CIVIL SOCIETY BRIEF

TIMOR-LESTE

Civil Society: An Overview

The four major phases of Timor-Leste's history have shaped civil society development: Portuguese rule and its decline (1702–1975), Indonesian rule (1975–1999), the emergency period (1999–2001), and the transition to independence from 2002 to today.

Prior to the Portuguese arrival in the 16th century, small kingdoms, each subdivided into clans, were the basis of Timorese society. These structures remained in place for most of the Portuguese colonial period.¹ The Portuguese administration leveraged traditional structures. Thus, the colonial process contributed to an evolution in traditional power structures, in which the legitimacy of some leaders was reinforced through the ability to exercise state power. During Portuguese colonial rule, the state sponsored only one political party and controlled most media. Catholic missionaries arrived on Timor as early as 1512,² and the Catholic church was the main expression of civil society during this time, providing primary school education on behalf of the government (endnote 1). While some perceived the church as an extension of colonial powers, it did lead some advocacy work for the local population (endnote 2).

Country and Government Context

Timor-Leste sits at the easternmost point of the Malay Archipelago, with the Timor Sea to the south and the Savu Sea and Ombai Sea to the north. Timor-Leste occupies the eastern half of the island of Timor, the Oecusse-Ambeno enclave on Timor, and Atauro and Jaco islands. The 2017 population was 1.23 million, the overwhelming majority of whom are Catholic.^a

▲ **Catholic ties.** Timor-Leste's 2017 population was 1.23 million, the overwhelming majority of whom are Catholic.

^a ADB. 2018. *Basic Statistics 2018*. Manila.

Approximately 30% of the population lives in urban areas, particularly in the capital Dili. Official languages are Portuguese and Tetum, while English and Indonesian are denoted as working languages in the constitution. Inhabitants speak more than fifteen other indigenous languages. Timor-Leste's currency is the United States dollar.

The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste became independent on 20 May 2002. Timor-Leste operates a unicameral parliamentary democracy where the Prime Minister is the head of government and the popularly elected President serves as head of state.

In 2006, Timor-Leste suffered a failure of state security and civil unrest resulting from internal divisions in the Timorese leadership and fragile political institutions. United Nations (UN) peacekeepers returned, and 150,000 people fled, becoming internally displaced. A 2008 assassination attempt on the President and Prime Minister again threatened the fragile state. Since 2008, the country has been relatively stable, and the UN peacekeeping mission ended in 2012. The July 2017 elections resulted in political deadlock, but elections in May 2018 went well. Timor-Leste has a quota system for women in the parliament. The Law on the Election of the National Parliament ensures women's representation in politics with a requirement that one in every three candidates elected to parliament be a woman.^b Women won 22 of the 65 national parliamentary seats, making Timor-Leste the country with the highest percentage of women in parliament in Asia.^c

▲ **Building the nation's economy.** While Timor-Leste has made considerable economic progress since its independence, skills building remains a critical component needed to continuously improve the country's economy.

While Timor-Leste has made considerable economic progress since its independence, it remains one of the least developed states in Asia. According to the 2017 Human Development Report, it ranks 132nd out of 189 countries globally.^d Timor-Leste's 2017 Human Development Index (HDI) value is 0.625/1.000, a significant increase from 0.507 in 2000. From 1990 to 2017, Timor-Leste saw its life expectancy at birth increase by 20.7 years, the mean years of schooling increase by 1.7 years, and the expected years of schooling of its population increase by 3.0 years.

Prospects for sustained progress on poverty reduction, human development, and job creation hinge on prudent use of the country's petroleum wealth to finance high-quality, sustainable investments in physical and human capital.^e However, Timor-Leste's dependence on declining revenues from petroleum—coupled with a nascent private sector and an absence of substantial new sources of revenue—is a concern. Despite a \$16 billion savings from petroleum revenues, social indicators for Timor-Leste remain weak. The country has infrastructure deficits in telecommunications, roads, and electricity.

^b ADB. 2014. *Country Gender Assessment*. Manila.

^c United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). 2018. Factsheet 6 Parliamentary Election 2018, Timor-Leste Final Result. New York.

^d UNDP. 2018. *Human Development Indices and Indicators: 2018 Statistical Update*. New York.

^e ADB. 2018. *Responding to Timor-Leste's Development Needs*. Manila.

