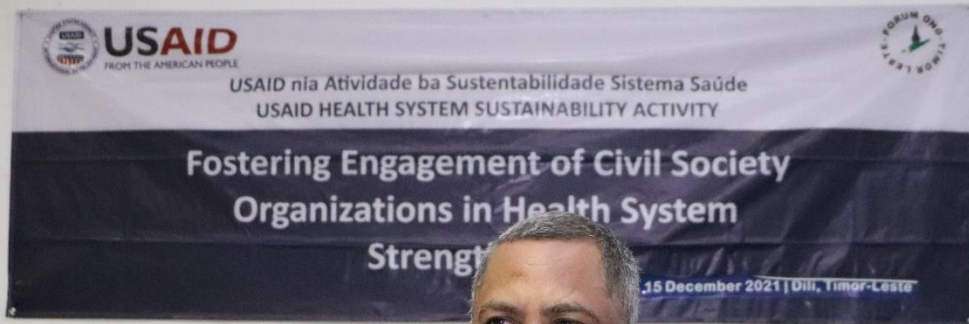




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Advocating For Health A Short Handbook on Advocacy for CSOs Promoting Inclusive and Effective Health Services in Timor-Leste

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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Acronyms

| | |
|----------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| CSO | civil society organization |
| FONGTIL | <i>Forum Organização Não Governamental Timor-Leste</i> (Timor-Leste NGO Forum) |
| LHSS | Local Health System Sustainability Project |
| REBAS-TL | <i>Rede ba Saúde Timor-Leste</i> (Timor-Leste Health Network) |
| SMART | specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely |
| USAID | The United States Agency for International Development |



1. Introduction

1.1 Context

Civil society organizations (CSOs) are important stakeholders in a health system. They play a vital role in strengthening health governance, especially to ensure that disadvantaged sections of society get access to quality health care. To fully perform this function, CSOs must effectively present the voices of marginalized people to policy makers and undertake evidence-based advocacy to address community issues.

In Timor-Leste, CSOs have played a long and powerful role in the country's history, both before and after independence. Today, as the Government of Timor-Leste shapes a self-reliant and resilient health system, civil society has a critical role to play. Evidence-based advocacy by CSOs can make them effective and meaningful influences in the policy development process.

The United States Agency for International Development's (USAID's) Local Health System Sustainability Activity in Timor-Leste is working with the Timor-Leste NGO Forum (*Forum Organização Não Governamental Timor-Leste* (FONGTIL))¹ to maximize health sector CSOs' contribution to policy-making, service delivery, and health governance. As part of this effort, 43 health CSO members of FONGTIL have come together and established the country's first-ever health advocacy network (*Rede Ba Saude-Timor-Leste* (REBAS-TL)), officially launched in May 2022. REBAS-TL aims to strengthen the capacities of health sector CSOs and enable them to better engage with the government and other stakeholders to create an equitable and inclusive health system that offers quality health care to all Timorese people.



Why focus on strengthening advocacy?

Timor-Leste's parliamentary system, in which people vote for a political party and the party appoints its political members to fill the seats, means there is no direct constituent representation. Timorese citizens are generally aware of the Parliament's roles but do not know to whom they should address community issues. Many citizens do not fully understand their role in participatory governance beyond elections. Often, CSOs are either unaware of the services and goods the Government of Timor-Leste should be providing to Timorese, or they see a gap but do not feel empowered to communicate shortcomings. There is no clear mechanism for CSOs to advocate for change, and they often encounter challenges accessing and interpreting data, which hinders their ability to engage in evidence-based advocacy.

In the health sector, an evaluation of the USAID Reinforce activity reported that no community members or subnational officials felt prepared to advocate at the national or subnational level for the allocation of resources and human resource deployment required to sustain health service delivery. The lack of advocacy to policy makers was a critical deficiency in the intervention, resulting in insufficient resource allocation or political will for the continuation of services at the end of the activity (Ghoston et al. 2020).



