

STRENGTHENING  
**CIVIL SOCIETY**  
GLOBALLY



# 2020 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

TIMOR-LESTE  
SEPTEMBER 2021



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# 2020 CIVIL SOCIETY ORGANIZATION SUSTAINABILITY INDEX

For Timor-Leste

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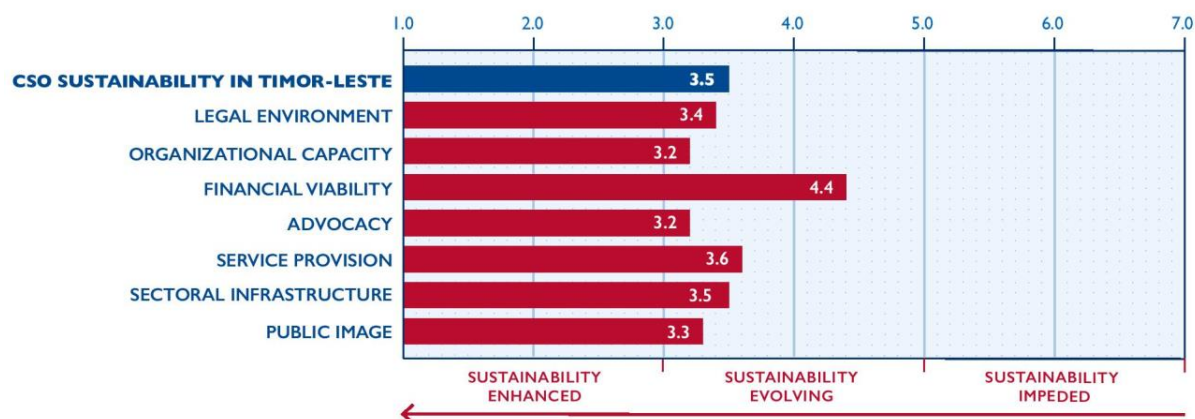
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# TIMOR-LESTE

Capital: Dili  
Population: 1,413,958  
GDP per capita (PPP): \$3,553  
Human Development Index: Medium (0.606)  
Freedom in the World: Free (72/100)

## OVERALL CSO SUSTAINABILITY: 3.5



Timor-Leste faced continuing political instability in 2020 and, with the rest of the globe, significant challenges due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conflict within the national parliament and the ruling coalition continued in 2020, ultimately resulting in the breakdown of the governing coalition and changes in the leadership of the national parliament. In October and December 2019, the parliament rejected the 2020 budget, leaving the government of Timor-Leste (GoTL) without an approved budget for the fiscal year. The governing coalition had not yet approved a state budget by February 2020, creating a political crisis that only worsened when the National Congress for the Reconstruction of Timor-Leste (CNRT) abstained from voting on the bill. As a result, the prime minister offered his resignation on February 25, 2020, before withdrawing it in April to tackle the pandemic. The coalition ultimately recruited one of Timor-Leste's largest and oldest parties as its newest member in May 2020, while CNRT became an opposition party. The government was therefore able to remain in office but did not have an approved state budget until October 2020. As a result, a number of CSO grants previously approved by the government were delayed, and money transfers or payments were postponed to the following fiscal year.

In March 2020, GoTL declared a state of emergency in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The state of emergency, which remained in place through the end of the year, closed national borders, prohibited events and large gatherings, limited transportation, and mandated social distancing and quarantine procedures. To mitigate the economic effects of the pandemic, GoTL provided food baskets and cash transfers for every household with a monthly income below \$500. The government also covered 60 percent of the salaries of CSO and private sector staff that had social security identification numbers (Número Identificado Segurança Social, NIS), with the Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion (MSSI).

CSOs were forced to adapt to the ongoing situation. Most CSOs focused their efforts on collaborating with the government to prevent the spread of the virus rather than attempting to continue their usual activities, which were largely put on hold. In addition to COVID-19 prevention and mitigation, CSOs monitored government interventions in both urban and rural communities, including the financial assistance provided through the government subsidy program.

