



Strengthening Tarabandu Advocacy to Enhance Women's Participation in Tarabandu Processes



Image : Women in Leotala Village, Likisa participating in Tarabandu 20 February 2025

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2. Executive Summary

This report presents key findings and key recommendations from the project “**Strengthening Tarabandu Advocacy to Enhance Women’s Participation in Tarabandu Processes**”, implemented by NGO Belun in partnership with ChildFund Timor-Leste and ChildFund International in Indonesia under the Strengthening Social Cohesion Program (2023–2025). The project engaged ten villages in the administrative post of Likisa municipality (Leotala, Dato, Hatuquesi, Loidahar, and Acumano village) and administrative post of Bazartere (Fatumasi, Tibar, Ulmera, Maumeta and Leorama village) in Likisa, with the dual aim of revitalizing Tarabandu, a traditional customary law system used to prevent conflict, guide social behavior, and protect the environment, while strengthening the leadership and participation of women and youth in local governance. Fieldwork was conducted by 10 enumerators (5 men and 5 women) for data collection and included 25 key informant interviews (KIIs) and 7 focus group discussions (FGDs), conducted between 8 and 18 July 2025, involving approximately 75 participants, including community leaders (Village Chiefs and Hamlet Chiefs), local governments (post administrators), lia-nain (cultural leaders), teachers and school directors, students, youth CSOs, youth (boys and girls), women representatives, and religious actors.

Summary of Key Findings:

Tarabandu as a Trusted Conflict Resolution Mechanism: Across all locations, Fatumasi, Tibar, Ulmera, Maumeta, Leorama, Leotala, Dato, Hatuquesi, Loidahar and Acumano village, Tarabandu was consistently recognized by community leaders, cultural leaders, educators, and elders as a legitimate and culturally resonant method for resolving interpersonal, family, and land disputes. Participants described it as more accessible and effective than the formal justice system in maintaining peace and social cohesion.

Inequitable Participation of Women and Youth: Despite strong cultural legitimacy, participation in Tarabandu remains unequal. Women and young people, especially girls, are often limited to supportive roles due to taboos (e.g. *na’an lulik*¹) and entrenched patriarchal norms. However, initiatives led by NGOs such as Belun and Ba Futuru (e.g., PeaceJam, civic clubs) are creating openings for youth engagement and women’s informal leadership, particularly in schools and through community dialogues.

Implementation and Enforcement Challenges: Traditional enforcers like *kableia*² and *lia nain* lack formal state support, legal authority, and consistent training. This results in uneven enforcement, especially in rural areas like Metagou or Bazartete, and limits the sustainability of Tarabandu rules. Several participants called for stronger integration between suco³ governance structures and traditional authorities.

Broader Impact Beyond Conflict: In addition to resolving disputes, Tarabandu regulates environmental practices and economic behaviors, contributing to sustainable community development.

Project Contributions:

¹ Sacred or restricted elements in traditional Timorese culture, often associated with spiritual or ancestral authority, and typically off-limits to women or outsiders.

² Traditional community guards in Timor-Leste who help enforce local rules and support village leaders during Tarabandu and daily activities.

³ A village.

The “**Strengthening Tarabandu Advocacy to Enhance Women’s Participation in Tarabandu Processes**” project promoted inclusive, community-based strategies to strengthen Tarabandu and increase women’s and youth participation. It expanded training, integrated Tarabandu into school peace education, and supported community dialogues to challenge restrictive cultural norms. By linking tradition with civic values, the initiative encouraged more equitable and resilient local governance, especially in villages like Fatumasi, Leotala, and Tibar and offers useful guidance for advancing gender- and youth-inclusive development in Timor-Leste.

3. Objectives

Belun implemented project activities with several objectives.