¹ FONGTIL is an umbrella organization of CSOs in Timor-Leste. Of the 201 local CSOs registered with FONGTIL, 51 are engaged in health-related programming and play a role in improving Water, Sanitation and Hygiene and maternal and child health, and combatting malnutrition in Timor-Leste.



This short handbook presents information and guidance to inform the advocacy efforts of REBAS-TL and its member CSOs. The handbook—prepared collaboratively by health CSOs, community leaders, FONGTIL, the Ministry of Health, and the USAID Local Health System Sustainability Activity—provides information on what advocacy means, why it is important, and how it can be undertaken. Health CSOs that work on different themes, such as maternal and child health; nutrition; HIV; tuberculosis; people with disabilities; and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender issues, contributed to this document.

1.2 Purpose of this handbook

This document aims to help health CSOs develop a clear understanding of what advocacy is and how it can support their work to promote equity, quality, and resource optimization in Timor-Leste's health system. The content in this short handbook will:

- Define advocacy and health advocacy
- Explain the importance of health advocacy
- Identify the key issues health advocacy should aim to address
- Provide guidance on how to undertake advocacy work
- Provide a list of DOs and DON'Ts for how CSOs can advocate most effectively



2. What does ‘advocacy’ mean?

2.1 Defining advocacy

Advocacy is a process of building support for and bringing about change in policies, laws, and priorities of institutions and policy makers so that the concerns of the communities, including those whom society has marginalized, can be addressed. Advocacy is not new. People and interest groups the world over have long tried to influence authorities and institutions to change their approaches and actions. Any person or group who argues for, recommends, or supports a cause or policy is an advocate. This can involve promoting the cause of an individual, a group, or the society at large. Importantly, advocacy need not only be about the creation or reform of policies, but also about their effective implementation and enforcement (Sprechmann and Pelton 2021). Used effectively, advocacy can be a potent instrument for the betterment of people.

The broad purpose of **health advocacy** is to ensure that all people, irrespective of their social or economic status, can access affordable and high-quality health care. The advocacy effort can involve direct service/humanitarian action for an individual or family or activities that promote health and access to health care for vulnerable individuals and marginalized communities. Advocates can support and promote the rights of those in need of health care, build awareness on salient health issues in the community, support the delivery of health services and products, and enhance health policy initiatives focused on accessible, safe, and quality health services.

2.2 Types of advocacy

Advocacy can take many forms, as described below.

| | |
|-----------------------------|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Self-Advocacy | Speaking or acting on one’s own behalf and standing up for one’s rights (e.g., asking to see a different health care provider if not being attended to appropriately by one’s current provider) |
| Natural Advocacy | Speaking up in the moment when one notices that something is not right or fair and others are not able to speak up for themselves (e.g., seeing someone being hurt and intervening) |
| Peer Advocacy | Encouraging and supporting other individuals to speak or act for themselves (e.g., assisting people to discuss their health issues with the doctor) |
| Service Advocacy | Working within systems to assist individuals and families in ensuring their needs are met (e.g., referral to a community agency for postpartum depression support) |
| Program Advocacy | Working to support a program or prevent its demise (e.g., writing to stakeholders to keep childcare programs from closing) |
| Cause/Issue Advocacy | Working with other advocates to influence politicians/senior officials at all levels of government to change legislation or policies that affect large numbers of people (e.g., engaging in joint initiatives with education advocates to increase childcare spaces); advocacy targets may also be private businesses |

Source: Adopted from Vancouver Coastal Health Population Health: Advocacy Guideline and Resource. www.vch.ca/Documents/Population-Health-Advocacy-Guideline-and-Resources.pdf



2.3 Difference between advocacy and activism

Advocacy and activism often are confused for one another. Although the aim of both is to create positive change, there are key differences in their methods. It is helpful to be mindful of these when charting out the plan and approaches for your advocacy effort.

