A. Background

SDG16+ Case Study Overarching Theme:
“Drivers for sustainable development: Timorese youth”

Timor-Leste’s youth (females and males) are both the guardians and catalysts of continued peace and sustainable development. This case study highlights the strong political participation of youth in a context of excellent civil society space, focusing on Timorese efforts to include youth in decision-making, with special reference to ensuring responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels (SDG target 16.7). It also looks at the important area of youth and employment as it relates to reducing the risk of youth engaging in violence (SDG target 16.1) also impacting positively on SDGs 1, 5, 8 and 10.

1. Which UNCT members have collaborated on this case study?
   - UNDP
   - Human Rights Adviser’s Unit
   - UNFPA
   - UN Women
   - UNICEF

2. Which national partners (governmental and non-governmental) were involved in developing this case study and how?
   - G7+ Secretariat
   - Secretary of State for Youth and Sports
   - Ministry of Interior, National Department for Prevention of Community Conflict
   - Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion
   - Timor-Leste’s National Youth Council
   - NGO BELUN – Director, Luis Ximenes, luis.belun@gmail.com
   - NGO HATUTAN
   - Umbrella NGO, Association of Persons with Disabilities (ADTL)

3. Does the case study illustrate one or several phases or levels?
   - Adapting SDG 16
   - Implementing SDG 16
   - Monitoring & Reporting on SDG 16
   - National level
   - Regional level
   - Local level

B. Case Study

OPTION 1 (pre-structured)

4. Country context for the achievement of SDG 16

The second youngest nation in Asia, with 62% of the population under the age of 25, Timor-Leste is committed to transforming the existing youth bulge into a “demographic dividend” by 2030. The Government is making efforts to include youth in development, working closely with a range of state Institutions, civil society, UN, private sector, church-based organizations and development partners. The Government recognizes the need for special attention to priority...
youth groups to address specific challenges they face, and ‘leave no-one behind’ in line with the key promise of the 2030 Development Agenda. Youth themselves are forging initiatives to ensure their voices are heard, making good use of the large civic space that exists in Timor-Leste. In 2018, both Freedom House and the Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit ranked Timor-Leste #1 in South-East Asia for political rights and civil liberties. At the same time, culturally Timor-Leste remains a gerontocracy as “young adults in Timor-Leste often say that, at present, older generations do not let them fully participate in the political sphere” (Ten Brinke, 2018). Some groups face additional challenges to participate in society, including youth with disabilities and youth members of the lesbian, gay, bi-sexual, transgender and intersex (LGBT) community, due to stigma, discrimination and a lack of opportunities in their lives (BELUN, UN, Youth briefs 2018). About 20 % of youth between the ages of 15-24 are not employed nor in education or training (NEET) (Education Monograph/Census Thematic Report, 2017). There are concerns that in particular NEET youth are drawn into martial arts groups some of which are involved in violence at the community level.

Apparent high youth political participation
Timor-Leste has achieved significant development gains in its young history, as evidenced by thriving electoral participation, especially among the youth. The number of registered voters increased by 25% from 626,503 in 2012 to 784,286 in 2018. Concerted efforts were made by the nation’s two Electoral Management Bodies, supported by the UN and other partners, to encourage youth to take part in the electoral processes. Electoral turnout has been impressive, with 76% and 80.98% of registered voters participating in the 2017 Parliamentary Elections and the 2018 Early Parliamentary Elections respectively, the latter representing the highest turnout since the restoration of independence in 2002. That Timor-Leste has set the voting age at 17 is another indication of the country recognizing the potential of young people. In the two recent elections, slightly over 50% of registered voters were between the age of 17 and 30, showing that a key democratic decision lays in the hands of Timor-Leste’s young people. While there is no data to assess the actual turnout of young voters on election day, the fact that many youth, female and male, are registered indicate that they are interested in engaging in political life. A major factor of this engagement with electoral processes is the enduring legacy of the 1999 referendum which enabled the country to restore independence.

The country has made additional efforts to develop youth political participation in recent years. As early as 2009, the country established a Youth Parliament, composed of young Timorese between 12 and 17 years old, who represent their peers from their municipalities in national debates on key issues and make recommendations to the National Parliament and the Government. In addition, each political party has a youth wing enshrined in party statutes.

In addition to taking part in political processes, youth are increasingly occupying existing civil society spaces to make their voices heard. In the past few years, youth have established dynamic and vocal groups like HATUTAN (meaning transmit/communicate/connect), the Grupu Feminista iha Timor (The Feminist Group in Timor-Leste) and the Movimentu Feto Foinsa (Movement of Women Youth). Making good use of social media, but also other ways of speaking up, these groups have impact on decision-makers and the public alike. In 2017, the Grupu Feminista played an important role in successfully calling for the continuation of the existing policy on family planning, when a draft revised policy that would cover married couples only was being proposed. The youth group HATUTAN successfully led the organization of the first two Pride Marches in Timor-Leste in 2017 and 2018 and increases awareness throughout the country on LGBTI rights. This ongoing work received a key boost in July 2017 when the then Prime Minister, Dr. Rui Maria de Araújo, delivered a public message calling for acceptance of young people of different sexual orientations within their families and in society as a whole.

