

Joint Statement for Inclusive Development Towards Prosperous and Strong Timor-Leste

Submitted to the President of Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste

Dili, 7 September 2023

Dear President José Ramos-Horta,

We, the undersigned of 14 civil society organizations in Timor-Leste under the **Coalition of Civil Society and Governance in Timor-Leste (CSG-TL)** representing marginalized groups such as People with Disabilities (PwDs), survivors and victims of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV), Youth, and People with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC), come together to express our collective commitment to advancing inclusive development in our nation. Inclusive development is not merely an economic imperative; it is a moral and ethical obligation that ensures all citizens have equal opportunities to prosper and contribute to the well-being of our society.

We record the current status of marginalized groups in Timor-Leste:

- People with Disabilities (PwDs):
 - According to the 2015 census, 38,000 people (3.2% of the population) had a disability¹. The Demographic and Health Survey analysis on youth, conducted in 2018, found that the most prevalent difficulty for both men and women with disabilities concerned vision, followed by difficulties walking. The most common disability among children and young people aged 0-19 was mobility impairments.
 - The Government of Timor-Leste has ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) in 2011, which signalled its commitment to protecting the rights and improving the welfare of people with disabilities. And in 2019, the Government undertook an intensive, participatory and inclusive process to develop the Disability National Action Plan (DNAP) for 2021-2030) across eleven line-ministries.
 - Despite the ratification of CRPD and the establishment of DNAP, people with disabilities in Timor-Leste faced numerous challenges, including limited access to public services including public transportation; justice system; political space; basic and higher education; healthcare, rehabilitation and referrals to other services; economic empowerment and small business activities; employment opportunities; and social services. Stigma and discrimination against individuals with disabilities were also prevalent in society.
 - The Coalition of Civil Society and Governance in Timor-Leste (CSG-TL) since 2021 has contributed to the improvement condition of people with disabilities by:
 - Providing the first time, training of computer with specific software Non-Visual Disability Access (NVDA) for 36 people on September 2023, in which 6 of the alumnae now become the trainers to continue the training.
 - Providing the first time, training on Prevention Gender Based Violence for 12 people of Communication Disability (Deaf People) on August 2023 and still continue until now.
 - Developing module of computer training on word basic, using braille language.
 - Developing sign language video tutorial on prevention Gender Based Violence.
 - Plan to reaching out to more than 300 people with visual and communication disabilities on 2024.
- Survivors and victims of Sexual and Gender-Based Violence (SGBV)
 - In 2021, Timor-Leste ranks 128th out of 187 countries on the UN Gender Inequality Index (GII)
 - In Timor-Leste, SGBV is the largest category of crimes reported to police, with 59% of ever-partnered women aged 15-19 experiencing intimate partner violence at least once in their lifetime². However, this figure only represents a fraction of real cases, as most instances of

¹Timor-Leste Disability Sector's Joint Submission on the Progress and Challenges on Disability Inclusive Development in Timor-Leste. Universal Periodic Review Report for 2021.

²The Nabilan Health and Life Experiences Study. Asia Foundation and Australian Aid. 2015. Online at: <https://asiafoundation.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/eng-FS4-2016-05-04-screen.pdf>

domestic violence are dealt with informally and never reported to law enforcement due to stigma, fear, and a lack of awareness about available support services. The underreporting of SGBV incidents makes it difficult to assess the full extent of the problem.