▲ **Shaping civil society.** The civil society in Timor-Leste became what it is today because of four milestones in the country's history: the Portuguese rule, Indonesian rule, the emergency period, and the transition to independence.

In the late 1960s, a Catholic church publication *Seara* provided a clear independent media voice (endnote 1).

In 1974, Portuguese authorities allowed the formation of several political parties, including Frente Revolucionaria do Timor-Leste Independente (FRETILIN), Uniao Democratica Timorese (UDT), and the Popular Democratic Association of Timor (APODETI). Women's and youth organizations linked to political parties—the Organizacao Popular de Mulher Timor (OPMT)—were established in 1975 as mass organizations and served as the women's arm of FRETILIN. The Timorese Workers' Union and student organizations were also active (endnote 1).

▲ **Symbol of faith.** The Cristo Rei statue was a gift to the people from the Indonesian government when Timor-Leste was a province in 1996.

During the Indonesian rule from 1975 to 1999, civil society largely operated as a clandestine movement,³ with the underground resistance operating around discrete cells or groups of individuals (endnote 1). Several civil society organizations (CSOs) were established in Timor-Leste during the Indonesian rule, including the Catholic church's development agency Caritas (previously Delgado Social), in 1976, not only providing community education and health services,⁴ but also providing a voice to the outside world on the situation in Timor-Leste (endnote 1). The International Committee of the Red Cross and Catholic Relief Services (CRS) opened in Timor-Leste in the late 1970s, although CRS withdrew in the 1980s after helping establish the agricultural CSO Ema maTA Dalan ba Progressu (ETADEP) (endnote 4).

Student groups from within and outside Timor-Leste were active throughout the 1980s and 1990s. The Santa Cruz massacre of hundreds of youth and students during a student funeral march in 1991 was pivotal in the independence movement.⁵ Resistencia Nacional Dos Estudantes De Timor-Leste (RENETIL), an organization for Timorese studying in Indonesia and established in 1988, was active in the struggle for independence.⁶ The East Timorese Student Solidarity Council (ETSSC) was also established in 1998.

Many of these CSOs formed as part of a resistance movement to Indonesian rule. However, several pro-Indonesian integration organizations also opened, including Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia (SPSI), a workers' organization; scouts; Korps Pegawai Republik Indonesia (KORPRI), a civil servants' organization; and Komite Nasional Pemuda Indonesia (KNPI) (endnote 6).

Several international agencies established branches in Timor-Leste as a part of their Indonesian operations in the 1990s, including Christian Children's Fund (1990), World Vision (1995), and CARE Canada (1995) (endnote 4). More local nongovernment organizations (NGOs) formed in 1996–1997. Some included women's rights groups East Timorese Women Against Violence, and for the Rights of Women and Children (ETWAVE), focused on preventing violence against women; Forum Komunikasi Untuk Perempuan Timor Lorosae (FOKUPERS), an advocacy organization formed in 1997; Yayasan Hak, advocating for human rights, in 1996; and POSKO (Pos Komando or Command Post), formed to provide emergency relief in response to the 1997–1998 drought (endnote 4). The Timor-Leste NGO forum, Forum ONG Timor-Leste (FONGTIL), emerged in 1998 when 14 local CSOs came together. However, the emergency period shortly followed, limiting operations (endnote 1). The network reactivated in June 1999.

▲ **Post-conflict assistance.** Having a large youth population prompted several international agencies like the Christian Children's Fund, World Vision, and CARE Canada to establish branches to assist families in post-conflict Timor-Leste.

During the emergency period in 1999–2001, a schism developed between locally based civil society and the well-resourced international relief organizations who began operations in Timor-Leste post-referendum. Local NGOs were crippled through destruction of their offices, physical attacks, or their staff fleeing the capital or country (endnote 4), while well-resourced international organizations generally focused on Dili, operated in English, and mostly did not engage local civil society actors.⁷

▲ **Empowering women.** Social and cultural progress in post-conflict Timor-Leste paved the way for more women to be equally represented in civil society.

