

La'o Hamutuk

The Timor-Leste Institute for Development Monitoring and Analysis

Rua Hamahon, Kampung Alor, Dili, Timor-Leste

Tel: +670-3321040 or +670-77234330 (mobile) email: laohamutuk@gmail.com

Website: www.laohamutuk.org



Submission from La'o Hamutuk Institute

to

The UN Universal Periodic Review

54th Session of the UPR Working Group of the

UN Human Rights Council

For the

Fourth Universal Periodic Review Cycle

Timor-Leste

Dili, 15 July 2026

Contents

Introduction	1
The Right to an Adequate Standard of Living: Food and Water.....	2
• Food and Water	3
• Access to Clean Water	4
The Right to Health	5
The Right to Education	6

INTRODUCTION

The Timor-Leste Institute for Development Monitoring and Analysis (La'o Hamutuk, 'Walking Together' in English) is an independent, non-partisan civil society organization in Timor-Leste that analyses, educates and advocates for policies that advance 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 advocate for policy decisions that 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. 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 seven recommendations related to the right to an Adequate Standard of Living - Food and Water, twelve recommendations related to the Right to Health, and twelve recommendations related to the Right to Education.

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

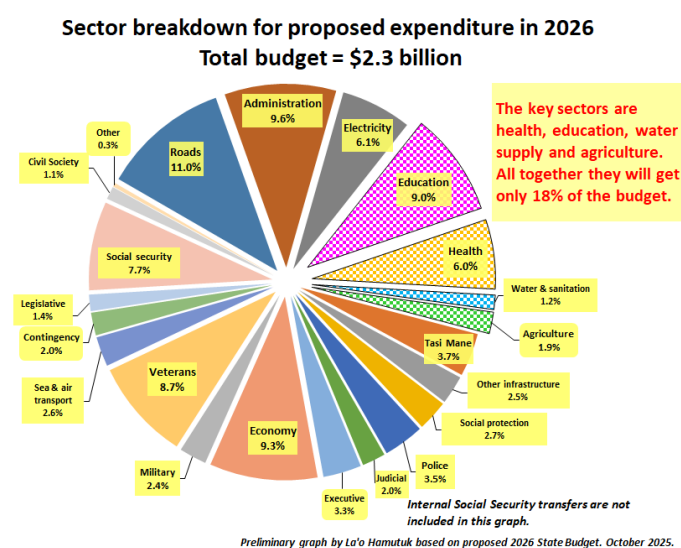
THE RIGHT TO AN ADEQUATE STANDARD OF LIVING: FOOD AND WATER

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 imported food, water shortages, low agricultural productivity, and limited human capacity.

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 during the past two decades. The State Budget for 2026, allocates only 18% to these essential sectors². The government continues to prioritize large-scale infrastructure projects and subsidies with uncertain future benefits over 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>



Food and Water

Government investment in agriculture is essential for food security, household incomes and the rural economy, all of which are necessary to improve people's standard of living. 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 sectors in the nation's economy.

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 is less than the 2025 allocation,³ showing that agriculture is not a priority in Timor-Leste's state policy.

Currently, Timor-Leste's economy continues to rely heavily on past oil and gas revenues. Incomes are low and unemployment because job opportunities are lacking. Efforts to promote agriculture, industry, and services have had limited success; consequently, the nation remains heavily dependent on imports, with a non-oil trade deficit of \$794 million in 2025. Non-oil state revenue has not significantly increased and continues to cover only 11% of the state budget, further aggravating these challenges.

Malnutrition and food insecurity remain major challenges. Most people live in rural areas, where their livelihoods depend on small-scale agriculture (growing various crops on a single plot), fishing, and livestock rearing. 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.

Over many years, the budget allocation for the agriculture sector has continued to focus primarily on flatlands, such as constructing irrigation systems and dams, 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.

2024	Potential Area	Cultivated Area	Harvested Area
Rice plant	80,578	27,782	27,252
Corn	214,525	32,675	31,408

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

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

The Government should facilitate appropriate investments and technical support, and create favorable 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 a tiny percentage of the State budget. In addition, challenges including land, water, and human resources impact domestic food production. Farmers depend on state-constructed irrigation systems to cultivate rice and vegetables. Civil society monitoring has found 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 water and sanitation. Civil society monitoring found that water coverage has not seen significant improvement. Furthermore, road widening projects in many areas have damaged 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, people in some rural communities still need to walk long distances to fetch and carry water to their homes.

Timor-Leste still possesses very weak clean water infrastructure in both rural and urban areas. 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 that infrastructure investment is concentrated in the cities, with rural people (71% of the total population) receiving 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 unimproved category.

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. Research on the Wastewater Management Strategy⁴ shows that 73.8% of children in the surveyed communities experience diarrhea during the rainy season, when the risk of waterborne diseases is extremely high. This situation is further aggravated by climate change (water pollution and flooding), which exacerbates water-related problems.

Recommendations:

- Allocate funds 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.
- 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 of Public Works through BTL, E.P.

⁴ https://mdpi-res.com/d_attachment/land/land-13-00799/article_deploy/land-13-00799.pdf

(Bee Timor-Leste, Public Enterprise) and the SMASA (Municipal Water, Sanitation and Environment Service) 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 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. Many children miss routine vaccinations, making them susceptible to preventable diseases.