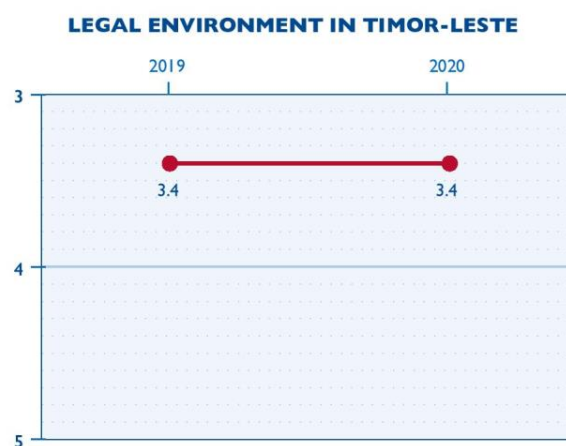
The overall sustainability of CSOs in Timor-Leste remained unchanged in 2020, despite the challenges posed by COVID-19 and political instability, and scores for all dimensions remained stable. Organizational capacity and advocacy remain the two strongest dimensions of CSO sustainability, as CSOs proved resilient and responsive to the immediate needs of the public and the government continued to see them as active partners in development. CSOs' service provision pivoted to COVID-19 prevention and emergency support, and the public image of CSOs remained positive. Though COVID-19 restrictions limited the availability of training sessions and in-person activities, CSO networks increased their effectiveness, particularly in supporting government relief efforts and disseminating information and assistance around COVID-19. CSO registration saw delays and obstacles in 2020,

but the legal environment remained unchanged as a whole. Financial viability remains the worst performing dimension of CSO sustainability; a newly announced government commitment to support CSOs every year was offset by the lack of an approved budget for 2020 and extensive delays in the distribution of funding, causing the score for the dimension to remain unchanged.

CSOs in Timor-Leste work in diverse programmatic areas, including human rights, peace building and conflict prevention, gender and social inclusion, youth engagement, agriculture, capacity building, education, monitoring and evaluation, water and sanitation, judicial reform, advocacy, humanitarian support, and research. CSOs engage in a variety of activities to empower a range of communities in both urban areas and remote, rural areas. In 2020, however, many CSOs temporarily refocused their efforts to directly support COVID-19 prevention and relief activities, primarily by providing vulnerable communities with health education and hygienic materials.

There is some uncertainty about the number of CSOs in the country. According to data from the Ministry of Justice (MoJ), 36 national associations and 14 foundations were newly registered in 2020, bringing the total number of registered organizations to 139 foundations, 522 national associations, and 82 international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). However, according to the NGO Forum Timor-Leste (Forum ONG Timor-Leste, FONGTIL), only 201 national associations and 30 INGOs were active in Timor-Leste in 2020. This discrepancy is likely due to the fact that some organizations are still registered with MoJ even though they have stopped their activities or no longer exist.

## LEGAL ENVIRONMENT: 3.4



The legal environment for CSOs in Timor-Leste remained unchanged in 2020.

Law No. 5/2005 governs non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The law applies to both associations and foundations: an association is defined as “a corporate body comprised of persons, which does not pursue any profits for its associates and therefore cannot distribute any profits, assets or remainders, or dispose of property owned by the association even in case of winding-up or liquidation,” while a foundation is defined as “a non-profit making corporate body, of social interest and comprised of property.” Some organizations continue to struggle to differentiate between the two organizational forms.

The law is written in Portuguese and translated into Tetun, the country’s other official language, as well as

English. This creates difficulties for many CSOs, however, as the Portuguese version takes precedence if there is any misunderstanding, while CSOs predominantly use Tetun. This language barrier further complicates registration, as CSOs must translate their organizational statutes into Portuguese.