After the emergency period, the number of FONGTIL local CSOs members mushroomed, from 24 organizations in 1999, to 112 in 2000, and then to more than 231 in 2002. However, some CSOs faced sustainability challenges, as some were established primarily to channel donor funds after the emergency period.⁸ During the security crisis of 2006, FONGTIL actively campaigned to promote peace and unity, but local NGOs again felt that international NGOs were marginalizing them in the relief effort.⁹

Civil society in Timor-Leste today comprises a range of groups. Village-level groups form around religious, cultural, hobby, or sporting activities, or create self-help and support groups.¹⁰ Some of these groups affiliate with national organizations, while others are independent. Sporting organizations exist both at the village and national levels, as do community organizations such as farmers' groups, water management associations, or women's organizations.¹¹ In addition, mass membership organizations, some of which operate at the village level, cover a range of issues (endnote 11), including women's, youth, and faith groups (endnote 6). Service delivery CSOs also provide health, education, and other services. CSOs deliver microfinance; social enterprise groups also operate in Timor-Leste. Development and public benefit NGOs serve at both the national and district levels. A range of advocacy NGOs also operate in Timor-Leste. The term NGO in Timor-Leste has a very specific meaning: usually a more structured organization with a constitution, management structure, focused on development, and often in receipt of donor funding. NGOs are key drivers of civil society, yet are only one part of civil society. The broader terminology also includes trade unions as well as media and institutions such as universities (endnote 6).

Several journalism organizations advocate to protect journalists' rights and promote media freedom.¹² Other trade and professional associations also exist in Timor-Leste. Nurses' and teachers' unions existed prior to the referendum in 1999; since then, separate unions for public service workers, construction workers, maritime and transport workers, agricultural workers, retail workers, hotel bar and/or restaurant workers, and security workers have opened. The national trade union congress, Timor-Leste Trade Union Confederation (KSTL), was established in February 2001.

According to Belun, FONGTIL, and primary field research data, over 600 CSOs operated in the country as of August 2014. About half (321) are locally formed NGOs; approximately one-third (209) are community-based organizations; about 12% (78) are international NGOs; and the remainder (17) are academic organizations.

Key Civil Society Organizations in Timor-Leste

This section lists some of the CSOs operating in Timor-Leste identified from a range of online sources. The list includes a basic description of their work, where available.

CHURCH-BASED ORGANIZATIONS

- **Caritas Diocese Baucau:**
E-mail address: caritas_baucau@yahoo.com
Mobile: (+670) 7727 4244
- **Caritas Diocese Dili:**
<http://diocesadedili.org/instituicoes-diocesanais/caritas-diocesana/>
E-mail address: sekcaritas@yahoo.com
Tel: (+670) 332 3442 or 331 3443
- **Diocesan Justice and Peace Commission:**
<http://djpcdilitimorleste.blogspot.com/>
E-mail address: jpcdili.2009@gmail.com
Tel: (+670) 331 2166
- **Observatorio da Igreja Para Os Assuntos Sociais (OIPAS):**
Mobile: (+670) 7723 3084

LOCAL NONGOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS

- **Alola Foundation**, focusing on improving the lives of women and children:
<http://www.alolafoundation.org/>
E-mail address: info@alolafoundation.org
Tel: (+670) 332 3855
- **Asosiasaun HAK**, focusing on law, human rights, and justice:
<https://asosiasaunhak.blogspot.com/>
E-mail address: info.asosiasaunhak@gmail.com
Mobile: (+670) 7804 0405
- **Ba Futuru (For the Future)**, focusing on child protection and conflict protection:
<http://www.bafuturu.org/>
E-mail address: bafuturu@bafuturu.org
Tel: (+670) 332 2437
- **Belun**, focusing on conflict prevention and resolution, research and policy development, and community capacity development:
<http://www.belun.tl/en/>
E-mail address: office.belun@gmail.com
Tel: (+670) 331 0353
- **Cruz Vermelha de Timor-Leste**, Red Cross affiliate:
<http://www.redcross.tl/>
E-mail address: info@redcross.tl
Mobile: (+670) 7317 2613
- **Ema maTA Dalan ba Progressu (ETADEP)**, focusing on agricultural development:
E-mail address: etadep2000@yahoo.com
- **Forum Komunikasi Untuk Perempuan Timor Lorosae (FOKUPERS)**, focusing on eliminating domestic violence:
<https://fokupers.org/>
E-mail address: fokupers2003@yahoo.com
Tel: (+670) 332 1534
- **Fundasaun Bia Hula**, focusing on water and sanitation:
E-mail address: biahula@hotmail.com
Mobile: (+670) 7725 4564
- **Fundasaun Mahein**, focusing on the security sector:
<http://www.fundasaunmahein.org/en/>
E-mail address: direktor.mahein@gmail.com
Mobile: (+670) 7831 6075, 7751 5437
- **Haburas Foundation**, environmental advocacy:
<https://www.facebook.com/HABURAS-FOUNDATION-19152477599020/>
Tel: (+670) 331 0103
- **Judicial System and Monitoring Program (JSMP)**, focusing on justice and legal affairs:
<http://jsmp.tl/>
E-mail address: info@jsmp.tl
Tel: (+670) 332 3883
- **La'o Hamutuk, Institute Timor-Leste Institute for Development Monitoring and Analysis:**
<http://www.laohamutuk.org>
E-mail address: laohamutuk@gmail.com
Tel: (+670) 332 1040
- **Luta Hamutuk**, focusing on sustainable development:
<https://www.facebook.com/Luta-Hamutuk-Institu-te-2005-1050895585078485/>
- **Organizacao Popular Mulheres Timor (OPMT)**, women's group:
<http://opmt21.blogspot.com/>
Mobile: (+670) 7731 4141
- **Rede ba Rai**, land infrastructure advocacy:
<https://www.facebook.com/redeba.raai.7/>
E-mail address: redebarai13@gmail.com
Mobile: (+670) 7792 2648

