



Progress Report: Improving Civic Engagement and Advocacy for Health System Strengthening

Local Health System Sustainability Project
Task Order 1, USAID Integrated Health Systems IDIQ



Local Health System Sustainability Project

The Local Health System Sustainability Project (LHSS) under the USAID Integrated Health Systems IDIQ helps low- and middle-income countries transition to sustainable, self-financed health systems as a means to support access to universal health coverage. The project works with partner countries and local stakeholders to reduce financial barriers to care and treatment, ensure equitable access to essential health services for all people, and improve the quality of health services. Led by Abt Associates, the five-year project will build local capacity to sustain strong health system performance, supporting countries on their journey to self-reliance and prosperity.

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Background

Civil society organizations (CSOs) have played a long and powerful role in Timor-Leste's history. Civil society led the resistance against foreign rule and local CSOs worked with international donors to aid Timorese families after the country won independence in 2002 (Asian Development Bank 2019). Today, Timor-Leste's umbrella NGO body *Forum Organizaasaun Naun Governental Timor-Leste* (FONGTIL) has more than 200 local CSOs as registered members, 43 of which are CSOs working on health-related programs.

To strengthen CSO action, collaboration and advocacy for health, the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) Health System Sustainability Activity in Timor-Leste supported FONGTIL to establish *Rede Ba Saúde Timor-Leste* (REBAS-TL, the Timor-Leste Health Network). Formally launched in May 2022, REBAS-TL will create a space for collaboration, learning, joint action and advocacy among health CSOs. In doing so, the network aims to enhance CSO reach and engagement with the Ministry of Health (MoH) to shape a sustainable health system in Timor-Leste.

Recently, the USAID Activity held consultations with REBAS-TL and its members to identify existing engagement mechanisms between the MoH and CSOs and seek recommendations to improve engagement overall. Based on these recommendations, the USAID Activity and REBAS-TL have co-developed a pathway describing how the network can evolve into a trusted and effective collaboration and best represent the community's voice across health issues. As this pathway unfolds, the Activity will continue to seek recommendations from REBAS-TL to ensure strong buy-in.

This document captures this pathway plan, progress so far, and next steps.

