



PROGRESS REPORT: STRENGTHENING THE ENGAGEMENT BETWEEN HEALTH CSOS AND THE MINISTRY OF HEALTH IN TIMOR-LESTE

Local Health System Sustainability Project

Task Order I, USAID Integrated Health Systems IDIQ

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Local Health System Sustainability Project

The Local Health System Sustainability Project (LHSS) under the USAID Integrated Health Systems IDIQ helps low- and middle-income countries transition to sustainable, self-financed health systems as a means to support access to universal health coverage. The project works with partner countries and local stakeholders to reduce financial barriers to care and treatment, ensure equitable access to essential health services for all people, and improve the quality of health services. Led by Abt Associates, the five-year, \$209 million project will build local capacity to sustain strong health system performance, supporting countries on their journey to self-reliance and prosperity.

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ACRONYMS

LHSS	Local Health System Sustainability Project
CSO	Civil society organizations
FONGTIL	Forum Organização Não Governamental Timor-Leste (Timor-Leste NGO Forum)
MoH	Ministry of Health
NHSCC	National Health Sector Coordination Committee
NHSSP II 2020-2030	National Health Sector Strategic Plan II 2020–2030
Partnership manual	Health Sector Partnership and Coordination Manual
REBAS-TL	Rede Ba Saude-Timor-Leste
SISCa	Serviço Integrado Saúde Comunitária
SnF	Saúde na Família
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

1. BACKGROUND

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are important stakeholders in a health system. They play a vital role in strengthening health governance, especially to ensure that disadvantaged sections of society have access to quality health care. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Vision for Health System Strengthening 2030 also emphasizes the need for strengthening and partnering with local stakeholders and civil society groups, thereby enabling the integration of communities into the broader health system. It is to this end that the USAID Health System Sustainability Activity in Timor-Leste is working with the Timor-Leste NGO forum known as FONGTIL (*Forum Organização Não Governamental Timor-Leste*)¹. The purpose of this partnership is to maximize health sector CSOs' contribution to policy-making, service delivery and health governance. As part of this effort, 43 FONGTIL health CSO members have come together and established the country's first-ever health advocacy network (*Rede Ba Saude-Timor-Leste* (REBAS-TL), officially launched in May 2022. REBAS-TL aims to strengthen health sector CSOs' capacities and enable them to better engage with the government and other stakeholders to create an equitable and inclusive health system that offers quality care to all Timorese people.

Since its launch in May 2022, REBAS-TL has, with the Activity's support, participated in various fora and meetings hosted by the Ministry of Health (MoH). The engagement is helping health CSOs realize the existing opportunities for collaboration, learning, joint action, and advocacy with the government and contribute to the agenda of shaping a sustainable health system in Timor-Leste. This document captures the progress so far in improving CSO-MoH engagement and the next steps.

2. PROGRESS REPORT

CONTRIBUTION TO THE MOH'S PARTNERSHIP MANUAL

Aiming to strengthen stakeholder engagement for the health sector in Timor-Leste, the MoH developed and launched the Health Sector Partnership and Coordination Manual (partnership manual) in Ainaro Municipality on July 22, 2022. The purpose of the partnership manual is to guide the coordination of health sector stakeholders and formalize their engagement with the MoH. The instruments of collaboration can include memoranda of understanding, technical cooperation agreements, joint planning, monitoring, and reviews and evaluation of health program priorities, implementation, and performance/results. This would help the MoH to accomplish national health priorities by making efficient use of internal and external resources.

When the partnership manual was under development, the Activity proposed that it recognize CSOs as strategic partners in the health sector and not only as health program implementers. The partnership manual now includes REBAS-TL and its CSO members in all health sector strategic engagement forums.

The Activity also assisted the MoH in validating the partnership manual by incorporating partners' comments and inputs prior to approval. Going forward, the Activity will continue to support the MoH in disseminating the partnership manual to health CSOs through workshops, seminars, and other existing forums to increase their awareness of their role in health system strengthening.

¹ FONGTIL is an umbrella organization of CSOs in Timor-Leste. Of the 201 local CSOs registered with FONGTIL, 51 are engaged in health-related programming and play a role in improving water, sanitation, and hygiene; maternal and child health; and combatting malnutrition in Timor-Leste.

CSO PARTICIPATION IN MOH'S ENGAGEMENT FORUMS

The MoH's recently launched health sector partnership and coordination manual specifies five engagement forums—three at the national level and two at the municipality level, as briefly described below—where health sector stakeholders, including CSOs, can participate and engage with the MoH. As Timor-Leste's national health CSO network, REBAS-TL has been representing its health CSO members at these forums.