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LOCAL NONGOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS

- **Resistência Nacional Dos Estudantes De Timor-Leste**, student organization:
<http://renetil.blogspot.com.au/>
E-mail address: renetil-sccp@yahoo.com
- **Timor Aid**, focusing on Tais research and agricultural development:
<http://www.timoraid.org/>
E-mail address: info@timoraid.org
Tel: (+670) 331 2260

INTERNATIONAL NONGOVERNMENT ORGANIZATIONS

- **Adventist Development and Relief Agency—Timor-Leste (ADRA):**
<http://adra.tl/>
E-mail address: info@adra.tl
Tel: (+670) 331 0515 | Mobile: (+670) 7734 3963
- **Care International Timor-Leste:**
<http://www.care-international.org/where-we-work/timor-leste>
E-mail address: info@care.org.au
Tel: (+670) 332 1407, 332 1411, 331 7274 |
Mobile: (+670) 7731 1807
- **Caritas Australia:**
<http://www.caritas.org.au/learn/countries/east-timor>
E-mail address: questions@caritas.org.au
Tel: (+670) 331 3669, 331 3274
- **Catholic Relief Services (CRS):**
<http://www.crs.org/countries/east-timor>
E-mail address: info@crs.org
Tel: (+670) 332 4641
- **Child Fund Timor-Leste:**
<https://www.childfund.org/timor-leste/>
E-mail address: questions@ChildFund.org
Tel: (+670) 332 3828 | Mobile: (+670) 7839 8601
- **Health Alliance International:**
<http://healthallianceinternational.org/timor-leste/>
E-mail address: hai@u.washington.edu
Tel: (+670) 332 2608 | Mobile: (+670) 7712 2612
- **Humanistisch Instituut Voor Ontwikkelingssamenwerking (HIVOS) International Timor-Leste:**
<http://www.hivos.org>
E-mail address: info@hivos.nl
Mobile: (+670) 7790 9077
- **International Committee of the Red Cross:**
<https://www.icrc.org/en/where-we-work/asia-pacific/timor-leste>
E-mail address: dil_dili@icrc.org
Tel: (+670) 331 0452 | Mobile: (+670) 7732 1648
- **International Conservation Timor-Leste:**
<https://www.conservation.org/Pages/default.aspx>
E-mail address: timor-leste@conservation.org
Tel: (+670) 331 0016
- **Instituto Marques Vale Flór:**
<http://www.imvf.org>
E-mail address: info@imvf.org
Tel: (+670) 331 0098
- **International Republican Institute:**
<http://www.iri.org>
E-mail address: info@iri.org
Tel: (+670) 332 5118 | Mobile: (+670) 7723 1841
- **Marie Stopes International Timor-Leste:**
<https://www.mariestopes.tl/>
E-mail address: mstl@mariestopestl.org
Tel: (+670) 332 2841, 332 2923 | Mobile: (+670) 7808 5472
- **Mercy Corps Timor-Leste:**
<https://www.mercycorps.org/countries/timor-leste>
Tel: (+670) 223 3841
- **Oxfam International:**
<https://www.oxfam.org/>;
<https://www.oxfam.org/en/countries/timor-leste-east-timor>
E-mail address: enquiries@oxfam.org.uk
Tel: (+670) 331 2605 | Mobile: (+670) 7723 0831
- **Plan International Timor-Leste:**
<https://plan-international.org/timor-leste>
E-mail address: info.timorleste@plan-international.org
Tel: (+670) 331 2492
- **The Asia Foundation:**
<https://asiafoundation.org/>
<https://asiafoundation.org/where-we-work/timor-leste/>
E-mail address: timorleste.general@asiafoundation.org
Tel: (+670) 331 3457
- **Union Aid Abroad (APHEDA):**
<http://apheda.org.au/>
<http://apheda.org.au/tag/timor-leste/>
E-mail address: apheda.dili@gmail.com
Mobile: (+670) 7723 2075
- **Water Aid:**
<http://www.wateraid.org>
<https://www.wateraid.org/au/where-we-work/timor-leste>
E-mail address: supportercare@wateraid.org
Tel: (+670) 332 2944
- **World Vision East Timor:**
<http://www.wvi.org/timor-leste>
E-mail address: asiapacific@wvi.org
Tel: (+670) 331 2830