- Not only impacting to survivors of violence and their families, but SGBV also entails significant social and economic costs, including the potential of children growing up with violence are more likely to become survivors themselves or perpetrators of violence in the future.
 - Timor-Leste has established a legal framework to address SGBV, including laws and policies that criminalize such acts. Notably, the country ratified the Convention on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW) in 2003, Child Rights Convention 2005 and Child Protection Act 2022, and passed the Law Against Domestic Violence in 2010.
 - The Coalition of Civil Society and Governance in Timor-Leste (CSG-TL) since 2021 has contributed to the improvement condition of survivors and victims of SGBV by:
 - Produced research document on Reinforce the implementation of the Law Against Domestic Violence – Law No.7/2010
 - Encouraging survivors of GBV to become dynamicators (*dinamizadora*) in 4 districts (Baucau, Ainaro, Dili, and Viqueque), it was recorded that up to this September there were 27 women *dinamizadora*, who are more empowered to invite women in the villages to form women's groups based on economic empowerment and also be more vocal in being able to convey their aspirations and needs to the village head in an effort to access government subsidy assistance.
 - Setting up the first child care and playground for the children of victims of violence during their parent's complaints about cases of violence at the legal aid agency, ALFela So far, more than 175 children have received child-friendly services and assistance to unravel their traumatic experience of violence.
 - Encouraging dissemination of prevention of gender-based violence in 4 districts Baucau, Ainaro, Dili, and Viqueque and has influenced at least 389 women and men at the grassroots to build families without violence and promote harmonious communities.
- Youth
 - Timor-Leste has one of the youngest populations in the world, with an estimated 42 per cent below the age of 18 in 2022. The population below age 25 accounts for 57 per cent of the total population, and its working age population is growing faster than the overall population.
 - Across geographies, school dropouts and youth unemployment have been shown to decrease GDP by up to 34 per cent
 - A UNFPA study on teenage pregnancies and early marriages in Timor-Leste found that 19 per cent of young women aged (20-24) are married before they are 18 years while 24 per cent are already with a child by the time they turn 20.³
 - Over time, the country has set up mechanisms to facilitate their participation in decision making and to promote civic engagement. They include a system of youth representatives: one female and one male aged 17–30 per suco, or village, at the administrative post level; youth centres at the municipal level; and a Youth Parliament at the national level. The Youth Parliament meets in Dili once a year, and promotes local engagement of its 132 members – one female and one male aged 12–17 from each administrative post, and one girl and one boy living with disabilities
 - These efforts, however, have not yet translated into meaningful participation. As per the 2016 National Youth Policy, youth civic engagement and participation is not yet strong in community activities and their participation is also not strong in the areas that most affect their daily lives, such as education and health.

³ Cummins, Deborah. Teenage Pregnancy And Early Marriage In Timor-Leste: Research On The Decision-Making Pathways Of Young Women In The Municipalities Of Covalima, Aileu And Dili. UNFPA. Dili, Timor-Leste. May 2017. Online at https://timor-leste.unfpa.org/sites/default/files/pub-pdf/TPM%20REPORT_ENGLISH_LOW%20DEF%20-%2048%20pages.pdf

- Lack of voice and influence may not only result in the needs of adolescents and youth being overlooked, it also presents risks to social cohesion and, over the long term, may fuel unrest and violence.
- The Coalition of Civil Society and Governance in Timor-Leste (CSG-TL) since 2021 has contributed to the improvement condition of youth by:
 - Building creative approaches and digital-based campaigns that are able to engage the enthusiasm of at least 85 youths and 165 junior high school-aged students in Dili and its surroundings for the prevention of bullying and violence in the school environment.
 - Providing computer training to 45 unemployed youth, 29 of whom are women survivors of violence, to create resumes, CVs, and administrative skills. 23 of the 40 people trained had interned in various government and non-governmental organization offices. In fact, five of them were immediately accepted to work as apprentices with compensation fee of USD 50 from May to September 2023.
- People with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC)
 - Timor-Leste does not have laws explicitly criminalizing same-sex sexual activity. Additionally, the country's constitution contains provisions that promote equality and non-discrimination, which can be interpreted to include protection for LGBTQ+ individuals.
 - There have been efforts to address discrimination based on sexual orientation and gender identity in Timor-Leste. LGBTQ+ activists and organizations have advocated for legal protections against discrimination, and some progress has been made in this regard.
 - Despite some progress, significant challenges persist. Stigma, discrimination, and social exclusion of LGBTQ+ individuals are still prevalent in some parts of society. Coming out as LGBTQ+ can be challenging, as it may lead to rejection by family or community members.
 - Cultural and Religious Factors can influence societal attitudes toward LGBTQ+ individuals. These factors can pose challenges to full acceptance and inclusion.
 - The Coalition of Civil Society and Governance in Timor-Leste (CSG-TL) since 2021 has contributed to the improvement condition of People with diverse sexual orientation, gender identity, expression, and sex characteristics (SOGIESC) by:
 - Encouraging dissemination of prevention of stigma and discrimination in Dili and its surroundings and has influenced more than 100 people who have become aware of gender diversity and sexual orientation.

With the current status, we, as civil society organizations, envision the future of an inclusive development where:

1. Economic Opportunities Are Equitably Distributed: We believe in creating an environment where economic opportunities are accessible to every citizen, regardless of their background, socioeconomic status, or geographic location. This includes policies and programs that encourage entrepreneurship, vocational training, and access to capital for underserved communities. Transparency and accountability supported by strong good governance should become the basis inclusive development where priorities for economic development focuses on social sectors such as education, health, water and sanitation.

