

Learning Question 2: *What conditions or factors successfully facilitate the institutionalization and/or implementation at scale of good practices that improve health system outcomes, and why? What are lessons learned regarding planning for sustainability and achieving results at scale?*

IMPROVING CIVIC ENGAGEMENT AND ADVOCACY FOR TIMOR-LESTE HEALTH SYSTEMS STRENGTHENING THROUGH REBAS-TL

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HEALTH SYSTEMS
STRENGTHENING
ACCELERATOR

Context

Describe the context in which the activity takes place. What is the health problem that you are trying to solve? What health system challenges contribute to this problem? How was the approach that you decided to institutionalize/scale up originally implemented? Why did you decide to institutionalize/scale it up?

The Government of Timor-Leste (GOTL) faced numerous challenges that restricted its ability to govern, finance and deliver health services effectively and sustainably. Among the challenges in the health sector is a lack of community participation. Various Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) exist in Timor-Leste but are not empowered to advocate for the needs of the community and are limited in their capacity to communicate directly with the Ministry of Health (MoH). There was a lack of effective feedback mechanisms between the community, CSOs and the MoH.

The USAID Health System Sustainability Activity (Activity) identified a need to facilitate empowerment of CSOs working in the health sector to better represent their constituencies and allow greater advocacy for their communities to the MoH. Defining and strengthening the roles of these CSOs were a necessary first step towards developing a relationship with the MoH and building more effective communication among these key actors. This is a key building block to strengthening the health system in Timor-Leste.

Activity Description

Describe in detail the process you used to scale up or institutionalize this approach. What government agencies or other stakeholders did you work with and how did you engage them? How did you build government/stakeholder ownership or buy-in? How was the scale-up or institutionalization funded? How did you ensure sustainability?

The Activity first conducted a thorough review all the CSOs in TL by working closely with FONGTIL, an umbrella organization of all CSOs in Timor-Leste. Though CSOs are a key player in the health system, only a few health CSOs were identified initially – many were dormant or not organized. The Activity sought to identify all the CSOs working in health that could play a key role in the health system.

Once these CSOs were identified, the Activity aimed to facilitate a greater collective voice for these CSOs by building a network of health CSOs. The Activity held a series of 6 workshops to begin the work of organizing the health CSOs into a strong network that would advocate for the community. These workshops led to the establishment of **Rede Ba Saúde Timor-Leste (REBAS-TL)** or the Timor-Leste Health Network of Civil Society Organizations. The network was launched in May 2022.

The network's objective is to coordinate the CSOs efforts, speak with a collective voice on behalf of their constituents and advocate for policies to strengthen the health system's ability to offer high quality, accessible and inclusive health services. In particular, the network will

- help increase CSOs awareness of health services and citizens' rights,
- use participatory processes to develop new engagement mechanisms,
- bring CSOs' voices into local council discussions,
- promote information sharing among CSOs and
- build the institutional capacity of CSOs.

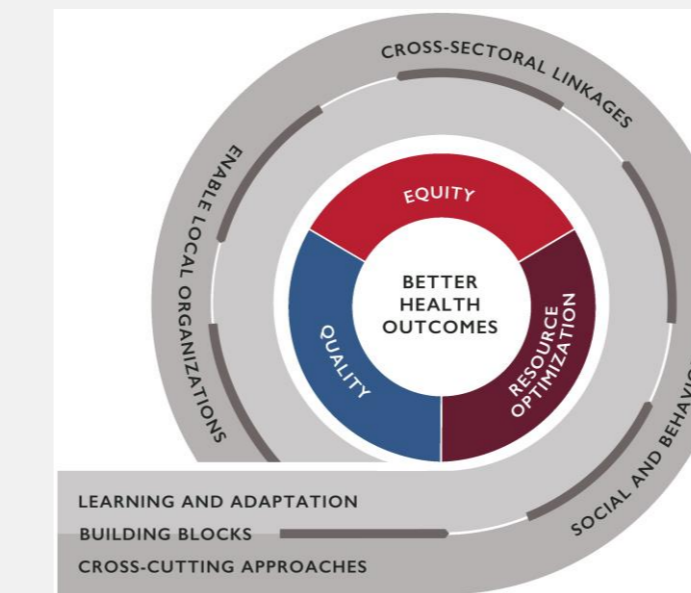
The Activity will continue to provide technical assistances to REBAS-TL to finalize its internal structure and governance, identify priority areas of engagement and advocacy both at the national and sub-national levels, and finalize its action plan and implementation.

The Activity assisted the MoH to finalize a partnership manual that will institutionalize MoH and CSO engagement.

Activity Impact

How did this activity strengthen the health system? Which components of the **health system** did you act on (for example, did you support improvements in financing, cross-sectoral coordination, governance, local ownership, information, human resources, behavior of health system actors, service delivery, or medical products, vaccines, or technologies)? How did the pieces of your activity come together to impact equity, quality, and/or resource optimization in the health system? How did these improvements in equity, quality, and/or resource optimization lead to better health outcomes? How does this activity contribute to health system resiliency and/or sustainability?