Government–Civil Society Relations

Government and civil society in Timor-Leste regularly engage on a range of issues. Civil society has been forthright in its criticism of government, particularly around issues such as petroleum funds, the national budget, media regulation, and justice. Civil society actors have emphasized the need to diversify the economy and reduce dependence on the petroleum fund.¹³ The government's Strategic Development Plan (2011–2030), however, addresses this concern by investing petroleum revenues in building a viable, modern non-oil economy that can generate higher income, while reducing overwhelming dependence on the petroleum sector. A growing concern is that current expenditure levels are not sustainable, and that the pattern of expenditure may not support the transition to a non-oil economy.

Civil society has raised issues about the separation of powers between the state and the judiciary after the government revoked the visas of a number of international judges, prosecutors, and an advisor to the Anti-Corruption Commission.¹⁴ Civil society also raised concerns about proposed new media laws, which were found to be unconstitutional.¹⁵ A modified Media Act was passed in 2014, although it still contained provisions of concern to journalist advocacy groups.¹⁶

The multilingual nature of Timor-Leste society has impeded aspects of government–civil society relations. The fact that some government publications are produced foremost in Portuguese (in lieu of Tetum), plus the decision not to include Bahasa Indonesia as a co-official language (although it is a “working language”), has divided elements of civil society and government. Women's groups have argued that this makes it difficult for them to analyze draft laws.¹⁷ FONGTIL has campaigned for draft laws to be produced simultaneously in Tetum and Portuguese, arguing that draft laws produced solely in Portuguese or with a delayed draft in Tetum, is a disservice to democracy.¹⁸ Others have characterized a generational divide between the younger, educated, and Bahasa-speaking activists of some civil society groups and the older Portuguese-speaking members of the government (known as the “1975 generation”).¹⁹ Although approximately only 10% of the population speaks Portuguese fluently, the government's engagement with civil society has often been in Portuguese. Some meetings with civil society have taken place in Portuguese, which few understand, with translation into Tetum. The younger, Bahasa-speaking generation and the Tetum-speaking activists have found it difficult to engage with the government due to a perceived government preference for using Portuguese.

▲ **Continuous progress.** To sustain the country's progress on poverty reduction, Timor-Leste must find ways to strategically finance emerging industries and skilled human resources.

The country has been transitioning from a post-conflict state to a developing state in consultation with civil society. First, the government launched a national Strategic Development Plan 2011–2030, which they prepared in a highly participatory manner, including a series of public consultations on the draft plan in all 13 districts and 65 subdistricts across the country.²⁰

Following the 2012 elections, the National Political Consensus policy has increasingly included civil society voices as they contribute at a national level through ministries and through state bodies increasingly partnering with CSOs. The program of the Sixth Constitutional Government, which took effect in February 2015, explicitly recognized the role of civil society. It had a clear commitment to work with civil society to promote national inclusiveness, unity, democratic values and to safeguard the national interest. The Sixth Constitutional Government also addressed the country's multilingual nature that affected government–civil society relations and committed the administration to “use simple language in order to continue to promote dialogue with civil society and to enable public consultation during law-making.”²¹ In addition, it acknowledged the contribution of civil society over the last few years in the process of state building and in strengthening the country's democracy.