- Raise community awareness of gender equality within cultural systems
 - Promote *Tarabandu* as a valuable cultural resource for conflict prevention and resolution
 - Strengthen relationships within and among communities through inclusive cultural practices
 - Provide evidence-based recommendations to the Secretary of State for Art and Culture, Secretary of State for Equality, local authorities, civil society organizations (CSOs), and community leaders
 - Enhance women's participation and leadership in *Tarabandu* processes
 - Reduce gender-based stigma rooted in patriarchal norms
 - Facilitate knowledge exchange between students, teachers and traditional leaders on peacebuilding approaches on *Tarabandu* practice in Timor-Leste
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4. Methodology

This report is based on a qualitative research approach designed to gather community perspectives on Tarabandu practices, gender participation, and peacebuilding outcomes across Likisa. The research was carried out between July 8th to July 18th, 2025.

1. Data Collection Methods

Two primary methods were used: Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

KIIs: Conducted with 25 individuals, including:

- Suco chiefs⁴ and secretaries
- Hamlet chiefs and post administrators
- School directors and teachers
- Lia-nain (cultural leaders)
- Veterans
- Religious actors

⁴ Suco Chiefs (*Xefe suku*) are elected local leaders responsible for governing sucos, coordinating with government institutions, and overseeing community development and customary practices.

- Community elders
- Secretary for Social Affairs at the Municipality Level

The KIIs explored how Tarabandu is practiced in different communities, who is involved in its implementation, and what challenges affect its enforcement, inclusivity, and sustainability. Particular attention was given to the roles of women and youth in community governance.

FGDs: 7 FGDs were held with 41 participants from:

- Youth and student groups
- Women and girls
- Mixed community members
- Teachers

FGDs captured shared experiences, perceptions of participation, and the influence of peace education and NGO interventions.

2. **Locations:** Fatumasi, Tibar, Ulmera, Maumeta, Leorama, Leota'la, Dato, Hatuquesi, Loidahar and Acumano (including aldeia-level and administrative post-level interviews).
3. **Respondents:** Teachers, students, youth, village chiefs and secretaries, aldeia and post administrators, lia-nain (cultural leaders), veterans, female leaders, religious leaders, and community members.
4. **Themes Covered:** Understanding of Tarabandu; women's and youth participation in traditional governance; peace education and school-based modules; community enforcement practices; implementation challenges; and recommendations for strengthening inclusion and sustainability.
5. **Limitations:** Not all villages, aldeias⁵, or schools in the municipality were included in the sample. While the research captured diverse voices, some stakeholder groups, such as municipal-level officials, marginalized youth, and persons with disabilities, may be underrepresented. Insights are specific to the participating communities and may not fully reflect the situation across all the Likisa municipality.

5. Key Findings

5.1 Understanding of Tarabandu

- Across all sites, Tarabandu is widely recognized as a customary law system used to regulate social behavior, resolve conflict, and protect the environment.
- In Likisa, school staff described it as “a system that prevents conflict through community consensus,” especially effective for handling minor disputes outside formal courts.
- In Fatumasi, the village Chief reported that after reactivating Tarabandu, community conflict dropped from 50% to 3%, particularly in land and water disputes.
- Youth in Tibar viewed Tarabandu as a guide for moral conduct and peace but expressed the need for clearer education on its rituals and purpose.

⁵ Aldeias are the smallest local communities forming part of a larger suco.

5.2 Women's Participation

- In all locations, women are primarily engaged in support roles, such as preparing offerings or coordinating logistics, but are rarely involved in decision-making, due to cultural taboos like na'an lulik.
- In Tibar, community women shared that they attend ceremonies but “sit outside the sacred space” and are not permitted to speak.
- In Fatumasi, veterans and school directors reported incremental progress: women are now invited to preparatory meetings, though decisions remain male-dominated.
- Girls in FGDs in Likisa and Tibar expressed strong interest in contributing to Tarabandu discussions, especially on issues affecting women and youth.

5.3 Tarabandu in Schools

- In Likisa, the Director of ESTV noted that Tarabandu is taught informally through civic behavior lessons, though it is not part of the official curriculum.
- In Tibar, teachers reported that NGO-led training introduced students to learn about Tarabandu and recommended more consistent integration across grade levels.
- In Fatumasi, the Secondary School Director reported embedding Tarabandu-aligned peace values in the school's discipline code and student engagement programs.

