

Voices: Tasi Mane Petroleum Project Brings Concern, Optimism to Timor-Leste's Southern Coast

By Bernardo da Costa Maia 11 March 2019 [Radio Rakambia](#), Timor-Leste



Residents of Cavalima whose land will be used for the Tasi Mane petroleum infrastructure project in Camanasa, Timor-Leste, Jan. 10, 2019 /Credit: Bernardo Da Costa Maia

Tasi Mane (the name of the sea between the south coast of Timor-Leste and Australia) is also the name given to the Timor-Leste's Development Strategy. The infrastructure of the *Tasi Mane Project* will be built in the municipalities of Suai, Manufahi and Viqueque. The government plans to implement the program in 2022.

The multi-year project of three industrial clusters on the south coast will form the backbone of the Timor-Leste petroleum industry. It will involve the development of a coastal zone from Suai to Beaco to support a growing domestic petroleum industry. Tasi Mane will include the Suai Supply Base (SSB) cluster in Camanasa, the Betano Refinery and Petrochemical Industry cluster, and the Beaco LNG-Plant cluster. The government plans to use a total of 1,113 hectares of community land.



A map of the Tasi Mane Project — the backbone of the Timor-Leste petroleum industry — on the southern coast of Timor-Leste / Courtesy of La'o Hamutuk

In 2012, research by La'o Hamutuk, a non-governmental organization, determined that the Suai Supply Base project will be established on land currently being used for agriculture including areas for raising cattle, docks for fishermen, and salt farms.

On a January 2019 reporting trip, Radio Rakambia discovered that the government has compensated some people while others have not been paid. It hasn't been indicated where the farmers can move to. The people of Suai have appealed to the government to establish good conditions for resettlement so that they can raise their animals and plant their plants.

AFONSO NOGUEIRA NAHAK, administrator, Covalima Municipality



Afonso Nogueira Nahak, left, administrator of Covalima Municipality, with Radio Rakabia Journalist Bernardo da Costa Maia in Loharai, Timor-Leste, Jan. 8, 2019 / Credit: Filomino Da Costa Amaral.

“The advantage of the SSB (Suai Supply Base) is that it will create employment for our communities throughout Timor-Leste, especially the people of Suai Covalima,” says Afonso Nogueira Nahak, administrator, Covalima Municipality.

“The disadvantage is that as we can see there will be less land for agriculture since 1,113 hectares will have to be handed to the government. The government will use it to build this support base. I would like to tell you that our government is currently paying compensations to our community members especially to those in Suco Camanasa, Aldeia Fatuisi, Sanfuk. Some have been compensated, but half [of the people] have not been compensated.”

ANACLETO AMARAL, traditional leader, Suco Camanasa, Aldeia Manequin



Anacleto Amaral, traditional leader of Suco Camanasa, Aldeia Manequin, in Sanfuk, Timor-Leste, Jan. 8, 2019 / Credit: Filomino Da Costa Amaral

"We had many meetings with the government and told them that when the SSB commences, the Suai people will have to be the ones to work as cleaners, laundry service, cooks or any other work," says Anacleto Amaral, a traditional leader of Suco Camanasa. "The Camanasa people will be the first ones because it is them who had provided 1,113 hectares of land. However, the reality was that when they built the airport everything was brought from outside. And, sometimes we became onlookers."

"The government said, 'If you offer this land to the government, you, the people of Camanasa would be the ones to be employed.' We asked, 'where would we stay?' and then the government responded, 'We would locate a new place for you in the future.' We don't know where we would live because our place to eat, our rice fields, our farms, we have offered everything to the state, even though the government has cared about us by giving \$3.00 USD per square meter."

"At first we signed contracts not for \$3.00 a square meter but we signed for 10% for land compensation. However, the government then used a law saying everyone must be paid \$3.00 per square meter so some people were unhappy. I myself talked to the Minister of Petroleum and Mineral Resources Alfredo Pires and said, 'You come and brought us into conflict because we signed for 10% not \$3.00 a square meter.' But some people have been greedy so they took the money. I do recommend to the government however, to look after the ordinary people from Suco Camanasa who have offered the 1,113 hectare-land to the government."

HONORIO MENDONCA, farmer, Aldeia Sanfuk, Suco Camanasa

"The government took my two and a half hectares of land. I had been using that land for farming and planting trees like teaks, coconuts, mangoes, and also raised my cattle, goats and pigs," says Honorio Mendonça, a farmer from Aldeia Sanfuk, Suco Camanasa. If we compare the money I made from planting trees to the money from the government, the numbers don't match, because we only get the money [from the government] once. Whereas new trees, like the teak trees, could grow again once the old ones had been harvested. I am saddened a little by this condition, but as small people what can we do? It is also not good not to give away land to the government for development for the nation. But my recommendation to the government is this: find empty land for us to raise our cattle and plant our trees."

ALDA JACINTA, community member, Aldeia Sanfuk, Suco Camanasa



Alda Jacinta, a community member from Aldeia Sanfuk, Suco Camanasa, talks about land compensation in Sanfuk, Timor-Leste, Jan. 9, 2019 / Credit: Filomino Da Costa Amaral

"My land has been measured but I have not been paid," explains Alda Jacinta, a community member of Aldeia Sanfuk, Suco Camanasa. "The government promised any land that has been measured will be paid, including the trees such as moringa, coconut and teak. The government must pay according to the size of the land and the house. I am not very happy because it is us, the people, who will remain suffering because we have sold our land, our village, to the government. I ask the government to give us a new area... so that we can do small business from our village. If there is no other place for us, we will not move out."

