

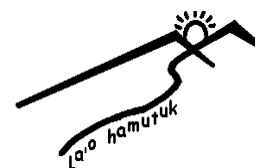
La'o Hamutuk

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Submission from La'o Hamutuk Institute

to

The UN Universal Periodic Review

54th Session of the UPR Working Group

on

Fourth Universal Periodic Review Cycle

Timor-Leste

Dili, 17 July 2026

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Introduction

The Timor-Leste Institute for Development Monitoring and Analysis (La'o Hamutuk, 'Walking Together' in English) is an independent, non-partisan CSO in Timor-Leste that analyses, educates and advocates on government policy to encourage better equity, human rights and sustainability. Since its founding in 2000, it has produced hundreds of articles, presentations, radio programmes,

submissions, testimonies and web pages relating to human rights, petroleum dependency and social and economic justice, with the objective of helping people in Timor-Leste have the knowledge and tools needed to ensure that policy decisions reflect their needs and interests.

In this submission, La'o Hamutuk examines the Government of Timor-Leste's compliance with its international human rights obligations to create and maintain a safe and conducive environment for civil society. We analyze Timor-Leste's fulfillment of the rights to an Adequate Standard of Living - Food, Water, and Education. Since the previous UPR examination in 2021, we have assessed Timor-Leste's implementation of the recommendations on these issues received during the third UPR cycle and provided follow-up recommendations.

During the third UPR cycle, the Government of Timor-Leste received eight recommendations related to the right to an Adequate Standard of Living - Food and Water, eleven recommendations related to the Right to Health, and twelve recommendations related to the Right to Education.

La'o Hamutuk has joined CIVICUS is a global alliance of civil society organisations (CSOs) and activists dedicated to strengthening citizen action and civil society around the world, the Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA, and Judicial System Monitoring Program (JSMP) in this submission addressing the rights to freedom of association, expression, and peaceful assembly, as well as unreasonable restrictions on human rights defenders.

THE RIGHT TO AN ADEQUATE STANDARD OF LIVING – FOOD, WATER AND EDUCATION

In the 2022 UPR recommendations¹ received from other countries, the Government of Timor-Leste accepted and agreed to improve the standard of living of its people, committing to allocate sufficient resources to social programs that promote sustainable economic and social development. Unfortunately, Timor-Leste continues to face structural problems, including food insecurity, malnutrition, poverty, unemployment, dependence on food imports, water shortages, low agricultural productivity, and limited human capacity.

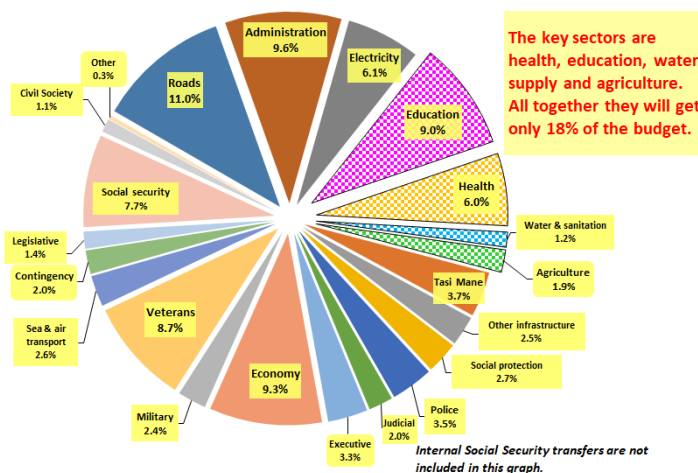
How can Timor-Leste overcome these challenges to improve the standard of living for its citizens? Although the government's public discourse and narrative documents frequently assert that its primary priority is its people, positioning human resources as a vital pillar for national development, state sustainability, and poverty alleviation, the budget allocation for sectors directly linked to human development, such as education, health, clean water, and agriculture, has rarely been treated as a priority over the past two decades. In 2026, the government allocated only 18% to these essential sectors². The government continues to prioritize large-scale infrastructure projects and subsidies with uncertain future benefits rather than investing in human development.