Associations and foundations register with MoJ. However, according to FONGTIL, 91 active Timorese organizations and eight international organizations still had not registered with MoJ as of early 2021—a substantial percentage of the 230 organizations FONGTIL identified as active in 2020. This is largely due to the complexity of the process and language barriers. MoJ’s notary department often presses for changes in an organization’s statute, though those changes may contradict its founding vision and mission. MoJ has rejected some organizations’ names, especially those that refer to the resistance or national identity. In such cases, the organization typically complies and changes its name in order to complete the registration process. The law further requires each organization to have a bank account, but this requirement is not applied consistently. These obstacles and the lack of clarity in the law itself particularly impede municipal-level CSOs, which frequently face delays in their registration. Funero, for instance, began the registration process in 2017 and has yet to be legalized; MoJ has not clarified the cause for this delay.

MoJ does not monitor an organization’s progress or implementation of its mission after it is legally registered, so some organizations remain registered with MoJ even after they have stopped their activities or no longer exist.

This largely explains the discrepancies between MoJ data on registered organizations and FONGTIL data on active organizations. Moreover, the law states that to legally register with MoJ, an association must have a minimum of ten members, but it does not provide clear guidance for them if membership drops below ten after registration.

The law does not limit the scope of a CSO's work and the government generally does not interfere with CSOs' activities. CSOs in Timor-Leste are not typically subject to harassment by state institutions or groups acting on behalf of the state. However, no law specifically protects CSOs from dissolution, effectively allowing the government to dissolve a CSO if its actions are found unconstitutional in a court of law. While the government has not yet made use of this authority, this remains a threat to CSOs' ability to operate independently.

In 2020, the government began discussing an amendment to the criminal code regarding criminal defamation, which would limit the ability to criticize the government. As currently drafted, the amendment threatens to criminalize all defamation, including that of public officials, political parties, and/or through the media, thereby threatening people and organizations for expressing their views or sharing information. The draft defamation amendments remained under discussion at the end of 2020. The government also introduced a draft Cybercrime Law in 2020, which CSOs view as a more democratic way to regulate the online space. While the defamation law is perceived as a mechanism to protect government and public officials, the Cybercrime Law would apply across society while ensuring the right to responsibly exercise freedom of speech.

CSOs do not pay taxes on their grant income but must pay taxes on imported goods. According to the Law on Taxation, employees who earn more than \$500 a month must pay taxes equal to 10 percent of their income. Every donor in Timor-Leste receives a notice of this requirement from the Central Bank. However, CSOs, especially Timorese organizations, struggle to adhere to these requirements and it often falls to staff, rather than to the CSO, to pay taxes on their monthly income. Therefore, only staff that work for INGOs and CSOs working at the national level typically comply with the law.

Every organization is responsible for developing its own strategy to raise funds and garner support to sustain its work. The majority of CSOs pursue funding from donors and the government. Beginning in 2020, the Office of the Prime Minister announced that CSOs are legally permitted to earn income and began to promote this option.

While there is some in-country capacity for legal assistance, national and municipal-level CSOs lack the funds to cover these costs, and there are no Timorese lawyers with expertise in CSO-related regulations. INGOs, however, do employ Timorese lawyers for legal assistance.

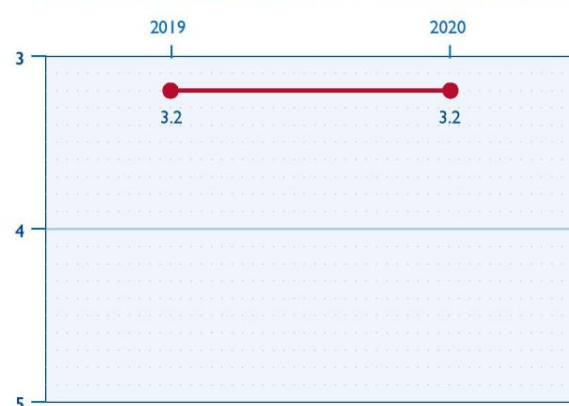
## ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY: 3.2

The organizational capacity of CSOs in Timor-Leste remained unchanged in 2020. Though COVID-19 posed increased difficulties and spurred many CSOs to reorient their activities, CSOs proved resilient in adapting to the challenging environment.