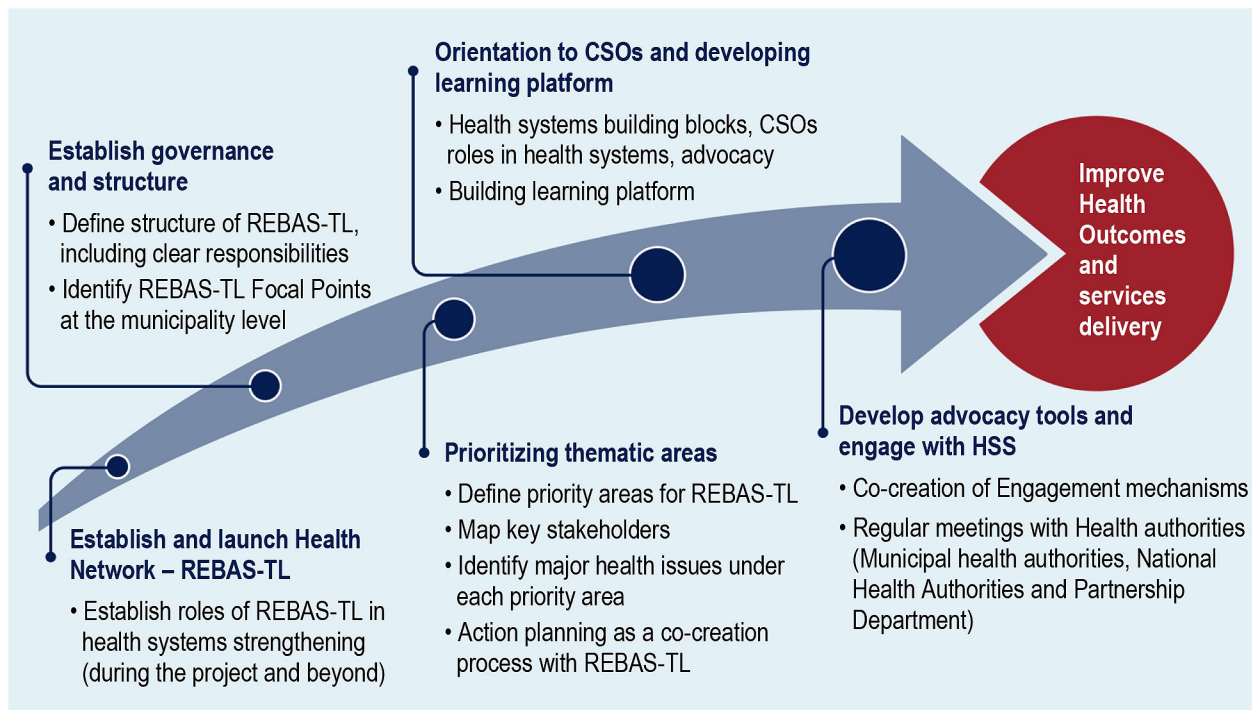


Progress Report

The launch of the REBAS-TL network in May 2022 was an important step in uniting and strengthening health CSOs in Timor-Leste. The USAID Activity has been supporting FONGTIL and REBAS-TL members to develop a clear vision for the network and define its focus areas. The mission of REBAS-TL is to develop a qualified, respected, and engaged network of health CSOs to effectively represent the needs and priorities of their constituents to health policymakers. In doing so, the network aims to promote a quality and inclusive health system that is responsive to the needs and priorities of its citizens.

Figure 1 below summarizes the overall vision for REBAS-TL and its pathway to improve CSO engagement in health system strengthening.

Figure 1: The path ahead to health systems strengthening through REBAS-TL



Progress and Next Steps

Formation and Launch

REBAS-TL was formally launched on 5 May 2022 as the country's first-ever CSO health advocacy network. Forty-three health CSOs organized to form the network with support and technical assistance from FONGTIL and the USAID Activity. In the months prior to its launch, the USAID Activity and FONGTIL jointly organized and facilitated six workshops to support discussions among CSOs and facilitate decision making on the form, functions, and priorities of REBAS-TL.



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These six workshops culminated in a national workshop in April 2022, during which CSOs finalized the REBAS-TL terms of reference (ToR). During the workshop CSO representatives also shared perspectives on how best to address barriers to CSO engagement in health system strengthening. The REBAS-TL ToR cover its vision, mission, structure, roles and responsibilities, and priority areas of work.

Participants at the REBAS-TL launch event included the country's health leadership and key stakeholders including H.E. Vice-Minister of Health, Mr. Bonifacio Maucoli dos Reis; H.E. Chargé d'Affaires, U.S. Embassy in Timor-Leste, Mr. Tom Daley; and Senior Advisor to Serviço Sociedade Civil e Auditoria Social (ASCAS), Office of Prime Minister, Mr. Filipe da Costa, among others.

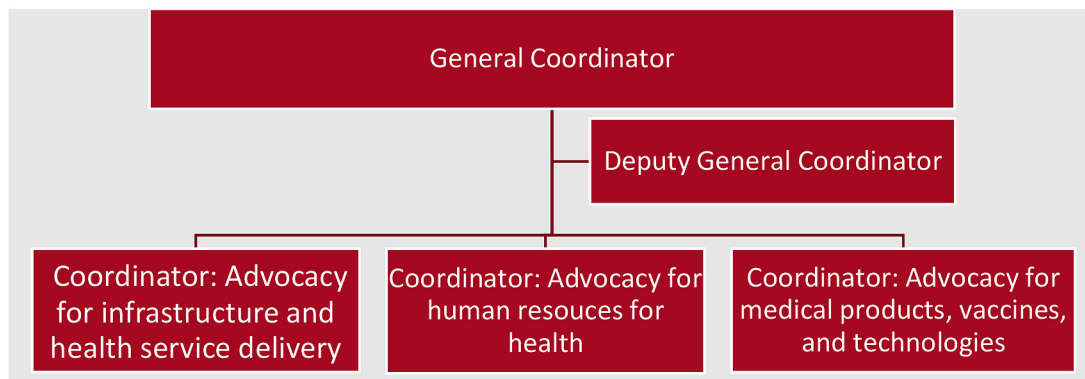
Establish Governance and Structure

To ensure it plays an active role at all levels, REBAS-TL will have a structure at both the national and subnational (municipality and village) levels, as described below.

National level:

The finalized REBAS-TL ToR propose the national-level leadership structure depicted in Figure 2. This structure includes a General Coordinator, a Deputy General Coordinator, and three Thematic Coordinators. The General Coordinator was onboarded in May 2022 and has been performing his role as the national convenor. The Activity co-convened a national level workshop on 23-24 June 2022. The internal structure of REBAS-TL was finalized during this workshop, during which three Advocacy Coordinators were elected to plan health advocacy efforts for specific areas and cross cutting areas of health system strengthening.