¹ <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/hrbodies/upr/sessions/session40/tl/2022-12-23/Timor-Leste.pdf>

² <https://www.laohamutuk.org/econ/OGE26/25OGE26.htm>

Sector breakdown for proposed expenditure in 2026

Total budget = \$2.3 billion



Food and Water

Government investment in agriculture is essential for food security, family income, and the rural economy, all of which are necessary to improve the standard of living of the people. Agriculture is the primary economic activity for 66% of the population of Timor-Leste. Despite this, the sector has not been fully developed to produce food or to stimulate other economic sectors in the nation's economic development process.

For some time, the General State Budget (GSB) allocation to the agriculture sector has stagnated at below 3%. This year, 2026, the agriculture sector has been allocated only 1.9% of the total budget. This amount represents a decrease from the 2025 OJE allocation for the agriculture sector.³ This clearly demonstrates that this sector is not a priority in Timor-Leste's public policy to diversify the economy and boost domestic economic growth to improve the quality of life of the people.

Currently, Timor-Leste's economy continues to face low-income levels and a heavy reliance on past oil and gas revenues, coupled with high unemployment due to a lack of job opportunities. Efforts to promote agriculture, industry, and services have seen limited success; consequently, the nation remains heavily dependent on imports, with a non-oil trade deficit of \$919 million in 2025. Non-oil state revenue has not significantly increased and continues to cover only 11% of the budget, further aggravating these challenges.

Despite these economic issues, the Ninth Government intends to increase the national budget annually. However, this increased budget is largely allocated to administrative costs and large infrastructure projects, while the basic needs of the population such as health, education, housing, nutrition, and employment opportunities are largely neglected. Furthermore, the government continues to prioritize extractive projects such as Tasi Mane, Greater Sunrise and mining, allocating a significant portion of the budget to these ventures for the coming years.

³ <https://www.laohamutuk.org/Agri/2025/250424Karta%20aberta%20ba%20Ministru%20Agrikultura%20PAA%20OJE%202026.pdf>

Malnutrition and food insecurity remain major challenges. In reality, the majority of the population lives in rural areas, and their livelihoods depend on small-scale agricultural activities (growing various crops on a single plot), fishing, and livestock rearing as sources of family income. Through agricultural activities, it is possible to provide healthy food and offer a sustainable solution to national challenges such as food insecurity, malnutrition, poverty, unemployment, and import dependence, as well as other social issues.

Based on the 2022 census⁴, the majority of farmers own less than two hectares of land, signifying small-scale agriculture. To ensure production meets national needs, it is necessary to prepare and properly manage the land, and to use the land to diversify production. Timor-Leste's agricultural land is limited, as we are a small island nation, and the majority of our terrain consists of mountains or hillsides. Most flatlands are used for rice (paddy) production, while the hillside areas serve as centres for diversified production, including maize, fruits, tubers, vegetables, and major commodity products such as coffee and other crops, including dry-land rice.

Despite the significant potential of hillside agricultural areas, the government has not yet invested in them to their full capacity. Over many years, the budget allocation for the agriculture sector has continued to focus primarily on flatlands, such as constructing irrigation systems and dams,

2024	Potential Area	Cultivated Area	Harvested Area
Rice plant	80.578	27.782	27.252
Corn	214.525	32.675	31.408

distributing tractors and modern equipment, implementing programs for free land cultivation, seeds, and fertilizers. For example, existing potential areas have yet to be maximized for cultivation and harvesting.

Source: National Directorate of Agriculture, Horticulture, and Plant Protection 2024

In reality, the Government should facilitate appropriate investments and technical support, and create favourable conditions to sustain food production, processing and the strengthening of a domestic agricultural processing industry to stimulate other economic sectors. However, the agricultural sector currently receives the smallest percentage of the State budget. Beyond this, there are several challenges such as land, water, and human resources that impact domestic food production. Farmers depend on state-constructed irrigation systems to cultivate rice and vegetables. Civil society monitoring has revealed that the Government's current investment in irrigation is insufficient to maintain existing networks, many of which have been destroyed by flooding and a lack of maintenance.

Access to clean water remains severely lacking. In 2026, the Government allocated only 1.2% of the total budget to the water and sanitation sector. Civil society monitoring during this reporting period found that water coverage has not seen significant improvement. Furthermore, road widening projects in many areas have resulted in damage to water pipeline systems for households in Dili and municipal capitals. Many schools and health posts also lack access to sufficient water, which impacts sanitation and hygiene; meanwhile, some rural communities still need to walk long distances to fetch and carry water to their homes.