Table I. Forums for REBAS-TL Engagement

LEVEL	DIFFERENT FORUMS FOR ENGAGEMENT
NATIONAL LEVEL	<p>National Health Sector Coordination Committee (NHSCC): Forum for the MoH, development partners, and other stakeholders to discuss health policies and challenges in the health sector and to oversee the implementation of projects and programs guided by the National Health Sector Strategic Plan II 2020–2030 (NHSSP II 2020–2030)</p> <p>Joint Health Sector Review Meeting at the MoH: Chaired by the MoH to conduct dialogue with health sector stakeholders to build trust, reinforce the spirit of mutual respect and accountability, and advance solutions to challenging health sector problems</p> <p>Joint Health Sector Planning Summit of the MoH: Organized by the MoH to coordinate with various partners and stakeholders working in Timor-Leste's health sector</p>
MUNICIPAL LEVEL	<p>Municipal Technical Working Group: Established to monitor progress and support in the implementation of the comprehensive service package for primary health care, Saúde na Família (SnF), and Serviço Integrado Saúde Comunitária (SISCa) at the health facility and community level, along with international and local organizations and bilateral and multilateral donors, including UN agencies</p> <p>Administrative Post-technical Working Group: Established to monitor and support the implementation of the primary health care essential services packages at health facilities and coordinate the SnF and SISCa programs in communities</p>

Separately from these, the Activity facilitated several opportunities for dialogue and exchange of information between the MoH and CSOs. Brief details of the MoH meetings and forums where CSOs participated are provided below.

National Health Sector Coordinating Committee Meeting (August 1, 2022)

REBAS-TL and health CSOs participated in this meeting to discuss the progress, challenges, and the way forward in implementing health programs. REBAS-TL provided input on issues around medical professionals' absenteeism at health posts and lack of ownership. The director general of public health and the director general of corporative services appreciated the input. Both officials encouraged CSOs to report on such issues, and they agreed to jointly work to improve the quality of health services for the people of Timor-Leste.

MoH's Presentation to CSOs on Public Health, with Focus on Environmental Health Priorities and Strategy (July 8, 2022)

The head of the Department of Environmental Health, Mr. Agustinho, addressed the CSOs and gave a presentation on the program priorities, progress, challenges, and the way forward to improve environmental health in Timor-Leste. During the presentation, CSOs explored the opportunities to

partner and work jointly with the MoH to address public health issues in Timor-Leste, especially in rural areas.

MoH's Presentation to CSOs on Human Resources for Health and Nutrition Priorities (July 7, 2022)

The director of Human Resource for Health, Mr. Augusto Joaquim Pinto, presented the MoH's vision and strategy and touched upon how the MoH manages human resource requirements across the country. Mr. Pinto requested that CSOs support the ministry in advocating for additional state budget allocation to the health sector so that they can recruit more health professionals to work in health centers and health posts.

The head of the Nutrition Department, Mr. Luis Correia, presented the results of a recent survey on the nutritional status in Timor-Leste. Access to this information and data on nutrition will help CSOs identify key issues and advocate for improved nutrition, especially for mothers and children.

MoH's Presentation to CSOs on the Vision, Priorities, and Strategy for the Health Sector (June 23, 2022)

The director of Policy, Planning, and Cooperation Directorate, Mr. Narciso Fernandes, presented on the government's health sector vision, priorities, and strategy to REBAS-TL members. The engagement session aimed to increase the CSOs' awareness of the context of health sector development. Mr. Fernandes acknowledged the contribution CSOs made to the health sector and highlighted the important role they can play in delivering the health sector's strategic plans.

MoH Consultation and Validation of the Human Resource for Health Recruitment Manual (June 14, 2022)

The MoH has developed the Human Resources for Health Recruitment Manual to help improve the recruitment process for health staff. Prior to approval of the manual, the MoH held consultations with CSOs to gather their perspectives and input. The MoH has agreed to continue such engagement with CSOs, depending on the technical area to be addressed and discussed. The Activity will continue to capitalize on the MOH's willingness to engage with CSOs.

Dissemination of the Sectoral Partnership and Coordination Manual (June 6, 2022)

The head of the Partnership and Cooperation Department, Dr. Adélia M. Barreto, presented the MoH's Health Sector Partnership and Coordination Manual to REBAS-TL and highlighted the foundational principles of the manual, which has been the MoH's priority since 2015. The manual is a guide for development partners and CSOs (including members of REBAS-TL) on engaging and partnering with the MoH and its stakeholders for the development of the country's health sector.

3. THE WAY FORWARD

- The Activity will continue to provide technical support to the MoH to facilitate their dissemination of the partnership manual to health CSOs to increase their understanding of available engagement mechanisms at the national and municipality levels so that they can increasingly participate and present any key health issues.

- The Activity will organize a training of trainers for FONGTIL/REBAS-TL with the expectation that upon completion, these trainers will take the next step toward strengthening the capacity of health CSOs to enable them to systematically advocate for issues with the MoH.
- The Activity will support the growth of REBAS-TL and its stewardship role in improving civic engagement and advocacy for health system strengthening.