MANUEL MONTEIRO, human rights activist, Hak Azasi Manusia (HAK)



Manuel Monteiro, human rights activist and director of HAK (Hak Azasi Manusia) Association is interviewed in Palpasu, Timor-Leste, Jan. 14, 2019 / Credit: Filomino Da Costa Amara!

"Since the beginning, the south coast has been serving as food storage in Timor," says Manuel Monteiro, human rights activist and director of Hak Azasi Manusia (HAK).

"Therefore, if we wanted to undertake any other development, it has to be done so that we avoid the destruction of potential areas for food production for our country. When we build a refinery it will affect the area's potential to produce food."

"Our people need development that involves the citizens in the planning process. Involvement means in the development itself, rather than imposing on them something that had been planned in advance. When sense of ownership is non-existent among the people, how can one expect them to take care of it?"

"When it rains, the water get stuck and become swamps around the people's houses, because the [new] highway is higher than the homes. The people cannot cross to the other side of the road, so they must install ladders. A development should free people from disasters rather than the other way around."

"The risk is that when a productive area is destroyed, we are no longer able to produce food to sustain our lives. We will purchase 100% of our rice from Vietnam, which has been contaminated by preservatives," says Monteiro. "To us, the risk is, especially when we relate it to human rights; the people are entitled the right to access healthy food, self-produced in a manner which has been guaranteed by their state. However, we are currently undertaking a development that is destroying our potential area."

GIL HORACIO BOAVIDA, coordinator Strengthening Agriculture Sustainability in Timor–Leste (HASATIL)



Gil Horacio Boavida of HASATIL in Palpasu, Timor-Leste, Jan. 14, 2019 / Credit: Filomino Da Costa Amaral

"I think politically the objective of the development is clear; to better people's lives," says Gil Horacio Boavida, coordinator of HASATIL (Strengthening Agriculture Sustainability in Timor–Leste), which represents civil society groups.

"Our government would like to develop the resources that we have so that we can guarantee a productive development of the other sectors in order to be able to increase the country's income so that in turn, it can allocate the money for the people's lives."

"We do think that even though it is good to develop the oil industry, consideration needs to be given to the social-cultural, economic as well as environmental impact, so that the impacts can be minimized."

"In our observation, the people have not yet felt the benefits [of the project] as outlined by the existing policy. For instance, people who live in the area were evicted. Many of them have not been compensated as promised. The highway has not seen much movement due to problems caused by the rain. We can also see that the port has caused inundation in the Suai area. The worst impact has been in Suai only. There has not [yet] been development in Beacu and Betano. However, we hope that Suai will serve as a lesson to our leaders, so they can be more thoughtful and minimize risks."

"The waste from the industry is in itself a risk. It will have an impact on the environment. It could damage people and animal health. It could also have impacts on the ocean and wells. It also compromises cultural activities that are still being held by the communities up until now."

"We would like to continue to recommend to the government, both the current ruling government as well as the future governments who will continue the project, to keep a balance in development. There needs to be a mapping of the areas so that separation could be done to the areas for the oil industry and agriculture."

"Despite the low income of the small farmers, we need to develop products with good potential. I think we need to look at the policies in order to address the potential productivity of this country so that we can develop good resources."

DEMETRIO AMARAL, Timor-Leste Secretary of State for the Environment



Demetrio Amaral, Secretary of State for Environment, is interviewed in his office in Dili, Timor-Leste, Jan. 17, 2019 / Credit: Filomino Da Costa Amaral

"The Suai Supply Base project has to follow the environmental management plan described in the environmental license," explains Demetrio Amaral, Timor-Leste's Secretary of State for Environment. "Therefore, in relation to the 1,000 or so hectares of land owned by the population, the environmental license says the operating entities who are working on the construction are the owners of the project, and therefore, are responsible for the acquisition of the land in a just and fair manner."

Amaral spoke about the environmental license granted to the company that is building the highway. "The company has to plant trees to replace the ones they had to destroy. They have to plant grass in the areas they have opened. This is a policy to ensure sustainable development."

"In Timor-Leste, there are laws against environmental destruction and environmental crime. All these laws address the conditions to secure Timor-Leste's better development."

Radio Rakambia confirmed with Amaral about the communities' fertile land that is being used by the government. He responded, "In regards to fertile land, in Israel, people live on sand but could grow watermelons. If we have financial resources from the petrochemical industry, we could put a significant investment to modernize our agriculture. With the less-productive lands, we can look at bio-engineering, so that in one or two years we could use it as a modern agricultural land."

"Petrochemical activity is a high-risk activity. Therefore, we have to do it in a careful way so that we minimize the risks. The biggest risk for the community is the risk of living in ignorance. So, we have an economic system that can give conditions for a better life," says Amaral. "Furthermore, we would also use the investment opportunity in the petrochemical sector as a source of income that will in turn establish conditions for the agricultural development of the peasants to have a better life, because they now have a good road. All of these contribute to the farmers and peasants."

Reporting for this story was supported by a grant from Internews' Earth Journalism Network and the South East Asian Press Alliance.