| Advocacy | Activism |
|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Speaks for an issue of social importance, emphasizing the voices of the marginalized and bringing them to the attention of relevant stakeholders | Tries to draw public attention to an issue, mostly to critique and confront a policy/program seen as wrongful |
| Works with the system and authorities to get all parties to listen to each other and identify solutions | Works outside the system, with focus on building public awareness about the need for reform |
| Involves meetings with government officials, writing letters and petitions, conducting research, running media campaigns, etc. | Involves taking direct action, such as demonstrations, protest marches, sit-ins, and strikes |



3. Why health advocacy matters

3.1 Need for health advocacy in Timor-Leste

Timor-Leste has just celebrated the 20th anniversary of its independence. The fight for freedom, won in 2002, was long and hard and filled the nation with a zest for progress. Timor-Leste has since made impressive strides in rebuilding its infrastructure, institutional frameworks, and democratic processes. However, progress on key health indicators such as nutrition, child mortality, and family planning has been more limited (LHSS 2022, forthcoming). Basic services such as access to clean water and sanitation, basic health services, and sufficient nutrition for children and pregnant mothers are severely lacking, especially in rural areas. The COVID-19 pandemic and the devastating floods of 2021 exacerbated weaknesses in the health system and further stymied progress.

The Timor-Leste Constitution obligates the government to provide equal, quality health services to citizens.² However, awareness about citizens' health rights is weak. So far, most awareness-raising activities of the government and donor-funded programs have focused on specific health issues rather than on the obligations of the system itself to deliver quality health services or the rights of citizens to expect and access such care. CSOs can use advocacy to spread awareness, highlight the health needs of communities, and provide feedback on whether citizens' rights to health services and products are being met. By playing this role effectively, CSOs can support the Government of Timor-Leste's efforts to achieve health sector objectives and improve health outcomes outlined in the country's health sector strategic plan 2020–2030 (Timor-Leste Ministry of Health 2020).

Being rooted in a community, CSOs have a better understanding of the persistent health issues their community faces and why the government's response needs to be strengthened. CSOs can bring the community's health issues to the government's attention and advocate for policies and programs to address the real needs of the community.

3.2 Major aims of health advocacy

The objective of health advocacy in Timor-Leste is to promote equity, quality, and resource optimization in the country's health system. Achievement of this objective requires that all health sector actors support policies, programs, and actions to address inequity in access to health care, shortcomings in the quality of health services, and inefficiencies in the use of health resources. Health advocacy activities by CSOs should, thus, support the development of an effective and sustainable health system that has the following features:

- **Accountability:** An accountable health system implies that the society plays a role in ensuring that the health services being provided meet people's needs. It also implies the acceptance of responsibility by decision makers and health service providers and a direct correlation for the well-being of their own citizens, as well as a willingness to be transparent, allowing others to observe and evaluate one's performance.
- **Affordability:** Affordability of a health system ensures that the money spent on health care provides the best value possible and that people can access the health care they need without financial hardship.

² Timor-Leste Constitution. Art. LVII.



- **Accessibility:** Accessible health care is available when and where people need it. It means that people can easily reach the appropriate health services they need, irrespective of their social status, geographic location, or ability to pay.
- **Reliability:** A health system that is reliable delivers high-quality health services in a timely and confidential manner, ensuring dignity and respect for all.
- **Equity:** An equitable health system provides every individual a fair opportunity to attain his/her highest level of health regardless of social and economic status or gender, especially reaching the underserved, socially excluded, and vulnerable populations.
- **Quality:** A quality health system is responsive to patients' and populations' needs. It uses a data-driven process to make continuous improvement in providing safe, effective, trusted, and equitable health care and medical products to all people.

3.3 Benefits of health advocacy

There are numerous benefits of health advocacy efforts, both for the community and for CSOs themselves. These benefits are depicted in Figures 1 and 2.

