

RESTORING **HOPE** FROM THE GROUND UP



**How Farmers in Timor-Leste Nurture Hope
Amidst Climate Change**

The great paradox of our time remains painfully clear: those who have done the least to cause climate change are suffering its worst impacts. The wealthiest people, corporations and nations continue to burn through the world's remaining carbon budget, while the poor, especially women, children and Indigenous peoples, face rising heat, hunger, and hardship.^[1]

An Indian church leader once lamented that

“Climate change is the colonisation of the atmospheric commons.”^[2]

It is not only an ecological disaster, but also a moral one. For Christians, it is a confrontation with the truth that sin and injustice fracture relationships: between humanity and God, between rich and poor, and between people and the earth itself.

From the first pages of Genesis, God entrusts creation to human care, not exploitation. When the prophet Micah calls us:

“To act justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with God,” (Micah 6:8)

he invites us to align our lives with the Creator's intention for the flourishing of all creation. This, too, is the call to climate justice.





A Faith-Driven Rediscovery in a Time of Despair

Four decades ago, an Australian missionary named **Tony Rinaudo** stood on the barren soils of Niger, defeated. Every tree he had planted to stop the advancing Sahara had withered and died. In desperation, he prayed that God would open his eyes to a new way forward. That prayer was answered when he noticed something small but miraculous: stumps of old trees, still alive beneath the surface, quietly sprouting new shoots.

That moment of revelation gave birth to **Farmer Managed Natural Regeneration (FMNR)**, a simple but revolutionary practice

of allowing existing root systems to regrow into full trees. Instead of expensive replanting, FMNR harnesses nature's own capacity to heal when given a chance.

Since then, the movement has spread across Africa, Asia and the Pacific, regenerating **millions of hectares of degraded land**^[3] and transforming the lives of poor farmers. But as Rinaudo himself insists

"The greatest thing FMNR restores is not trees, it's hope."^[4]

Timor-Leste: Hope Taking Root

Two years ago, I set out to explore whether FMNR truly restores hope among vulnerable communities. My research with farmers and faith leaders in rural Timor-Leste, revealed that the answer is a resounding yes.

Farmers there live on the frontline of the climate crisis. Prolonged droughts, erratic rains, and floods threaten their crops and livelihoods. Yet, through FMNR, they have begun to reclaim both the land and their confidence in the future.

What they told me could be summarised in the words of a community leader in Niger,

"Before this project, we were nothing, nobody. Today, because of this project, we are known. We matter." [5]

Another shared that their once-dry fields now retain water, and native trees that had disappeared are returning. Women spoke proudly of their leadership in teaching FMNR to their children and neighbours.

These are not just environmental outcomes. They are signs of restored **self-worth, self-efficacy, community cohesion, and faith in tomorrow**, what theologian Jürgen Moltmann calls,

"Hope against all hope." (Rom 4:18)





When Faith Meets the Soil

FMNR is far more than an agricultural technique. It embodies a **transformational development model** that brings together environmental stewardship, social justice, and spiritual renewal.

Wherever farmers protect tree stumps and nurture regrowth, they participate in the divine rhythm of creation and resurrection. They experience, often for the first time, the truth that

“God is good to humanity and will triumph over all evil.”^[6]

This is what theologian Richard Bauckham describes as the intersection of proximate hopes and ultimate hope.^[7]

The proximate hopes, the tangible fruits of increased harvests, clean water, and restored dignity, become glimpses of the ultimate hope of God’s new creation. Through patient care of the land, farmers act out a living parable of the Kingdom of God: transforming desolation into abundance, despair into joy, and brokenness into communion.



A Theology of Restoration

True Christian hope is not passive optimism or escape to a heavenly elsewhere. It is an active, earthy participation in God's ongoing renewal of the world.