Most CSOs maintained strong relationships with their constituents and were able to maintain a list of their beneficiaries and targeted areas for intervention during the year. Given restrictions on travel and gatherings, CSOs increasingly communicated with beneficiaries by phone or over messenger platforms like WhatsApp. It continues to be challenging for CSOs to focus on the priorities and needs of their constituents as they are financially dependent upon donors, often through project-based funding.

Most CSOs have statutes that clearly define their visions and mission, and some have worked with donors to better align funding with their strategic plans. The COVID-19 pandemic and the ensuing state of emergency, however, resulting in a sudden shift in CSO activities and priorities. Rather than carrying out their defined missions, in 2020 most CSOs focused on COVID-19 relief and supporting the government's efforts to prevent the spread of COVID-19 at the community level. Typically, this resulted in a focus on health education and information

ORGANIZATIONAL CAPACITY IN TIMOR-LESTE



and the provision of hygienic materials. For some CSOs, such as those working to support women, children, or the agriculture sector, this work was more readily integrated into their usual service areas.

CSOs generally have boards, but board members rarely contribute meaningfully to organizational governance or fundraising efforts. They lack knowledge about program implementation and financial reports and are not required to read the organization's reports. Instead, the role of board members is generally limited to attending important meetings, for instance to elect the executive director, and formally approving the organization's annual reports. Most CSOs at the national and municipal levels have limited internal management capacity, especially in terms of financial management.

Staff turnover continued to be a problem in 2020, as staff members are typically employed on a project basis. After funded projects end, staff leave the organization, taking the knowledge and skills they have gained with them. In 2020, several CSOs further reduced their staffs, especially training facilitators and field staff, in response to COVID-19 limitations and the postponement of previously planned activities. CSOs were also unable to turn to volunteers for support in 2020, given the state of emergency and COVID-19 restrictions on in-person gatherings.

CSOs' use of technology necessarily expanded in 2020. However, while national-level CSOs typically have greater access to information and communications technology (ICT), rural and municipal CSOs are largely limited to mobile phone platforms like WhatsApp. In response to COVID-19 restrictions on gatherings, organizations at the municipal level used WhatsApp to meet with donors and stakeholders, while organizations at the national level also made use of platforms like Zoom, Microsoft Teams, Webex, and Skype.

## FINANCIAL VIABILITY: 4.4



Despite the financial challenges brought by both the pandemic and political instability, CSOs' financial viability remained unchanged in 2020.

The majority of CSOs in Timor-Leste depend on funding from international donors and the government. Some organizations have funding from multiple donors, which allows them to sustain their activities. No Timorese organizations or foundations provide financial resources to CSOs.

Through the annual state budget, the government provides support for CSOs for both programming and operational costs. In 2020, the prime minister announced a new government commitment to provide support to CSOs every fiscal year. Given the lack of an approved budget, however, government support was not

confirmed until October 2020, so no funds were transferred until November 2020; those funds can be used for programming over the coming year. The Office of the Prime Minister ultimately allocated approximately \$3.2 million for CSO support in 2020, a notable decrease from \$6 million in 2019. Previously, CSOs were invited to submit program proposals only after the budget had been approved, but beginning in 2020, the Office of the Prime Minister reordered that process: CSOs first submit proposals, which are then brought to discussion in parliament. Included in this direct funding, the government continued to support FONGTIL to follow-up on its 2019 assessment of the internal policy and management systems of FONGTIL members. In addition, the approved FY2020 budget included \$600,000 for social audits, which CSOs conduct to ensure the quality of community participation in government-sponsored projects in the agriculture, education, health, and infrastructure sectors. While social audits have been conducted in Timor-Leste since 2016, they were previously funded by the European Union, not the government. As part of its COVID-19 relief efforts, the government also covered 60 percent of the salaries of the staff of many CSOs.

Foreign support remained unchanged in 2020 but was largely redirected to COVID-19 prevention and mitigation, while other programs were postponed. The government of New Zealand and the World Health Organization (WHO), for example, supported the Women Network's COVID-19 prevention and mitigation efforts. USAID also



worked to strengthen CSOs in Timor-Leste, with a particular focus on capacity building and expanding initiatives to earn income.