5.4 Extracurricular Activities

- NGO programs such as PeaceJam and civic journalism are active in Tibar and Likisa, supporting youth involvement in peacebuilding and conflict resolution.
- In Tibar, the Vice School Director shared that girls participating in PeaceJam often serve as peer mediators and help resolve family disputes.
- Students in Likisa FGDs described PeaceJam as the first time they connected traditional values with everyday school life.
- Participants in Fatumasi noted that while NGO programs have made Tarabandu more visible to youth, access remains limited and inconsistent.

5.5 Effectiveness of Peace Modules

- Teachers and students in Likisa and Tibar reported that peace modules reduced bullying and improved mutual respect in classrooms.
- A director in Fatumasi observed that “trained students behave differently” and are more confident in managing peer conflict.
- However, the Director of ESTV Likisa cautioned that “training reaches only a few,” leaving many students without access and creating disparities.
- Across all sites, there was a call to formalize these peace modules and ensure equal access for all students across all schools in Timor-Leste.

5.6 Youth and Girls' Participation

- In Fatumasi and Likisa, teachers and community leaders acknowledged that youth, particularly girls, are showing emerging leadership following NGO involvement.
- Girls in Tibar said they now help mediate household issues using communication tools learned through extracurricular activities.

- Despite gains, youth in FGDs expressed frustration at being excluded from Tarabandu planning and rule enforcement processes.
- There is strong community interest, especially in Likisa, in creating formal roles for youth within customary governance systems.

5.7 Broader Social and Economic Impacts of Tarabandu

- In several communities, including **Fatumasi** and **Leota’la**, respondents highlighted that *Tarabandu* has helped improve household economies by discouraging practices that lead to financial hardship, such as theft, excessive alcohol use, and misuse of communal resources. These traditional sanctions promote discipline and reduce economic strain, especially for low-income families.
- Participants in Likisa and Metagou reported that *Tarabandu* helps prevent gender-based violence (GBV), particularly **domestic violence**, by setting behavioural expectations and providing community-led accountability. As one woman stated, “If a man mistreats his wife, the community will call a meeting through *Tarabandu*, and there are consequences.”
- Women leaders in Acumano emphasized that *Tarabandu* reinforces respect for women within households by promoting shared responsibilities and moral conduct, especially when linked with peace education in schools.

6. Observations and Gaps

6.1 Inequitable Access to Training Creates Gaps and Social Divides

Across all research locations, school directors, teachers, and students reported **significant disparities** in access to peacebuilding and Tarabandu-related training.

- In Likisa, the Director of ESTV noted that only a small group of students are selected to participate in NGO-led programs (such as PeaceJam), resulting in uneven understanding and engagement.
- In Tibar, teachers confirmed that while some students benefit from high-quality training, others, especially those with disabilities or from marginalized backgrounds (example LGBTIQ youth) are not included.
- As a result, peer-to-peer learning is limited, and untrained students often feel excluded or disempowered. This inequity risks deepening **social divides between “trained” and “untrained” youth**, especially when leadership roles or extracurricular opportunities are limited.

6.2. Girls and Women Benefit from Inclusion but Rarely Hold Leadership Roles

While women and girls benefit meaningfully from involvement in trainings and community events, their participation often remains **symbolic or secondary**, rather than structural.

- In Fatumasi, veterans and elders acknowledged that women support preparatory work and attend meetings, but decision-making authority remains with male elders and lia-nain (traditional leader).

- In Tibar, girls participating in PeaceJam are recognized for mediating family disputes and promoting peace values, yet they are excluded from ritual and rule-setting roles, due to cultural taboos like *na'an lulik*.
- FGDs in Likisa and Tibar revealed that women and girls are **rarely consulted when drafting or revising Tarabandu rules**, even on issues that directly affect them such as domestic violence or mobility restrictions.
- The gap is especially stark in rural and traditionally conservative aldeias, where women are not formally invited to speak, decide, or represent their interests in community rituals.

6.3. NGO-led programs are impactful but may not be sustainable without government support

School-based peace education and Tarabandu learning are almost entirely driven by NGOs like Belun and Ba Futuru, with little integration into formal systems.