The March 2017 Aid Management Effectiveness Policy specifically recognizes the role of civil society and encourages development partners to leverage the knowledge and skills of local CSOs and NGOs. The Government of Timor-Leste has led public consultations on large government projects and important legislation through the National Program for

Village Development (PNDS) program, the Special Zones of Social Market Economy of Timor-Leste (ZEESM) in Oecusse, the Land Law, and the Plan to Develop and Integrate the Districts (PDID) under the Ministry of State Administration. The Ministry of Agriculture has established Conselho Nacional Seguransa Aihan no Nutrisaun (CONSANTIL), which is a mechanism to ensure civil society input into the ministry's plans.

CSOs regularly contribute to parliamentary or governmental committees. FONGTIL co-chairs the Civil Society Advisory Committee, established in 2011, under the United Nations (UN) Integrated Mission in Timor-Leste. The Commission for Anti-Corruption has quarterly meetings with FONGTIL as a cooperation mechanism. FONGTIL also reports that “[i]t is increasingly becoming a norm [for government] to consult with FONGTIL and CSOs on crucial policy debates in the country” (endnote 18). In the water, sanitation, and hygiene sector, a cross civil society-government network called PN BESI-TL (Plataforma Nacional ba Bee, Saneamentu, Ijiene Timor-Leste or National Platform for Water, Sanitation, Hygiene of Timor-Leste) is a network and quasi-umbrella association of WASH NGOs. Other active NGO networks include Rede ba Rai (land network), Rede Feto Timor-Leste (women's network), HASATIL (Organizasaun Hadomi Agricultura Sustentavel Timor-Leste or Sustainable Agriculture CSO Network), Core Group Transparency and the Timor-Leste Education Coalition. Other examples of government networks or organs with civil society involvement include the National Network for Conflict Prevention, convened by the Secretary of State for Security and which has several CSO representatives; the Petroleum Fund Consultative Council, which includes two CSO members; and the Superior Council on Defence and Security, which has Fundasaun Mahein as a member.

The Office of the Prime Minister established a multimillion-dollar Fund for CSOs to increase the capacity of CSOs to partner with government in development.²² In 2011, 135 CSOs across all 13 districts received support through this fund, including FONGTIL. In 2013, 67 CSOs received funding; in 2014, 78; and in 2016, 49 CSOs. On 30 March 2017, the government announced a further tranche of funding from the fund; 43 CSO applications were in the second stage of consideration for funding.²³

Around this same period, civil society expressed concern that the consultations on the new constitution were cursory and the time frame too short (endnote 1). They made similar criticism of the release of the first draft of the National Development Plan (endnote 1).

▲ **Vocational training.** The Claretian Training Center in Salele is one of the civil society organizations engaged by the government to conduct vocational skills training for the youth in Timor-Leste.

Similarly, some civil society actors worried that the consultation over the process of registration of NGOs under the Ministry of Justice was not adequate (endnote 19).

In the lead-up to independence in 2001–2002, civil society engaged in forming the new state and framing the constitution. NGO representatives on the UN-established National Council argued for consultation with the people in the drafting of the new constitution (endnote 1). A “countrywide consultation with civil society” involved close to 1,000 meetings with almost 40,000 participants (endnote 1). Civil society also participated in the National Planning Commission (endnote 8). The 2002 National Development Plan explicitly recognized the role of civil society in Timor-Leste’s development, particularly in service delivery and monitoring of the implementation of the plan (endnote 8).

In summary, civil society works with the government at three levels: (i) upstream: influencing government policy as it is formulated; (ii) midstream: working with government on policy and specific draft legislation; and (iii) downstream: urging presidential veto of laws already passed by Parliament (endnote 2). CSOs also implement projects and activities with and for the government. More recently, CSOs have been active in monitoring and auditing government projects.

Examples of civil society influencing government policy as it is formulated include the Ministry of Education disseminating a draft primary school policy to civil society for comment in 2013. In addition, research conducted by Belun in 2012 formed the basis for government pilot projects on mother tongue use in education in Lautem, Manatuto, and Oekusi Districts. In addition, FOKUPERS actively advocated for the Law Against Domestic Violence, which was passed in 2010.