Few CSOs in Timor-Leste actively engage in fundraising, and in 2020 there were no known instances of fundraising activities. Some NGOs, such as the Red Cross of Timor-Leste (RCTL), began to earn income in 2020 by renting assets like meeting spaces. FONGTIL continued to collect membership fees in 2020: for national NGOs, fees are just USD \$60 per year or \$5 per month, while membership fees for INGOs are \$300 per year. In 2020, the Office of the Prime Minister also supported CSOs' capacity to expand their sources of income through the production of handicrafts and other products.

Some large companies are open to negotiations for funding support or cooperation. For instance, the Alola Foundation, which focuses on maternal and child health, education, and economic development, received funding from ConocoPhillips in Timor-Leste. In 2020, private companies focused on supporting COVID-19 relief efforts, including by funding cleaning materials, transportation, and meals for volunteers. However, few CSOs have explored these opportunities.

The majority of CSOs have internal financial management systems in place, which donors require of their partners. However, the capacity and quality of those systems remain limited for some organizations at both the national and municipal levels. Some national CSOs have financial software and dedicated staff able to manage funding and comply with donor requirements. Those organizations also typically operate in a transparent manner and share annual financial reports and financial statements with donors and the government. All CSOs are required to submit annual reports to the government if they receive government funding, though many do not undergo internal audits or submit financial reports that are not in compliance with their proposed budgets.

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## ADVOCACY: 3.2

CSO advocacy remained unchanged in 2020.

The government continues to recognize CSOs as active development partners in Timor-Leste. CSOs are legally guaranteed the right to demonstrate and criticize decisions of the government or National Parliament (NP), and there is space for public debate through national news media and social media. The Office of the Prime Minister is committed to supporting CSOs and recognizes their input in developing public policies, and local government authorities continue to view CSOs as critical partners in decision-making processes and as a bridge between the government and communities. Though the state of emergency limited large gatherings, CSOs experienced no additional challenges in advocacy, and even remained actively engaged with parties throughout the political instability and coalition restructuring in May 2020.

In 2020, FONGTIL organized the Forum Dialogue between CSOs and the government, including the president, the NP, and the Ministries of Education, Health, and Agriculture, Forestry, and Fisheries. The Forum, which focused on food security and nutrition in Timor-Leste, provided a meaningful outlet for cross-sector communication and advocacy.

FONGTIL and its members—particularly the Human Rights Network—actively contributed to the drafting, adoption, and promotion of the Law of Prevention and Combating Corruption, promulgated by the president of Timor-Leste in July 2020. They then helped disseminate information about the law after its adoption. In 2020, CSOs also actively advocated for improvements to the Lifelong Pension Law, which currently provides full salaries and extensive benefits to former government workers and members of parliament. CSOs used public reports and outreach to call for an amendment to the law; the amendment was still under discussion in the NP at the end of the year.

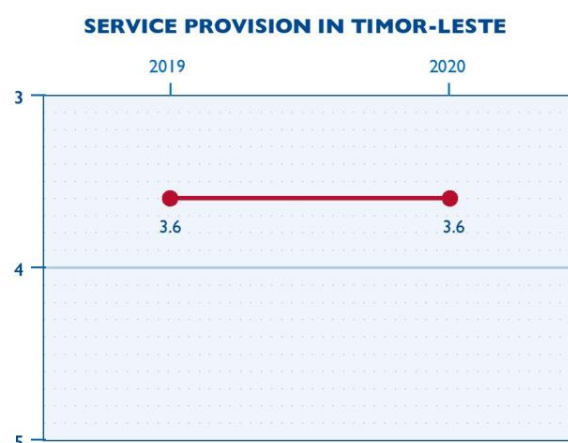




The Women Network advocated for the Maubisse II Declaration to ensure that infrastructure development meets the needs of those with disabilities, working to garner support from the government and NP. Together with the United Nations Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW), the Women Network further prepared a proposal for the government to ratify the International Convention for People with Disabilities in Timor-Leste; its submission and ratification, however, was delayed due to challenges around the COVID-19 pandemic and political instability. Also in 2020, the Women Network and FONGTIL engaged in discussions with the NP regarding budget allocations for various ministries, including agriculture, water and sanitation, and education. However, these efforts failed to address gender concerns, and the amount allocated for gender programs remains very small. Advocacy for the rights of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and intersex (LGBTI) populations continued in 2020, although on a limited basis. For instance, though COVID-19 restrictions limited the possibility to organize large public events in 2020, CODIVA celebrated LGBTI day through an outreach campaign, video, and small gatherings. CSOs also engaged with government ministries, the NP, and the president in policy-making forums and discussions around COVID-19 prevention.