Timor-Leste's health system continues to face significant pressure due to infectious disease outbreaks. The dengue crisis in early 2026 was particularly severe. According to ECDC and WHO data, between 1 January and 28 February 2026, a total of 2,906 cases and 17 deaths were reported nationwide. This represents a 10-fold increase compared to February 2025. The majority of cases occurred in Dili (1,714 cases, 10 deaths). The National Hospital Guido Valadares (HNGV) alone recorded 383 cases and 5 deaths among children during the same period. 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. The impacts of climate change include floods, droughts, and cyclones, which increase cases of water-related diseases, rising temperatures, and other health problems.

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 centers. 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.

Recommendations:

- **Develop a National Immunization Strategy for all children:** The Ministry of Health must develop this strategy and ensure sustainable financing.
- **Strengthen domestic resource mobilization:** Increase government investment in health through the state budget rather than relying 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, pediatrics, and anesthesia. This should include establishing clear career structures for nurses and doctors at the National Hospital and local health centers.

- 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 centers, including the preparation of a climate emergency response system that involves the health sector.

THE RIGHT TO EDUCATION

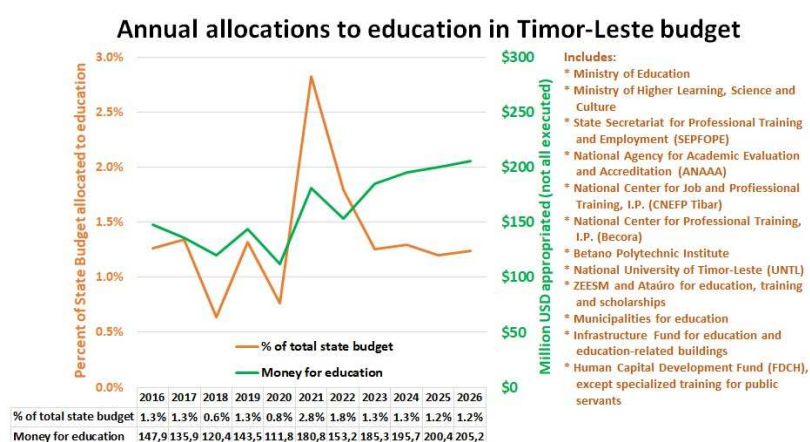
In accordance with the 2022 UPR recommendations, Timor-Leste is committed to focused on several key areas, including increased budget allocations, improved school infrastructure, enhanced teacher quality, and expanded access in rural areas. The Government accepted recommendations to prioritize education within the state budget and to ensure that all schools have adequate 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; advancing gender equality; and establishing school nutrition programs.

Furthermore, the Government pledged to enhance inter-ministerial coordination, improve data and monitoring systems, to develop contingency plans for climate-related disruptions, to integrate peace and human rights education into the national curriculum, and to mobilize local resources to reduce dependency on donors.

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

A central obstacle is political instability, resulting in inconsistent policymaking and the recurring revisions to 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.



Graph by La'o Hamutuk based on each year's budget law. December 2025

The greatest challenge is the allocation of the General State Budget (GSB) to education, which has remained stagnant at only 9% to 10% for the past decade. This figure is much lower than regional benchmarks—such as Vietnam's 20%—indicating that the State has not shown the bold financial commitment necessary to make education the foundation of national productivity. This constrained budget limits investment in technology and teacher quality, thereby reinforcing inequality, which is increasing across society.

Recommendations:

1. **Structural and Financial Reform:** The Government should undertake structural and financial reforms by increasing the State Budget allocation for the education sector from 10% to 16-20%, including rehabilitating 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.
2. **Human Resources:** Regarding human resources, the Government should value teachers by implementing a meritocratic system that offers dignified pay 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 should be linked to the national productive sector through vocational education, and should incorporate education on citizenship, democracy and the environment, so that students can develop the capacity to analyses and address problems within their communities.
4. **Digital Transformation and Inclusion:** Digital transformation and inclusion should be prioritized through investment in internet connectivity and the distribution of digital learning materials across municipalities to bridge the information gap. The State should 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 should 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 should 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 should empower students to become masters of their own futures and critical citizens for the nation's development. Quality education should be treated as a fundamental right for all citizens throughout the national territory, not merely a privilege for the elite in the cities.

In conclusion, La'o Hamutuk views the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) as a vital mechanism for advancing human rights in Timor-Leste. Beyond holding governments accountable, the UPR provides a valuable space for constructive dialogue and mutual learning among UN member states enabling countries to share successful practices, learn from shortcomings, and strengthen their human rights frameworks through cooperation.

For La'o Hamutuk, the UPR is not an endpoint but a continuous process of national reflection and international solidarity. By fostering an interactive and cooperative environment, the UPR can help Timor-Leste translate its vision of human dignity into a tangible reality for every citizen ensuring that the nation's progress is measured not only by economic indicators, but by the well-being, empowerment, and participation of its people.

Sincerely



Marta da Silva



Celestino Gusmão



Charles Scheiner



Mariano Ferreira



Jonathan Gonsalves



Elia da Costa Araujo



Elivania Alves Correia