Civil society has also worked with government at the second level, on specific legislation; the Land Law is a prominent example. In 2011, the Minister of Justice led a public consultation with civil society. As a result, the draft law was amended to include the civil society advocacy points on evictions and ensuring a clear distinction between state-owned and community-owned land, although some CSOs were critical of the government's consultative processes.

Examples of civil society action that has promoted the use of the presidential veto include private legal training and, most notably, the package of land bills passed by Parliament in February 2012. The President vetoed it the following month, citing the lack of civil society support as the reason (endnote 2).

The government has also promoted civil society's involvement in social audits, where the beneficiaries of public funds participate in evaluating projects, policy, and implementation. Civil society is expected to play a key role in the social audit process, with the government working with civil society on social audits in the health, agriculture, infrastructure, and education sectors. The Office of the Prime Minister held a National Conference on Social Audit with a number of national NGOs in October 2016, following the signing of a memorandum of understanding between FONGTIL and the government on social audits.²⁴ The Social Audit aims to ensure that all citizens have access to accurate and up-to-date information. It also works with the government so that the development process is efficient, transparent, and involves public participation. In 2017, The Asia Foundation and FONGTIL jointly produced a guide to conducting social audits.

Civil society is also independently active in monitoring and auditing government projects and expenditure. For example, the NGO Luta Hamutuk has a budget transparency division and a community networking initiative. In its monitoring work, it engages the local community to monitor government investments in the community. It has identified, developed, and trained a network of 294 focal points across Timor-Leste. Belun monitors conflict across Timor-Leste through its Early Warning, Early Response program.

▲ **Consultations on road design.** Consultation with Liquica community leaders and local police yielded information on what local people wanted from the new road and how it could be designed with their needs in mind.

The Legal Framework for Civil Society

Civil Society Registration

During the emergency period, FONGTIL handled NGO registration. In 2005, *Decree Law 5/2005 On Non-Profit-Making Corporate Bodies* was passed. Under this law, nonprofit bodies that received state or donor funds would be subject to oversight by the Ministry of Planning and Finance (endnote 1). However, until 2012, an extra-legal administrative guideline of the Ministry of Justice required that NGOs and nonprofit organizations have \$45,000 in capital to be able to register—a prohibitive sum for many local organizations. Many organizations simply registered with FONGTIL and not with the government; thus, these organizations did not have formal legal recognition. FONGTIL campaigned throughout 2010–2011 to have this requirement removed, which was achieved in 2012. More CSOs are likely to register as nonprofit bodies under Decree Law 5/2005 (endnote 18).

Tax Treatment of Civil Society Organizations

CSOs in Timor-Leste must pay a range of taxes, including wage income tax for employees. In addition, they must pay a withholding tax for payment of rent (10%), construction and building activities (2%), payments for construction consulting services (4%) and payments to nonresident consultants (10%).²⁵ Each registered NGO has a taxpayer identification number and the Government of Timor-Leste reissued them all in 2013.

Umbrella and Coordinating Bodies

The **Forum ONG Timor-Leste (FONGTIL)** is the umbrella group for nongovernment organizations (NGOs) in Timor-Leste. In 2018, it had 348 members: 324 local NGO members and 44 international. Its mission is to promote and advocate in all sectors for the well-being and interests of all Timorese citizens; work toward ensuring that the people of Timor-Leste are free from all forms of injustice, including poverty, exploitation, and discrimination; have the opportunity to participate openly and freely in the political and democratic decision-making process; and strengthen the NGO sector to be an effective voice for all Timorese citizens, especially the most vulnerable members of the community.²⁶

Contact details:

Forum ONG Timor-Leste
Rua do Mercado
Municipal Dili
Timor-Leste

Tel: (+670) 332 1005
Mobile: (+670) 7742 2821 or 7723 6782 or 7756 0005
E-mail: info@fongtil.org or forumngo.tls@gmail.com
Facebook page: <https://www.facebook.com/FONGTIL-160943704014801/>

Rede Feto Timor-Leste is an umbrella organization for women's organizations established on 10 March 2000. The network promotes gender equality and women's empowerment by supporting its 22 members through advocacy, networking, and capacity building.²⁷

Contact details:

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The **Conselho Nacional Juventude Timor Lorosae** is the umbrella organization for youth civil society organizations of Timor-Leste.