As an umbrella organization for CSOs in Timor-Leste, FONGTIL continued to lobby the government for greater financial support for CSOs. In addition to this, in 2020, FONGTIL and its members produced a draft law to institutionalize social audits in order to maintain effective communication between CSOs, government, and communities. By the end of the year, the Office of the Prime Minister had submitted the draft law to the Council of Ministers. CSOs also engaged in ongoing advocacy efforts against the defamation law, arguing instead for a more democratic Cybercrime Law to regulate online space. CSO advocacy toward that end successfully stalled the draft defamation law at the Council of Ministers, where it remained under discussion at the end of the year.

## SERVICE PROVISION: 3.6



CSOs' capacity to provide services remained unchanged in 2020, even as the services themselves pivoted to focus on COVID-19 prevention and relief.

In the past, CSOs in Timor-Leste have worked in diverse programmatic areas, including human rights, peace building and conflict prevention, gender and social inclusion, youth engagement, agriculture, capacity building, education, monitoring and evaluation, water and sanitation, judicial reform, advocacy, humanitarian support, and research. In 2020, however, many CSOs temporarily refocused their efforts to directly support COVID-19 prevention and relief activities. While their ability to fulfill their mandated missions was limited in 2020, CSOs were responsive to the most pressing needs of the community during the COVID-19 pandemic and

the resulting state of emergency.

In 2020, FONGTIL and its members established the COVID-19 Information Center. Through this center, CSOs provided the national government with on-the-ground information about the public's needs. The center focused on issues of food security, water, sanitation, and hygiene, and overall security, while providing information to the community regarding COVID-19 protocols and prevention. CSOs also worked extensively with the government to guarantee public access to basic needs during the state of emergency. For instance, both national and local level CSOs joined discussions with MSSl and other government officials to ensure that government subsidies reached the households that needed them most.

Some CSOs conduct baseline assessments before implementing their programs in order to determine community needs and the best interventions to support their community. In 2020, CSOs focused primarily on the most vulnerable communities and worked closely with both communities and government authorities to monitor COVID-19 relief programs and ensure that basic needs were met at both sub-national and suco levels. CSOs do not discriminate in the selection of their beneficiaries on the basis of race, culture, religion, or gender.

CSOs continued to provide their services for free, with funding from international donors and the government, so there was no cost recovery for services to their beneficiaries in 2020. Instead, all CSOs were focused on ensuring that basic needs were met, especially for vulnerable populations.

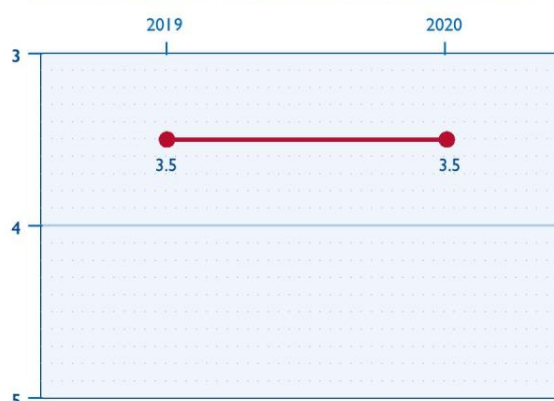
The government continued to recognize the vital work of CSOs, which became even more significant given the extensive challenges of 2020. The Ministry of Health was particularly supportive of CSO activities in 2020, as so many worked on COVID-19 prevention and mitigation at the community level. The Office of the Prime Minister further supported FONGTIL and its members to monitor the provision of emergency subsidies to households, and the resulting data was submitted to the Ministry of State Administration.

## SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE: 3.5

CSOs in Timor-Leste enjoy access to fairly robust sectoral support and infrastructure. While restrictions due to the pandemic posed additional challenges, the infrastructure supporting the sector remained largely unchanged in 2020.

The infrastructure supporting CSOs in Timor-Leste includes training, networks, and intersectoral partnerships. Prior to the state of emergency in 2020, national NGO networks, including those that bring together organizations focused on women's issues, human rights, and peace building and conflict resolution, offered capacity building to other CSOs based on relevant needs. However, no such training was offered for most of 2020 due to restrictions on gatherings and CSOs' efforts to prioritize COVID-19 relief.

SECTORAL INFRASTRUCTURE IN TIMOR-LESTE



In 2020, CSOs primarily relied on the internet to access information. Those CSOs that had donor agreements in place before the state of emergency in March 2020 were best placed to access ongoing support and information on funding opportunities and training. In the past, international donors generally conducted organizational capacity assessments and provided training to program, administrative, and finance staff before awarding funding to national and local CSOs. In 2020, however, only online training was available for CSOs for the majority of the year, and even those opportunities were limited.

While no local organizations or foundations provide local funding to CSOs, in 2020 a few organizations sub-granted foreign support. For instance, Bridging Peoples sub-granted funding from the Millennium Challenge Corporation to Belun for education research in Timor-Leste.

In 2020, coalitions and networks improved their effectiveness, especially in the dissemination of COVID-19 protocols to local communities. CSOs worked jointly to support government relief efforts, ensuring that all communities were included, and coordinated to promote information about the risk and prevention of COVID-19.

CSOs also collaborated with other sectors to promote health and hygiene protocols and monitor the government's relief programs. For instance, they worked to promote guidance from the health sector and coordinated with the business sector to provide materials like soap, disinfectant, and masks. FONGTIL and its members actively supported government relief work during the state of emergency.

## PUBLIC IMAGE: 3.3

CSOs' public image remained unchanged in 2020, and CSOs continued to enjoy mostly positive relationships with the media and the public in Timor-Leste.

During the state of emergency, FONGTIL provided information on the impact of COVID-19 on a weekly basis, which the national media consistently covered. However, some CSOs provided inaccurate information about the



pandemic through social media, creating conflict between the involved CSOs and the government and highlighting the need for CSO capacity building in media and digital literacy. These incidents also sparked calls for the government to better understand and manage media policies and regulations on public information.

The public perception of CSOs—both urban and rural—remains largely positive as CSOs work directly with communities, and those communities witness the role of CSOs in public assistance and development. CSOs also act as a bridge between the government and communities and are able to relay public needs and concerns to government officials. However, there is still an ongoing need for CSOs to better explain their role at the community level. In the past, CSO activists have gone

on to become politicians or members of parliament, creating confusion and distrust among the public about the broader goals and ethics of CSOs. CSOs continue to promote their activities and missions through news media, online and social media, and their organizational websites.

Though the government at both the national and municipal levels perceives CSOs positively and as partners in aid and development efforts, it sometimes regards CSO activists as political actors. When government authorities do criticize the work of CSOs, it is typically aimed at specific individuals, rather than organizations. Because CSOs actively monitor government programs, the private sector is sometimes led to believe that CSOs do not implement programs themselves, but merely evaluate government programs. Businesses also sometimes come into conflict with CSO activities, particularly in response to CSO advocacy efforts. For instance, after companies raised the price of rice and other basic needs during the pandemic, CSOs advocated with the government to set a standard market price.

Most CSOs in Timor-Leste have internal control systems, such as manuals addressing personnel, financial, and procurement issues, to help them ensure good governance and transparency, particularly with partners and donors. In 2020, most CSOs continued to publish annual reports on programming and financial reports, sharing them with donors and stakeholders. CSOs generally also have codes of ethics to guide their program implementation.

**Disclaimer:** The opinions expressed herein are those of the panelists and other project researchers and do not necessarily reflect the views of USAID or FHI 360.

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