- In Likisa, both the Post Administrator and school leaders stated that **without** NGO involvement, peace education would not be available.
- In Tibar, teachers credited PeaceJam with transforming student behavior but expressed concern about **long-term** continuity in the absence of donor support.
- Tarabandu and peacebuilding are not currently part of the **national education curriculum**, and teacher capacity to independently deliver this content is inconsistent.
- Without government policy endorsement, standard teaching materials, or dedicated time in school schedules, these programs remain fragile, donor-dependent, and difficult to scale.

7. Recommendations

7.1 For Program Implementers (schools, village councils, training coordinators):

Schools, village Councils, Training Coordinators

1. Expand Equitable Access to Tarabandu in Schools

Program implementers should prioritize expanding access to Tarabandu modules across all schools, both urban and rural across Timor-Leste. Currently, only selected students benefit from programs such as PeaceJam. Standardized materials and structured guidance should be developed in collaboration with school directors and municipal education offices to ensure more inclusive delivery.

2. Ensure Inclusion of Marginalized Youth and Students with Disabilities

It is essential to include all students, particularly those with disabilities and from marginalized groups (LGBTIQ youth) in peace and conflict resolution education. Inclusive training formats, accessibility measures, and targeted outreach must be adopted to close participation gaps and ensure equal opportunity for leadership, especially with more girls in leadership roles.

3. Support Women to take on Leadership Roles in Traditional Governance

Despite women's contributions to Tarabandu rituals in support roles, their exclusion from decision-making remains. Implementing pilot projects where women co-lead Tarabandu ceremonies alongside lia-nain and male elders can challenge traditional barriers. Successful initiatives should be documented and promoted to support cultural adaptation and gender-inclusive governance.

7.2 For Policy and Advocacy (e.g. Ministry of Education, Secretary of State, Municipal Governments):

example. Ministry of Education, Secretary of State for Equality, Municipal Governments

1. Integrate Tarabandu into the National Curriculum

While Tarabandu is central to cultural identity and peacebuilding, its absence from the formal education system limits its reach and impact. Policy actors should advocate for its inclusion in civic and peace education modules. This should be supported by the development of culturally appropriate content, teacher training, and formal assessment tools.

2. Promote Women's Participation through Policy Mandates

Formal mechanisms should be put in place to ensure women's participation in customary governance. Gender equality targets can be embedded within village development plans to require female representation in decision-making roles. Complementary training, mentorship, and public recognition can further legitimize women's leadership in traditional systems.

7.3 For NGOs (Belun, Ba Futuru, CSOs and ChildFund Timor-Leste):

1. Sustain and Expand PeaceJam and Civic Journalism Programs

PeaceJam and civic journalism initiatives have shown success in building youth confidence, leadership, and peace literacy. NGOs should continue supporting and scaling these initiatives to all administrative posts in Likisa, while also adapting content for younger learners and broader community engagement.

2. Deliver Refresher Trainings to Teachers and Leaders

Training impacts are diluted over time, especially with high staff turnover in schools. Regular refresher trainings, supported by updated learning materials, peer exchange sessions, and ongoing community dialogue, will help maintain knowledge and strengthen the long-term impact of peacebuilding efforts.

3. Institutionalize Peer-to-Peer Mentorship Models

Trained students have organically supported peers and family members in resolving conflict, but these efforts remain informal. NGOs should formalize this through structured mentorship models in schools and sucos, enabling trained individuals to serve as peer educators and multiplying the program's reach and impact.

8. Conclusion

Tarabandu remains a deeply respected system of conflict resolution, moral guidance, and community regulation in Timor-Leste. When paired with inclusive education and community training, it offers a powerful tool for building sustainable peace and strengthening local governance. However, its long-term success depends on closing access gaps, integrating Tarabandu into formal institutions, and ensuring that women and youth are not just present but meaningfully involved. Enhancing women's participation in Tarabandu processes is essential for achieving gender-equitable governance and community resilience. To sustain these efforts, national and local actors must take deliberate steps to embed Tarabandu into education and policy systems, while creating formal leadership pathways for

women and youth to shape peacebuilding and governance in their communities.