⁴ file:///C:/Users/Hp/Downloads/Final-Main-Report_TLPHC-Census_WEB.pdf

According to the 2022 Census results⁵, 39.5% of households have access to public taps, 10.2% have taps installed inside their homes, while 8.7% of households continue to rely on rivers, springs, ponds, and irrigation channels for their daily needs, and 0.2% rely on rainwater collection. This 2022 census data indicates that nearly 51.3% of households still lack access to treated water (via public taps or home piping systems).

Timor-Leste still possesses very weak clean water infrastructure in both rural and urban areas. Due to road widening projects in the capital, Dili, many water pipeline systems have been damaged. This situation forces some communities in Dili to buy water or walk to nearby water springs to fetch it. On the other hand, there is significant inequality between rural and urban areas; the rural population (7.7%) has less access to in-house water compared to the urban population (16.8%). This reflects infrastructure investment that is concentrated in the cities. The large rural population (71% of the total population) receives less priority. Rural areas are heavily dependent on public water sources (44.4%); however, many public water sources are not secure (considered "unimproved" if they lack regular treatment). In rural areas, many public water sources fall into either the "improved" or "unimproved" categories.

In the 2026 General State Budget, the Government has prioritized investment in clean water with a total of \$2.291 billion, focusing on national transformation, which includes priority for water infrastructure. Furthermore, support from development partners is steadily declining, compounded by challenges from unsuccessful past projects financed by development partners. For instance, projects funded by the World Bank have faced significant delays; the water and sanitation project in Baucau has also suffered delays due to financial management issues and the 2023 parliamentary elections, which altered the water management structure. Additionally, the Dili Water Supply project has faced challenges in meeting its targets.

Another challenge is groundwater contamination, which poses a threat to public health, as the majority of Timor-Leste's population depends heavily on groundwater. In Dili, many communities use groundwater through private pipes. The health consequences are significant. Research on the Wastewater Management Strategy⁶ shows that 73.8% of children in the surveyed communities experienced diarrhea and during the rainy season, the risk of waterborne diseases is extremely high. This situation is further aggravated by climate change (water crises and flooding), which exacerbates water-related problems.

Recommendations:

- Allocate budget to channel water from existing major irrigation systems down to the *suco* (village) and *aldeia* (hamlet) levels. This includes constructing new irrigation canals where none exist and rehabilitating damaged ones to ensure a continuous water supply for rice paddies, farm plots, and other productive activities.
- Prioritize investment in agriculture and water to increase sustainable agricultural productivity and facilitate farmers' access to local markets. This must be completed with the goal of improving food security and reducing Timor-Leste's dependence on imported products that can be produced domestically.

⁵ file:///C:/Users/Hp/Downloads/Final-Main-Report_TLPHC-Census_WEB.pdf

⁶ <file:///C:/Users/Hp/Downloads/land-13-00799WastewaterManagementStrategyforResilientCities.pdf>

- Strengthen technical assistance programs by increasing the number of agricultural extension workers at the local level. Ensure the provision of quality technical support and guarantee that any technology utilized is appropriate for the needs of Timorese farmers.
- Achieve universal clean water coverage through an integrated approach by strengthening project management. Improve the capacity of the Ministry through BTL, E.P. (Bee Timor-Leste, Public Enterprise) and the SMASA secretariats to manage water project funds with transparency, accountability, and sustainability.

THE RIGHT TO HEALTH

In accordance with the 2022 UPR recommendations, Timor-Leste is committed to improving services to provide access to healthcare by ensuring equal access to quality health services for all citizens throughout the national territory.

The primary concerns in Timor-Leste's health sector include the quality of service in hospitals, persistent malnutrition, rising rates of infectious diseases, the threats posed by climate change, and the urgent need to strengthen the management of the health system and the public sector workforce.