The formation of the REBAS-TL CSO network is strengthening the health system by focusing on the components of governance, local ownership and the behavior of key actors. Numerous CSOs existed but were not empowered to speak for their communities and had little awareness or understanding of their role as advocates. There was little to no communication between the community, CSOs and the MoH, therefore organizing the CSOs and strengthening their roles in the health system would allow greater governance through civic engagement. Improving CSOs capacities to use more evidenced based advocacy will further contribute to a stronger role to help monitor and report key health systems building blocks to ensure health equity, quality, and resource optimization. Building greater collaboration between the MoH leadership and health CSOs will ensure that capacity development and ownership will continue engagement beyond Activity project implementation.



Evidence

What evidence do you have that the scale-up or institutionalization of this approach was successful? How can you best show what your activity accomplished? How do you know that you met your goals? Is the evidence able to be measured? Graphs or charts may be useful here to show this evidence.

The Activity worked with the FONGTIL consortium to identify and bring 42 active health CSOs together to the REBAS-TL network. The launch included the country's health leadership and key stakeholders including the MoH and the U.S. Embassy and USAID.

The Activity and FONGTIL organized and facilitated 6 workshops with the following results:

- shaped and formulated terms of reference (ToR) for REBAS-TL that will guide health CSOs' engagement and advocacy for health system strengthening;
- raised health CSOs' awareness of the health system and their roles in health system strengthening.
- raised awareness of existing MoH mechanisms of engagement in health system strengthening; and
- defined key priorities for capacity development with practical approaches to strengthening CSOs' advocacy strategies.

The Activity contributed to the review of the MoH's draft Partnership and Cooperation procedures manual and proposed a clear engagement mechanism to promote the regular exchange of information between MoH and CSOs. This will facilitate CSO contribution to the MoH's health planning and priority identification. As a result, the MoH invited REBAS-TL and its CSOs members to a consultation workshop planned for June 20th, 2022.

Since its establishment, REBAS-TL has already been invited to attend several meetings by key development partners including the MoH to participate in the Health Sector Procurement Evaluation Workshop, Timor-Leste Development Partners Meeting, Human Resource for Health National Workshop, and the MoH Partnership Manual consultation workshop.

Facilitators

What aspects of the health system, context, or external partner support helped make this successful? For example, were there existing working groups in place that enabled efficient coordination between stakeholders on this activity? Did you use a tool or knowledge resource from a global partner like WHO or UNICEF to help inform your activity?

The focus of the Activity in facilitating greater collaboration between CSOs and the MoH is a new approach in TL.

The Timor-Leste government provides substantial support annually managed by SASCAS to assist Timorese CSOs play a key role in contributing to national development. The Activity coordinated closely with this unit to establish REBAS-TL.

The Activity coordinated closely with the USAID NGO Advocacy for Good Governance implemented by Counterpart International to share advocacy resources with the CSOs.

The Activity also worked closely with the Partnership for Human Development funded by the Australian government and implemented by Abt Australia to finalize the manual that will guide the partnership of the CSOs and MoH.

Challenges

What were some problems or challenges that you faced during your activity implementation? Did you expect these challenges or were they unanticipated? How did you respond to these challenges?

Some of the key challenges to civic engagement encountered in the past year are:

- Continued changes in leadership affect the capacity development and engagement of CSOs with the MoH.
- Health CSOs are viewed by the MoH as an implementor of health service delivery rather than as a stakeholder for policy reforms and advocacy or as representatives of their constituents. Raising awareness of this CSO roles required extra efforts and greater sensitivity.
- CSOs needed to have clearer advocacy strategies. These challenges created opportunities for new approaches especially in handling leadership changes. Thorough documentation of any meetings held can be passed on to multiple counterparts throughout changes in leadership.

Lessons Learned

What lessons have you learned while you implemented this activity? How will this impact future activities or approaches? What advice would you give to other implementers and health systems actors in other countries that might want to adapt your approach?

Some of the lessons learned from the Activity's assistance towards the establishment of the REBAS-TL network are:

- As an implementing partner, it is crucial to set realistic expectations from the start and plan for smaller but achievable goals.
- Key actors in the health sector need greater understanding of the role of advocacy in order to build sustainable and strategic partnerships. Understanding the concept of advocacy early on is essential in seeking the civic engagement necessary to help strengthen the health system in TL.
- Timorese CSOs and the MoH have been working alongside each other for more than 2 decades, receiving substantial technical support from international donors but realizes it will still be difficult to sustain these initiatives on their own. Empowering key actors, defining and helping strengthen their roles and increasing collaboration and communication among the key actors are important to facilitate ownership of any initiative and contribute to its sustainability.
- The existing engagement mechanisms in Timor-Leste health sector need to go beyond just the reporting of health projects to actual engagement of CSOs in health system strengthening.