The communities of Timor-Leste testify to this truth every day. Their faith is not abstract, it is embodied in the soil, the roots, and the shared labour of neighbours who choose cooperation over despair. FMNR, in this sense, becomes a theology of restoration: a protest against fatalism and an affirmation that even the most degraded landscapes, and the most wounded communities, can be renewed.

As one priest told me during the research,

"God has entrusted us to be changemakers for our children's future."

His words echo Pope Francis' encyclical *Laudato Si'*, which calls for a revolution of mindset to recover our sacred duty of care for creation.

From the Margins to the Global Stage

These humble farmers from Timor-Leste, Niger, and beyond carry a message that the global community must hear. Their story challenges the world's political and economic powers: **justice begins at the roots.**

The climate crisis cannot be solved by technology or finance alone. It requires a moral conversion, a re-ordering of relationships.



FMNR offers a living example of how local faith and global science can work hand in hand to heal creation.

Through FMNR, millions of trees have regrown, soils have been restored, and families once trapped in poverty now hold agency over their future. Yet the deeper miracle is spiritual: hope reborn in places the world had forgotten.

Choose Hope

Global leaders should begin by listening to the quiet wisdom of those who have already begun restoring the Earth, farmers who turn from despair to hope, from dependence to stewardship. Their witness reminds us that hope is not naive; it is an act of defiance against injustice. It is a faith that God's promise of reconciliation extends to all creation.

If the international community truly seeks a just and sustainable world, it must stand in solidarity with these grassroots movements, supporting regenerative agriculture, empowering local communities, and valuing the moral and spiritual dimensions of climate action. Because in the end, restoring the planet will not begin in conference halls but in fields where people, faith, and creation meet. From the dry soils of Timor-Leste to the corridors of COP30, the same truth holds: **hope grows best when it is shared.**

Endnotes

- [1] Khalfan et al. (2023). Climate Equality: A planet for the 99%. Oxfam International. p.ii
- [2] Moe-Lobeda. (2017). Climate Justice, Truth-telling, and Hope. Anglican Theological Review, 99 (3). p.533
- [3] Kibru et al. (2021). Farmer's perception and reasons for practicing farmer managed natural regeneration in Tigray, Ethiopia. Agroforestry Systems, 95(7).
- [4] Hervey & Davoren-Rose. (n.d.). How to reforest the desert without planting a tree, ([Tony Rinaudo- Reforesting The Desert Without Planting A Tree by Hope Is A Verb](#))
- [5] Rinaudo, T. (2021). The forest underground: Hope for a planet in crisis. p.162
- [6] Nolan, A. (2001). Jesus before Christianity (25th anniversary ed). p.39
- [7] Bauckham, R. (2016). Ecological Hope in Crisis? (In Creation care and the gospel: Reconsidering the mission of the church). p.16

Acknowledgements

This document was developed by World Vision.

Author: Jude Shirantha Perera

Content editor: Karla Harvey

Design and layout: Karla Harvey

Proofreader: Karla Harvey

Cover photograph: A young girl smiles at the camera/ WVTL - Children's Prayer Windows at the 2022 Triennial Council. © World Vision

Back cover photograph: Community resilience in action: Local residents in Timor-Leste cultivate sustainable gardens with support from Australia Aid, fostering food security and environmental stewardship. © World Vision

Copyright © 2025 by World Vision International. All rights reserved. No portion of this publication may be reproduced in any form, except for brief excerpts in reviews, without prior permission of the publisher.

World Vision is a humanitarian relief, development and advocacy organisation dedicated to working with children, families, and their communities to reach their full potential by tackling the root causes of poverty and injustice. We work with the world's most vulnerable people from all backgrounds, even in the most dangerous places, and serve all people, regardless of religion, race, ethnicity, or gender.

For further information about this publication please contact:

Shirantha Perera

Manager – Sponsorship Portfolio Team World Vision Australia

Email: shirantha.perera@worldvision.com.au

RESTORING **HOPE** FROM THE GROUND UP



World Vision 