

Participation in Timor-Leste

An investment opportunity for private and public donors

unicef 
for every child

The opportunity

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.

A young population of this magnitude represents an enormous opportunity to transform economic and social outcomes for the country, raising productivity and reducing inequality, if investments are made to ensure young people thrive.

The evidence is clear – investing in children and young people can yield high returns to society, individuals and the private sector. Across education and employment interventions, there is a social return of 2–5 times on investments in young people. The social costs of not investing are just as high. Across geographies, school dropouts and youth unemployment have been shown to decrease GDP by up to 34 per cent. Young people experience personal returns when others invest in their success, in the form of lifetime earnings, life expectancy and well-being. The personal return on investment for each additional year of secondary education is 16 per cent per year. Private sector actors who invest in young people can also achieve benefits. Investing in training of young people can increase employee productivity, with returns up to 200 per cent on funds invested.

Young people in Timor-Leste represent a demographic dividend and are more educated, more connected and more innovative than any generation before them. From climate action to the COVID-19 response, young people are demonstrating their potential and are leading the way in shaping a vision for a more sustainable, inclusive and resilient future.

UNICEF believes in the power of young people as innovators to transform the world and aims to promote avenues for young people's participation in all levels of decision making, encouraging youth-led innovations and solutions to national and local challenges, and empowering them with

information and opportunities for participation so they can demand their rights and drive positive action. Importantly, empowering young people will also help sustain peace, as well as promote equitable economic growth and increased social cohesion.

Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 16: Peace, justice and strong institutions

UNICEF's participation programme contributes to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goal 16 – peace, justice and strong institutions. It promotes peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, and accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.



The challenges

The role that youth can play, and their centrality for development, democracy and social cohesion, is well recognized in Timor-Leste. 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. Some youth organizations also exist, including the Timor-Leste National Youth Council and the Alumni Association of the Youth Parliament, as well as informal youth groups.

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.”

The policy further states that “Suco Council youth members do not seem to have knowledge about their tasks and responsibilities as youth representatives in the Suco Councils. At the same time, Council Leadership resists the active engagement of young people in the decision-making process.” Limited participation of youth in local planning is compounded by top-down decision-making processes.¹ The survey of 850 adolescents carried out during a UNICEF-led situation analysis further showed that while 74 per cent felt their voice was heard in the family, only 44 per cent felt heard in the community and 28 per cent nationally.

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. As per the United Nations Common Country Assessment, if youth “are not given space to participate politically and in civic life, and do not start to see jobs and tangible benefits of the petroleum fund, they may resent the growing inequalities between rural and urban or other segments of society”.



¹ Timor-Leste common country analysis, 2019, United Nations Country Team.

The solutions

UNICEF will drive change in two key areas that currently limit the meaningful participation of Timorese children in society.

① Empower children, adolescents and youth to demand their rights and act as agents of positive change on social, economic and climate issues

UNICEF will raise awareness of children's rights among children, adolescents and youth and will build their capacity to organize, speak up and influence others. In close collaboration with the national child rights institute INDDICA, UNICEF will produce child-friendly material on children's rights, adapted to the Timorese context, and will disseminate them with a focus on reaching those most left behind. UNICEF will also support greater access to information and platforms for engagement for children, adolescents and youth, partnering with national media, in particular radio and television, to facilitate access and develop child-focused programmes.

Programmes with and for adolescents will be co-created to inspire adolescents and youth to drive change. This will include capacity building on a range of skills and topics, such as life skills, data literacy, multimedia skills and advocacy, gender equality and climate change, to be defined and co-designed by adolescents and youth. These will be implemented, to the extent possible, through existing mechanisms such as the suco-level youth representatives, the municipal level youth centres and the national Youth Parliament, to strengthen existing government platforms. Other stakeholders' adolescent and youth programmes, including through religious institutions, will also be leveraged to achieve significant coverage. UNICEF will build on existing initiatives supporting youth innovation, in partnership with United Nations agencies and civil society organizations, and help support coordination between young people through already existing platforms such as the Hamutuk Ita Rezolve online platform.

② Increase the capacity of key actors, including opinion leaders, donors, the private sector, the media and youth to raise the profile of and drive action on children's issues

UNICEF will focus on advocacy, leveraging and partnerships, including with INDDICA, to drive action that will provide an enabling environment for the realization of child rights, through budget allocations, policies and plans. UNICEF will also drive awareness on the situation and needs of Timorese children and inspire decision makers, influencers and the public to support change that benefits children. UNICEF will expand its collaboration with opinion leaders, including religious figures and youth advocates, to gain greater visibility for children's issues and influence action for the most disadvantaged. The private sector will be an important partner, and UNICEF will reach out to the business community in their capacity as influencers of economic and political life, but also as duty bearers encouraged to assess their impact on children's rights.

Partnerships with the media will be expanded, with increased focus on television. UNICEF will also consolidate its presence on social media, through collaboration with influencers including artists and athletes. UNICEF will continue to organize real-life events to draw attention to children's issues and highlight achievements supported by donors, building on innovative formulas such as the UNICEF cafés.



Impact

By 2025, working with partners in the public and private sectors, UNICEF in Timor-Leste will contribute to the achievement of these key results:



Three municipalities have functioning mechanisms for child/adolescent and/or community participation in local planning, budgeting and monitoring processes



1,500 (800 girls and 700 boys) have completed a **skills development programme**



2,500 adolescents have been reached through **offline events, initiatives and child participation in media**



100 high-profile individuals publicly support and amplify UNICEF advocacy messages and initiatives



10 priority advocacy issues are promoted with business and business stakeholders



2,500 adolescents and youth have participated in or led **civic engagement initiatives**





Young people at the forefront of flood-recovery efforts in Timor-Leste

Heavy rains and winds lashed much of Timor-Leste on the first weekend of April 2021. This caused the worst flooding in 40 years, washing away or damaging roads and bridges, houses, schools and other buildings and causing landslides.

Despite being directly affected themselves, adolescents and youth mobilized and were spurred to action to help their communities. In Dili alone, youth groups have cleaned 68 houses of dirt and debris and have provided 246 households with some form of humanitarian assistance.

“With support from my parents, I joined this effort to help affected communities, and it taught me a lot on how to be empathetic and help those families who lost their houses. Through this work, I can see their situation,” said 17-year-old, Ernizia.

One of the vice-coordinators of the youth action network ‘Youth Action Posku’, Zaulino Gomes da Silva, explained that Youth Action Posku was established within two days of the devastating floods by the Secretary State for Youth and Sport to help coordinate flood response efforts by youth.

“The intention was to set up a coordinated approach to supporting families who were badly affected by the flood to recover, return home and continue their daily activities,” said Gomes da Silva.

UNICEF has supported the Youth Action Posku with various supplies, including personal protective equipment against COVID-19, cleaning kits to enable the youth to help vulnerable families with the clean-up, and non-food items for at least 100 vulnerable families, including toys, children’s clothing and hygiene products.

“The help of the young people has meant a lot. We would not be able to clean up all of this on our own. They have lightened our suffering,” said Antoninho, a resident who was helped by the volunteers.

Youth Action Posku has been so successful in coordinating civic action by youth that the Secretary State for Youth and Sport is now planning to continue the initiative, not just for flood response, but also on other civic actions in which youth could support the government.

We hope you are inspired to join us and take a leading role in empowering young people in Timor-Leste. If you have any questions or would like more details, please contact:

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