Figure 2: National-level organizational structure of REBAS-TL



Subnational level:

Based on discussions with CSO members, the USAID Activity recommends that REBAS-TL onboard community 'Focal Points' by July 2022. Focal Points will be identified in communities and will have experience working in health programs. Eventually, Focal Points will conduct health advocacy and civic engagement activities in their respective municipalities and villages. For example, Focal Points will actively participate in existing advocacy mechanisms at the municipal and village level to present community issues and help facilitate their resolution. The USAID Activity is working towards developing clear roles and responsibilities for these REBAS-TL Focal Points and providing training on the basic building blocks for advocacy.



Prioritize thematic areas

Health is a broad area with multiple issues of importance. As REBAS-TL gets settled and started, it will need to prioritize its advocacy priorities. During formative discussions, health CSOs listed several possible areas of focus, including:

- Communicable diseases
- Epidemic management
- Non-communicable diseases
- Maternal and child health
- Malnutrition
- Pharmaceuticals (medicine availability)
- Adolescent sexual and reproductive health
- Psychosocial and mental health
- Water and sanitation
- Inclusive services (Health for all people)
- Tobacco control
- Environmental health
- Quality of food products imported to Timor-Leste
- MoH's policies, laws, and plans
- Financial management in the health sector
- Human resources for health
- Logistical support for the health sector
- Cross-cutting issues such as youth, disability rights, and gender

REBAS-TL will prioritize advocacy issues through a participatory process that includes mapping of stakeholders who can play an influential role in each thematic area. The USAID Activity and REBAS-TL co-convened a workshop on 23 June 2022 to determine REBAS-TL's initial focus areas through this process. As a result, CSOs listed 3 primary priority areas: nutrition, human resources for health, and water. At the same workshop, REBAS-TL began to develop advocacy action plans at the national and sub-national levels.

Develop a learning platform and orient CSO

Many learning resources will be created as the USAID Activity begins conducting capacity development activities with REBAS-TL and its CSO members. This will create a need for an effective information exchange platform. The Activity proposed to build a learning platform to host such resources and promote their exchange. REBAS-TL members can use the platform to access stored resources and share new information, ask questions, and seek support from experts to advance their respective health agenda. REBAS-TL members discussed platform design during the REBAS-TL workshop on 23-24 June 2022. Once developed, REBAS-TL will organize a follow-up workshop to orient members on how the learning platform can be managed and used effectively.

Develop advocacy tools and engage CSOs for health system strengthening

As REBAS-TL begins to shortlist thematic areas and develop action plans, it will become important to provide advocacy tools so that members can better advocate for their respective causes. The USAID Activity recently developed a brief guide, *'Advocating for Health: A short*



handbook on advocacy for CSOs promoting inclusive and effective healthcare in Timor-Leste. In the future, the Activity will provide technical assistance to REBAS-TL as it develops more extensive training materials designed to strengthen CSOs' understanding of advocacy. Guidance will enable CSOs to strengthen their capacity to advocate effectively with the MoH.

Way forward

The Activity and REBAS-TL will continue to engage with various departments within the MoH, including the Department of Partnership and Cooperation. This initial engagement will serve as an entry point for health CSO engagement in health system strengthening. The Activity will also look to leverage the experience of other USAID partners and collaborate with the USAID NGO Advocacy for Good Governance Activity to assist health CSOs.

In the year ahead, the Activity and REBAS-TL network plan four major next steps:

1. Establish governance and structure

- Identify CSO members to hold key positions in the proposed national structure for REBAS-TL;
- Select REBAS-TL focal points in discussion with health CSOs; and
- Develop clear roles and responsibilities for REBAS-TL focal points and orient them on civic engagement and health advocacy.

2. Prioritize thematic areas

- Shortlist thematic areas from the broad list of areas and develop action plans for advocacy.

3. Develop a learning platform and orient CSOs

- Finalize the design of the learning platform and initiate the platform's development.

4. Develop advocacy tools and engage CSOs in health system strengthening

- Create appropriate tools for advocacy (e.g., white paper, status report, stories from the field).



References

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<https://www.adb.org/sites/default/files/publication/498631/civil-society-brief-timor-leste.pdf>

USAID Health System Sustainability Activity's workshops report 2021-2022 (forthcoming)