Malnutrition remains a major challenge, contributing to high infant mortality rates and leaving children vulnerable to disease. A lack of immunization results in many children missing routine vaccinations, making them susceptible to preventable diseases. According to recent data from the World Health Organization (WHO)⁷, it was estimated in 2024 that 11% of children globally (representing approximately 20 million children) missed or did not receive the first dose of the DTP vaccine (diphtheria, tetanus, and pertussis). According to WHO data⁸, the leading causes of death in Timor-Leste are tuberculosis, stroke, and ischemic heart disease.

Timor-Leste's health system continues to face significant pressure due to infectious disease outbreaks. The dengue crisis in January 2026 was particularly severe, increasing the total number of cases. More than 380 cases and 5 deaths (children aged 1–10) were registered in just one month. Another risk is that Timor-Leste remains vulnerable to other diseases, such as malaria, which is exacerbated by poverty and weak water and sanitation infrastructure. Added to this, the risks of climate change threaten public health and increase pressure on the health system. The impacts include flooding, droughts, and cyclones, which increase cases of water-related diseases, rising temperatures and other health issues.

A lack of infrastructure in municipalities and administrative posts, unequal distribution of health professionals, delays in the medical supply chain, and a lack of clean water and electricity in some health facilities make these facilities highly vulnerable. There are reports of medicine shortages in remote health centre.

Although the Government has taken some steps to resolve these issues through audits, new laws, and strategic plans, Timor-Leste's health sector faces a complex combination of immediate crises and long-term structural challenges.

⁷ <https://www.who.int/news-room/fact-sheets/detail/immunization-coverage>

⁸ <https://data.who.int/countries/626>

Recommendations:

- **Develop a National Immunization Strategy:** The Ministry of Health must develop this strategy to ensure sustainable financing and reach all children.
- **Strengthen domestic resource mobilization:** Increase government investment in health through the state budget rather than relying solely on donors, and conduct regular audits of health expenditures to ensure transparency and accountability.
- **Launch public education campaigns:** Combat vaccine misinformation and maintain active surveillance for dengue, malaria, and other tropical diseases, as climate change is increasing these risks.
- **Create specialized training programs:** Focus on priority areas such as maternal health, neonatal care, paediatrics, and anaesthesia. This should include establishing a clear career structure for nurses and doctors at the National Hospital and local health centre.
- **Provide continuous mentorship and technical assistance:** Support health teams at both primary and secondary levels and implement financial incentives for health professionals serving in remote areas.
- **Implement the Multisectoral National Action Plan for Nutrition,** Involve the ministries of health, social affairs, agriculture, education, and finance to effectively reduce malnutrition in Timor-Leste.
- **Incorporate the impacts of climate change into national and municipal health planning,** Strengthen the resilience of health infrastructure by ensuring clean water and electricity in all health centre, including the preparation of a climate emergency response system that involves the health sector.

THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION

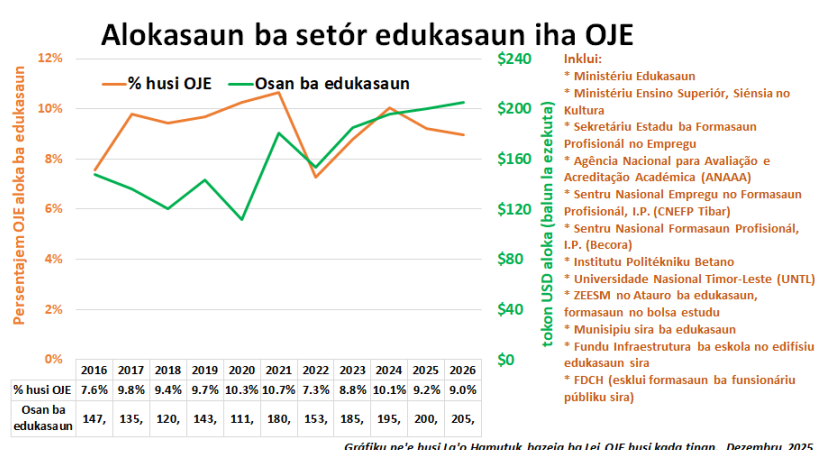
In accordance with the 2022 UPR recommendations, Timor-Leste is committed to focused on several key areas, including increased budget allocation, improved school infrastructure, enhanced teacher quality, and expanded access in rural areas. The Government accepted recommendations to prioritize education within the state budget and to ensure that all schools are equipped with clean water, sanitation facilities, classrooms, libraries, and laboratories. Additional commitments include strengthening teacher training and qualifications; providing transportation and scholarships for students in remote regions; promoting inclusive education for children with special needs and advancing gender equality; and establishing school nutrition programs. Furthermore, the Government pledged to enhance inter-ministerial coordination, improve data and monitoring systems, develop contingency plans for climate-related disruptions, integrate peace and human rights education into the national curriculum, and mobilize local resources to reduce donor dependency.

