



BRINGING CIVIL SOCIETY'S VOICE INTO SUCCO COUNCIL DISCUSSIONS IN TIMOR LESTE

Local Health System Sustainability Project

Task Order I, USAID Integrated Health Systems IDIQ

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 Governmental Timor-Leste
MOH	Ministry of Health
REBAS-TL	Rede Ba Saude Timor-Leste
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

INTRODUCTION

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are increasingly seen as active contributors to strengthened health systems (Sacks et al., 2019). An engaged civil society not only holds systems accountable and provides oversight, but also (and most importantly) brings the community's perspectives into discussions to advocate for their health needs. In Timor-Leste, the Ministry of Health (MOH) has played a stewardship role in creating engagement mechanisms to enable CSOs' active participation in health system strengthening. The U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) Health System Sustainability Activity has been supporting the MOH and CSOs to deepen their engagement. The effort aligns with USAID's Vision for Health System Strengthening 2030, which recognizes the importance of engagement between public and private sectors—including communities and NGOs—and their collaboration and coordination around the common agenda of shaping a resilient and sustainable health system. A key achievement of the Activity's support on this front has been establishing Rede Ba Saude Timor-Leste (REBAS-TL), which is the health sector CSO network that the Activity helped the national NGO network of Timor-Leste Forum Organização Não Governmental Timor-Leste (FONGTIL) create and launch in May 2022.

The MOH recently introduced its first-ever health sector partnership and coordination manual to guide collaboration with a range of health sector stakeholders, including REBAS-TL and its member CSOs. The manual clearly identifies the engagement mechanisms where REBAS-TL/CSOs could participate to discuss health issues that impact the population at national and municipality levels. Currently, however, there is no clear mechanism for CSOs to engage in health system strengthening at the village level and below.

Suco Council meetings: A potential platform for CSO engagement at the village level

Timor-Leste is largely an agricultural nation, with most of its population residing in rural areas. The country has 452 *Sucos*, or villages, and more than 2,233 *aldeia*, or sub-villages (Ministry of Finance 2017). The concentration of the *Sucos* with the highest living standards in or close to Dili or municipality centers have better infrastructure and health care opportunities. Conselho do Suco, which is the consultative body of the Suco, is an existing mechanism where health CSOs could get engaged at the village level. However, by law, CSOs are not members of local councils such as Conselho do Suco, which organize meetings among local authorities, community representatives, women's and youth groups, and other local representatives and partners twice a year to discuss issues related to local development, including health issues.

The exclusion of CSOs from Suco Council meetings means they cannot directly advocate for health issues in rural areas through this channel. This is a loss for CSOs given the shared health issues that both CSOs and Suco Councils strive to address. As per Suco Law no. 9/16 Article 5, the health-related functions of Suco Councils include the following:

- Promote the adoption of healthier lifestyles among community members and sensitize them on the need for preventing diseases such as cholera, meningitis, diarrhea, malaria, AIDS, tuberculosis, and dengue.
- Sensitize community members about the importance of maternal and child health and mobilize them for participation in vaccination campaigns.
- Inform the municipal administration about the existence of underage children (0–5 years) at risk in the community, as well as individuals who are socially excluded or vulnerable.

- Sensitize and mobilize community members for the adoption of good hygiene and food handling and preparation practices.
- Sensitize and mobilize community members for the maintenance of hygiene, salubrity, conservation, and quality of public spaces.

Participation of CSOs in Suco Council meetings could allow for a range of community health issues to be better amplified and advocated at the village level. CSOs could also use the opportunity to bring awareness about citizens' health care rights and communicate about gaps and shortcomings in the delivery of quality health services in villages.

Barriers to CSO engagement in Suco Councils

The main reason CSOs are excluded from Suco Councils is the law that does not recognize CSOs as members. However, there are several other barriers that inhibit engagement. These are listed below.

- The local authorities have a limited understanding about the role health CSOs could play in advocating about the health issues encountered by citizens.
- Suco Council meetings also lack systematic ways of discussing health issues and reporting. As a result, health issues are raised ad-hoc and without in-depth discussion identifying solutions.
- Issues are not often reported to the municipal health authorities, and when raised there is no clear plan for follow-up.
- Health CSOs have a limited understanding of how Suco Councils could contribute to health system strengthening and so do not always see the importance of joining.
- Very few of the country's health CSOs operate at the village level.

Proposed steps to improve CSO engagement with Suco Councils

- The Activity will support FONGTIL and REBAS-TL as they discuss and advocate for the inclusion of CSOs as members of the Suco Council.
- The Activity will assist FONGTIL and REBAS-TL to strengthen Suco Council members' capacity for systematic and effective health advocacy.
- The Activity will orient and, when appropriate, educate, health CSOs to the need for village-level engagement broadly and partnership with the Suco Councils in particular.
- The Activity will support REBAS-TL members to closely engage existing women's and youth groups at the Suco level and raise their awareness about citizens' health care rights, the health system, and their role in strengthening health systems through their participation so that they can advocate effectively during Suco Council meetings.

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