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Civil Society Directories

Belun maintains a database of CSOs active in community development and the humanitarian sector in Timor-Leste. Its National Database Program provides regular updates on members of civil society groups and organizations, with contact details. The database is available at <http://projetutlbelun.wordpress.com/>.

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Civil Society Capacity

Improving civil society capacity in Timor-Leste has been a focus of numerous local and international development efforts for some years. As a result, today in Timor-Leste, a number of reliable, robust, and credible CSOs work both independently and with development partners. The capacity of Timor-Leste CSOs has increased since the restoration of independence, particularly among Dili-based CSOs, but major sustainability and operational challenges remain for the civil society sector in Timor-Leste as donor funds tighten.

CSOs in Timor-Leste rely on donor and government funding. As international donor funding has decreased post-2008 and several international NGOs and development partners have withdrawn or downsized, the government has increased the funds available to CSOs.

The Government of Timor-Leste supports local CSOs through the Fund for CSOs, along with other ad hoc small grants through line ministries. The Fund for CSOs directs about 80% of funding to church and religious groups, and 20% to nonreligious organizations. Grants range in size from \$30,000 to \$500,000. Some in the NGO sector worry that this funding compromises the sector's ability to openly criticize government. Some national NGOs have decided not to apply for funding to remain independent.

One of the key challenges raised by local CSOs in Timor-Leste is the need for multiyear and operational funding, or core nonproject funding; project-based and short-term funding does not allow CSOs to operationally plan for a long-term program of activities. The Australian government currently provides longer-term funding for Australia-based CSOs, which then, through a partnership model, fund locally based CSOs. This is one of a limited number of opportunities for core, multiyear funding for locally based CSOs.

Local CSOs have limited experience in development processes in Timor-Leste's short history of independence. Several stakeholders noted that some NGOs had formed specifically to meet donor needs and were not driven by community needs.²⁸ Some CSOs were found to be preoccupied with their relationships with donors, with scant attention paid to their relationships with their communities or the government. Further, studies noted that aid was concentrated in Dili and most international CSOs implemented their own programs without engaging or supporting local CSOs (endnote 22). While there had been some capacity building of local CSOs, this tended to focus on project skills and reporting requirements, while local CSOs expressed the need for support in the areas of organizational development and building sustainable capacity (endnote 22).

A significant concern for the sustainability of civil society in Timor-Leste, particularly donor-funded NGOs, is the degree to which donor agendas—as opposed to the local mandate of the NGO—drive the program of work of the NGO. Economic forces play a role as well. There is the concern that some members see the NGO as a source of personal income, which also affects the long-term sustainability of these organizations.²⁹ It has been noted that some NGOs are trapped in a cycle of project funding, making it difficult for them to plan sustainably.

Cultural approaches to the roles of women have tended to restrict women from fully participating in civil society (and public society in general) (endnote 17), resulting in women being underrepresented in the CSO sector.

▲ **Faith groups.** The Government of Timor-Leste's Fund for CSOs directs about 80% of funding to church and religious groups, and 20% to nonreligious organizations.

It has been noted that in many CSOs, women hold financial positions, but men mostly occupy leadership roles.³⁰ However, women's organizations are active in Timor-Leste in a range of areas and have been involved in policy issues, such as the campaign for a law against domestic violence.

The 2018 European Union Roadmap for Engagement with Civil Society in Timor-Leste notes that civil society capacity has grown notably since 2008.³¹ However, a CSO's capacity to implement projects typically still exceeds its internal governance systems. Also, it notes that Timorese CSOs have a wide range of capacities that vary based on the age of the organization, support it has received in the past, and continuity of staff. The report also states that a number of CSOs have shifted their advocacy approach to a more dialogue-focused and partnership-oriented approach.

Within this context, CSO staff need to continue to develop the relevant skills to administer projects and manage nonprofit institutions. Despite a lack of financial security, many CSOs have survived on a series of short-term projects. Over the longer term, however, CSOs must continue to increase their effectiveness as representatives to their constituencies and remain relevant partners to international organizations and donors. As a more decentralized government develops, CSOs should be able to expand their effectiveness by enhancing the interchange and dissemination of information, accelerating community coordination and participation—from the most basic to the highest level and vice versa.³²

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