Despite the impressive gains, youth face challenges to participate politically. Customary gerontocratic social structures in Timor-Leste are reinforced by the deep respect and reverence for the older generation that endured severe hardship during the struggle for independence. Demanding social and political decision-making power before one’s time can be deemed disrespectful. Accordingly, young people believe they are to wait until the older generations leave the political scene before assuming leadership roles. In practice, the two youth representatives on each Sucu (village) councils, where they have guaranteed seats at all meetings, have very limited influence over actual decision-making (Ten Brinke, 2018).
5. Efforts to achieve SDG 16

Efforts targeting youth to achieve SDG 16 – sustaining peace through employment

Timor-Leste has demonstrated strong commitment to ensuring sustainable peace: it is a leading member of the G7+ community of post-conflict nations and was a strong advocate for the inclusion of SDG16 in the 2030 Development Agenda. The country is cognizant of the opportunity but also the threat that this youth bulge can present to existing peace. The country’s SDG Roadmap (2017) identifies the inclusion of youth in development as an enabler to achieve SDGs, if strategic investments in this group are made, and notes that potential of youth being agents of change. To better address a variety of youth needs, already in 2016, Timor-Leste adopted its first National Youth Policy following extensive consultations with youth. The policy calls on all partners – youth groups, government institutions, the private sector, development agencies, donors – to contribute to the wellbeing of youth and outlines five key areas: education; health; employment; civic participation; and freedom from violence and crime. The State budget for 2019 saw a decrease in investment in most of the areas covered in the Policy.

Youth, being such a significant part of the population, exert pressures on the economy and social services, while unemployment is highest among youth. The SDG Roadmap identifies youth as a potential source of instability. Data shows that young people are indeed overrepresented among the unemployed. According to the 2015 Census, people aged 15-34 amounted for 77% of the 9% unemployed in the adult population, and, as noted above, 20% of youth between the ages of 15-24 are not employed and not in education or training (NEET) (Education Monograph/Census Thematic Report, 2017). That youth unemployment poses a risk to peace in Timor-Leste was affirmed by youth themselves in the 2016 Youth Well-Being Survey, which targeted 15-34 year olds. Many youths noted that, if young people have nothing to do or if they are NEET, they may be tempted to carry out socially undesirable activities, such as using drugs or creating conflict (Human Development Report, 2018).

To support Timorese and its youth to engage in constructive activities to support themselves economically but ultimately also benefit the nation overall, the Government has invested in vocational training, with several centers functioning in a number of municipalities across the country. Conscious of the importance of the need to diversify the country’s oil and gas dependent economy and to develop productive sectors like agriculture and tourism, in the meanwhile, the Government, under agreements with Australia and South Korea, has already sent more than 3,000 Timorese overseas as labour migrants for more than a decade. Other efforts that particularly target youth include the Knua Juventude Fila Liman (KNFL) or Youth Centre for Entrepreneurship, by the Government with key support from the UN. KNFL is a one-stop youth innovation and entrepreneurship hub, where youth access information and are trained to improve their employability and entrepreneurship skills, to make their voices heard and engage in development. The Centre reached more than 5,000 young people in 2017, supporting many to start their own business and become entrepreneurs.

6. Results so far and Way Forward

7. Lessons Learned

Lessons learned and ways forward

Timor-Leste can truly pride itself on its strong commitments to include youth in the development of the nation and on the increasing role that youth play in the space that is available to them to contribute therein. In order to safeguard the achievements so far and to further strengthen inclusion, existing commitments require sustained investments to empower youth. Knowledge and skills of youth require further development to tackle youth exclusion from the job market and to create livelihoods. Youth call for higher investment in the quality of education and in productive sectors like agriculture and tourism. In addition, they seek better access to finance, and appeal for increased number of vocational training centres and hubs like the Knua Juventude Fila Liman, including at the municipal level.
To harness but also the maintain the high interest of youth to participate in the political arena, Government, Parliament, but also civil society, donors and UN should more systematically provide spaces for youth and its representatives, like the Youth Parliament. It is important that they can meaningfully participate in all processes that affect their lives, and that concerted efforts are made to seriously consider their opinions. It is promising that, as part of the government’s development of mid-level governance structures, some pilot municipalities have started to establish inclusive working groups where youth are represented.

In line with Timor-Leste’s strong commitment to the 2030 Agenda’s principle of leaving no-one behind, in any efforts whether by Government or its partners, it is essential to engage regularly and meaningfully with persons from specific groups, like young women, youth with disabilities and members of the LGBTI community. Ultimately, for development to be sustainable, and for Timor-Leste to truly reap its demographic dividend, development will need to benefit all.