While these commitments were formally accepted, their implementation has been hindered by significant challenges, including political inconsistency among policymakers, constrained budgets, and the Government's persistent focus on physical infrastructure and extractive industries over human development.

A central obstacle is political instability, driven by inconsistent policymaking and the recurring practice revision of the curriculum. This disrupts long-term planning and creates systemic instability. The weak coordination between public policy objectives and partisan interests remains a major barrier, undermining the continuity of sustainable education strategies from preschool through primary education.

Human resource management and data systems also pose critical problems. Despite ongoing investment in teacher training, educational outcomes remain poor, partly because the Educational Management Information System (EMIS) has not been updated with reliable, comprehensive data. Without a robust database, the Government struggles to accurately assess teacher deployment needs or allocate resources according to capacity and geographic location factors that directly affect the effectiveness of classroom instruction.

Finally, the education system perpetuates social inequality through a growing divide between private and public schools. The proliferation of high-quality private institutions has created an education pathway accessible primarily to affluent families, while public schools continue to struggle with shortages of learning materials, libraries, and classrooms. This trend reinforces an elite, exclusionary system and underscores the State’s failure to guarantee equal access to quality education for all citizens.



The greatest challenge is the allocation of the State General Budget (OGE), which has remained stagnant at only 9% to 10% for the past decade. This figure is considerably low compared to regional benchmarks—such as Vietnam's 20%—indicating that the State has yet to demonstrate the bold financial commitment necessary to transform education into the foundation of national productivity. This constrained budget limits investment in technology and teacher quality, thereby reinforcing the inequality that continues to widen across society.

Therefore, a fundamental paradigm shift is required one that positions education not merely as a routine public service, but as a strategic investment for social transformation.

Recommendations:

1. **Structural and Financial Reform:** The Government must undertake structural and financial reforms by increasing the State General Budget allocation for the education sector from 10% to 16–20%, with the specific objective of funding the rehabilitation of rural school infrastructure. Concurrently, it must establish social audit mechanisms at the municipal level that empower civil society and parents to monitor school financial management, thereby ensuring transparency and preventing corruption at the grassroots level.

2. Human Resources: Regarding human resources, the Government must value teachers by implementing a meritocratic system that offers dignified remuneration and adequate incentives for those serving in remote areas. Short-term training programs should be replaced by continuous in-school mentoring programs, conducted by senior teachers for new educators, to ensure the quality of creative and qualified teaching methods.
3. Curriculum Contextualization: Curriculum reform is required through the integration of mother tongue languages with official languages, utilizing didactic materials that are relevant to local culture. Secondary education reform must also be linked to the national productive sector through vocational education, and incorporate education on citizenship, democracy, and the environment, so that students can develop the capacity to analyse and address problems within their communities.
4. Digital Transformation and Inclusion: Digital transformation and inclusion must be prioritized through investment in internet connectivity and the distribution of digital learning materials across municipalities to bridge the information gap. The State must also remodel all school facilities to be disability-friendly and provide teachers with specialized training to ensure that children with special needs receive fair and inclusive support.
5. Participatory Governance: The Government must promote participatory governance through decentralized management, granting schools the autonomy to create additional programs that respond to local community needs through coordination between school directors, parents, and *xefe suku* (village chiefs). Radical transparency must also be implemented by publishing performance reports for all schools on an online platform, compelling the Government to intervene promptly in schools that fail to meet quality standards.
6. A Shift in Mindset: the transformation of education in Timor-Leste requires a shift in mindset, moving from simply building schools to building an inclusive learning system. Education must empower students to become masters of their own futures and critical citizens for the nation's development. Quality education must be treated as a fundamental right for all citizens throughout the national territory, not merely a privilege for the elite in the cities.

Sincerely



Marta da Silva



Celestino Gusmão



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