2. Quality Education Is Accessible to All: Inclusive development requires that (basic and higher) education is not a privilege but a fundamental right. We advocate for policies that promote affordable and high-quality education from early childhood to higher education, ensuring that no one is left behind. This include ensuring accessibility in all schools, and develop an integrated program, collaborating with Disability People Organizations (DPOs) and the Deaf Association, to support teachers learning basic sign language and braille, especially when their schools or classes have deaf or vision impaired students.

3. Healthcare Is Universal and Affordable: Access to quality healthcare is a cornerstone of inclusive development. We urge the government to prioritize the establishment of a comprehensive and affordable healthcare system that leaves no one without access to essential medical services. This include providing information on the annual budget allocation for DNAP implementation, percentage of the overall health budget allocated for disability specific services such as through Saúde na Família and mental health program and mainstreaming of disability inclusive health into Ministry of Health overall program. Consider budget allocation for the implementation of services included in the comprehensive service package for Primary

Health Care and ensure coordination and collaboration with DPOs and relevant partners of the community-based rehabilitation component. More important, to amend/altering the terminology used in the Decree-Law no. 19/2008 of 19 June 2008 regarding Support Allowance for the Elderly and Persons with Disabilities as 'invalidus' to 'people with disability', and revise the minimum age of disabled citizen to receive support allowance from 18 years old to since birth.

4. Environmental Sustainability: Inclusive development cannot be achieved without protecting our natural environment. We encourage sustainable practices that safeguard our environment for current and future generations. We need to focus investment in productive sector such as agriculture, tourism, blue economy, processing food industry and manufacturing as part of economic diversification with respect to the environment. Dependency from oil and gas sector using government's petroleum fund around 90% annually to state budget will lead to fiscal cliff in approximately 10 years from now.

5. Diverse Voices Are Heard and Valued: We must promote diversity, equity, and inclusion in all aspects of our society. It is imperative that the voices of marginalized groups, including minorities, women, and the LGBTQ+ community, are heard, respected, and included in decision-making processes.

6. Make justice closer for the marginalized and vulnerable: The lack of understanding on violence against women and children with disability which prevents them to access legal and justice services. Therefore, ensuring the integration of disability rights in new National Action Plan on Gender Based Violence is crucial. Sufficient budget allocation for the implementation of DNAP 2021-2030 through the secretary of estate of Gender Equality and Inclusion and the Ministry of Justice is necessary. Capacity building for the Justice Sector on disability inclusion, including accessible information/process such as having a sign language interpreter in the court and accessible information in the judicial system is a must. And ensuring accessible process for all to recognize evidenced provided by witnesses with vision impairment or deaf persons (not consider the evidence invalid on the ground of their disabilities), or women victims of SGBV is important.

7. Collaboration Across Sectors: Achieving inclusive development requires collaboration among government agencies, civil society organizations, businesses, and communities. We pledge to work together to develop and implement policies and initiatives that advance our shared vision.

As organizations committed to inclusive development, we respectfully request that your administration prioritize the principles outlined in this joint statement. We offer our expertise, resources, and support to work collaboratively towards building a more equitable and prosperous nation for all.

We look forward to engaging in a constructive dialogue with your administration to turn these principles into actionable policies that will shape the future of our country.

Sincerely,

Signatory (in alphabetical order)

1. Asisténsia Legál Feto no Labarik (ALFeLa)
2. Associacaon Chega Ba Ita (ACBIT)
3. Associação Halibur Deficiência Matan Timor Leste (AHDMTL)
4. Arcoiris Timor-Leste
5. Casa Vida
6. Foin Sa'e Unidade Dezenvolve Futuru (FUNDEF)
7. Forum Komunikasaun ba Feto Timor-Leste (Fokupers)
8. Judicial System Monitoring Program (JSMP)
9. La'ó Hamutuk
10. Klibur Defisiensia Tilun Timor-Leste (KDT-TL)
11. Mane Ho Visaun Foun (MHVF)
12. Psychosocial Recovery & Development in East Timor (PRADET)
13. Ra'es Hadomi Timor Oan (RHTO)
14. Yayasan Humanis dan Inovasi Sosial (Affiliated with Hivos)