Figure 1. Benefits of advocacy by CSOs

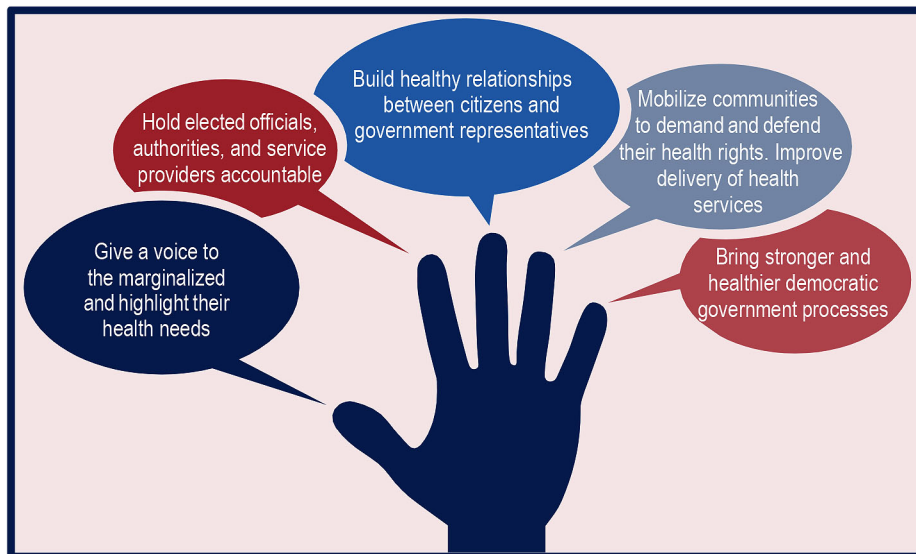


Figure 2. Benefits of advocacy for CSOs





4. How to conduct health advocacy effectively

4.1 Best practices to guide advocacy activities

All CSOs have their own organizational and administrative guidelines to follow in doing their usual activities. However, there is a set of basic practices they should all aim to adhere to for advocacy work:

- Choose issues for advocacy based on the health needs of the community.
- Consider the evidence and expertise on an issue and ensure the proposed response is based on research/best practices whenever possible.
- Provide a non-partisan viewpoint.
- Ensure gender equality and social inclusion in identifying issues and proposing solutions.
- Ensure wide representation and participation of the community.
- Be transparent and accountable in all aspects of advocacy work.
- Proactively assess for any negative social impacts of the CSO's efforts.
- Be respectful of stakeholders/partners and ensure that they have been consulted on relevant issues.
- Identify advocacy activities that are aligned to the CSO's mandate and are within the capacity of staff.
- Advocacy has risks: it takes place in the public policy arena, and there may be some risks involved. CSOs need to consider the possible risks, how likely they are, and decide how to manage them.

4.2 Skills for effective advocacy

Effective advocacy requires that the people or organization advocating for a cause develop and employ key skills which include:

- Strategic use of data and analysis to identify the problem and present solution
- Strong communication skills to effectively speak about a cause, using both traditional and digital media
- Ability to work collaboratively with multiple stakeholders, including with the government

4.3 Planning for advocacy³

Advocacy is a powerful tool to bring about the desired change. Its success depends on many factors, one of which is ensuring that robust planning has gone into preparation. The basic framework below can help CSOs plan their advocacy effort.

³ This section and the following section are in part drawn from Vancouver Coastal Health Population Health: Advocacy Guideline and Resource, available from: www.vch.ca/Documents/Population-Health-Advocacy-Guideline-and-Resources.pdf



i. Define the issue

Ask yourself: Is the issue and desired outcome(s) clearly defined? Does the issue affect a significant population? Do you have a process for verifying the issue with stakeholders?

ii. Define your mandate

Ask yourself: Does the issue have a clear health implication? Is the issue part of the REBAS-TL mandate/vision? Is there an existing REBAS-TL position on the issue? Does the issue align with your day-to-day work/activities?

iii. Consider practical aspects

Ask yourself: How much time and resources does your organization have to dedicate to the issue? Do you have the expertise and/or skills to address the issue? Is your manager supportive of advocacy action? Can you identify internal and/or external resources that are available to support your work? Who could be potential opponents for the cause and how best can they be persuaded?

iv. Decide on your approach

Ask yourself: What action(s) are you going to take? What are the most appropriate advocacy strategies for the issue? What will be the key messages? Who will be responsible for implementing your plan? What are your timelines?

v. What's next?