9. Contact Information

For further details about this report or the project *“Strengthening Tarabandu Advocacy to Enhance Women’s Participation in Tarabandu Processes”* please contact:

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10. Annexes

Annex A: Sample Interview and Focus Group Responses

This annex features selected excerpts from Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) and Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) from women and girls across Likisa municipality. These quotes illustrate the community’s lived experiences and insights regarding the Tarabandu system, women’s roles, youth engagement, and peace education.

“We learn from PeaceJam how to help friends, but not everyone can join.”

Female Student, Tibar

“We are asked to prepare food or sit outside, but not to speak inside the meeting.”

Woman Participant, Fatumasi

“I saw how my daughter helped resolve a fight between neighbours using skills from her club.”

Mother, Tibar

“Now we are invited to meetings. We still don’t make the final decisions, but at least our voices are being heard.”

Woman Participant, Fatumasi

Annex B: List of Schools, Villages, and Participant Profiles

Category	Participants / Locations	Description
Villages / Suco Locations	Fatumasi, Tibar, Ulmera, Maumeta, Leorama, Leota’la, Dato, Hatuquesi, Loidahar and Acumano.	Locations where field research was conducted, including FGDs and KIIs.
Schools	Escola Secundária Técnica e Vocacional (ESTV) Leorema Escola Secundária Técnica e Vocacional (ESTV) Likisa	Engaged through KIIs and school-based programs such as PeaceJam and civic journalism.

	Secondary School Fatumasi Basic Schools in Tibar and Likisa Escola Secundária Geral Pública (ESGP) Likisa	
Key Informant Interviewees (KIIs)	Village Chiefs and Village Secretary Lia nain (Traditional ritual leaders) Aldeia Chief Post Administrators (Bazartete and Likisa) School Directors, Vice Directors, and Teachers Secretary of State for Social Affairs Representative Veteran Representatives (Fatumasi and Leota'la) Religious Leader (Priest) Community Elders Women Leaders and Advocates	Total of 25 individuals interviewed on customary law, gender roles, peacebuilding, and community development.
Focus Group Discussion Participants (FGDs)	Youth and secondary students (male and female) Community women and girls Mixed groups of male and female community members	Five FGDs conducted with 41 participants to capture shared experiences and perceptions on Tarabandu, inclusion, and education.

Annex C: Peace Education and Awareness Modules Summary

This annex summarizes the peace education and awareness activities implemented across Likisa, Fatumasi, and Tibar as part of the Strengthening Social Cohesion Program 2023–2025. These initiatives were carried out by ChildFund Timor-Leste, ChildFund International Indonesia, and NGO Belun in partnership with schools and community groups. The modules and sessions aimed to support conflict prevention, increase civic participation, and promote gender equity through traditional and formal education.

1. PeaceJam Curriculum

PeaceJam is an extracurricular leadership and peacebuilding program facilitated by Belun and ChildFund. It focuses on youth empowerment through activities centered on conflict resolution, empathy, communication, and critical thinking.

- Core Components:
 - Leadership development through Nobel Peace Laureate stories
 - Peer mediation and communication training
 - Conflict resolution and emotional regulation
 - Gender sensitivity and social inclusion exercises

2. Civic Journalism Clubs

These clubs engage students in exploring issues of community justice, inclusion, and traditional customs like Tarabandu. The goal is to foster youth voice, analytical thinking, and civic responsibility.

- Activities Include:
 - Reporting on community events and peace practices
 - Producing interviews and features on traditional leaders
 - Engaging in school-based dialogues on youth roles in governance

3. Tarabandu Awareness Sessions

Conducted through community and school forums, these sessions revitalized local understanding of Tarabandu's role in conflict resolution, environmental protection, and moral regulation.

- Themes Covered:
 - Cultural values and rituals
 - Gender equity within traditional systems
 - Environmental discipline (example., forest and water source protection)
 - Intergenerational knowledge transfer and community norms

4. Observed Impact

Based on FGDs and KIIs, participants reported that these modules enhanced student confidence, reduced classroom bullying, and improved conflict management at the family and school levels. Female students noted greater awareness of their rights and responsibilities.