoods—as well as to influence government policy to be inclusive of their rights.

**STAKING A CLAIM TO ANCESTRAL LAND**

Laurinda, 63, has lived in her home in Dili, Timor-Leste’s capital city, since 1963. But when her husband died, her neighbors disputed her right to the land. She and her family, including daughter Sonia, son-in-law Americao, and toddler grandson, received constant threats and demands that they produce documentation to prove they belonged on the land.
“I am hurt because we have occupied that place for a long time,” said Sonia. “This was my grandfather’s homeland. I’m a bit hurt because my grandfather and father are the ones who built the place till their nails were all used up for this land.”

Laurinda had paperwork showing the land had been left to her, but when she and her family brought their case to the village office, nothing changed. While land laws guarantee equal rights, women traditionally are not recognized as heirs to land, explained Ines Martins, women and land adviser at Oxfam in Timor-Leste. Shutting women out of property ownership severely limits their income, making widows and women living in violent situations particularly vulnerable.

Laurinda and her family took their case to Rede ba Rai, and now they’re feeling optimistic about the future. Since Rede ba Rai got involved, Laurinda’s neighbors have stopped bothering her family.

**ADVOCATING FOR THOSE WHO LOST THEIR HOMES TO DISASTER**

In 2021, Cyclone Seroja wiped out communities that lived near the Comoro River. According to the U.N. Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, the floods resulting from the storm affected 30,322 households and destroyed 4,212 houses. To this day, people live in temporary homes and government shelters. Timor-Leste’s young government has struggled to find a solution for those who have been displaced and lost their livelihoods.

When the river rose, Dilva, 26, recalled that the flooding happened so suddenly that people were unable to grab any belongings—including documents. Local authorities led them to a camp, where Dilva and her family have been living for the past two years. Since their land is along the river, it is considered to be “at risk,” and they have not been allowed to return home. Thus far, the government has not provided assistance to secure more stable housing, and without land to farm, Dilva has no means of earning money.

Agusto, 63, was evacuated from his home, and while he was sheltering, the government handed his property to the navy. Now soldiers use his home for training. “We asked the government, ‘Do we have rights?’” said Agusto. So far, he said, “They haven’t responded to us.”

Juristas Advocasia, a legal aid organization in Rede ba Rai’s network, is working with Dilva and Agusto to help them understand their rights and challenge the government’s actions. Martins, the Oxfam adviser in Timor-Leste, told us that since the written laws are new, communities are often not aware of their rights. Rede ba Rai is creating tools for the community to use so that members feel comfortable voicing their rights.

“Most of the time what the community can do to have influence is to be a part of the dialogue,” said Martins. “We always motivate the community affected by a program or project and ask them to participate in the dialogue with decision makers. There are also communities who write open letters ... this brings their voice directly to the decision makers.”

Viera, the advocacy coordinator at Rede ba Rai, said that in nearly all the instances the network monitored, the government had violated the law, and in many cases, had violated human rights as well. Through campaigning and mediation, Rede ba Rai has helped bring justice to defendants. The goal with mediation is that when communities decide to give up their land for compensation, effects on livelihood are taken into consideration. Rede ba Rai is working to establish a model by which the government must guarantee that the future living condition of those whose land is taken is better than their current condition.

“We do not often go to court,” said Viera. “They see how we advocate, [how we] defend the community, [and] their desire to push the case through reduces.”

**Reporting by Aimee Han.**