Ask yourself: Do you have a communication plan? What media and channels will you use to advocate for the cause and galvanize support for it? Do you know what success will look like for your work? What parameters of success (indicators) should you include to know if your work has brought an improvement?

Advocacy strategies usually have several different objectives that all contribute to achieving the goal and overall vision. Ensure that your advocacy efforts are SMART: Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Realistic, and Timely. Example of a SMART goal for advocacy: increase funding for nutritional support to school-age children in two municipalities within 12 months.

4.4 Putting the advocacy plan into action

Once a solid advocacy plan is in place and all required resources and stakeholders are aligned, the implementation of advocacy activities can begin. Advocacy activities can take many different forms, for example, face-to-face meetings with government officials, blogs, and media interviews. Following is a list of possible advocacy activities a CSO can initiate to bring a community health issue into focus and drive change.

- **Have direct meetings with decision makers**
 - Identify health system entry point at the Ministry of Health.
 - Learn as much as you can before initial contact (i.e., biography, the authority's position on similar issues).
 - Position yourself as a resource for the decision maker.
 - Be part of committees, fact-finding missions, and other entities concerned with the issue.
- **Write letters and make presentations to decision makers**
 - Write letters to authorities in support of a policy issue. Explain the problem along with evidence, propose a solution, and clearly state the desired outcome.



- Respectfully refer to previous articles or statements by the authority, acknowledge what was said and add to or challenge it.
- Be brief and state the most important points first.
- Be aware of REBAS-TL's resources and prior communication on the issue.
- **Leverage electronic and digital media**
 - Participate in media events to provide perspective and build awareness on the issue.
 - Issue press releases about your events and activities.
 - Contribute articles and give interviews to media.
 - Share data about the issue and publish blogs on yours and partners' websites. Post on social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook).
- **Form coalitions and partnerships**
 - Collaborate with others working for the cause. Provide them with your data on the issue.
 - Encourage partners to speak out on the issue/cause.
 - Provide partners with opportunities to have their voices heard.
 - Prepare a policy brief or position paper and disseminate it to all relevant stakeholders.
 - Help sponsor a meeting on an issue/cause.
 - Form a policy working group to provide a collective perspective to decision makers.

4.5 Assessing advocacy outcomes

A final but important step of a robust advocacy initiative is the mapping of its outcomes. Admittedly, advocacy is a slow and gradual process, which can make it difficult to clearly ascertain progress toward a goal. Nevertheless, monitoring and evaluation are necessary to keep your effort on course and allow you and other stakeholders to ascertain change.

- Continuous monitoring of the progress of your advocacy effort can help you understand if things are going as planned or if a course correction is needed.
- When evaluating, look at progress against the set of indicators you defined at the outset.
- Use quantitative (e.g., surveys, study of secondary data sources) and qualitative methods (e.g., group discussions and key informant interviews) to assess impact.
- The data from your monitoring and evaluation exercise can provide opportunity for a wider discussion about a needed reform and influence decision-making.



5. Do's and Don'ts of advocacy

| Do try to: | Best not to: |
|-----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Make data and evidence the basis for your advocacy effort. | Merely present your opinions or use anecdotes to talk about an issue. |
| Keep community the focus of your work and bring in their voice at every stage. | Stop consulting the community to understand if their issues are being adequately and comprehensively discussed and addressed. |
| Set specific objectives your work should achieve. | Start your advocacy activities without setting clear goals. |
| Keep your message simple and consistent. | Use conflicting or confusing messages. |
| Identify at the outset who the target audience (officials/organizations) will be for your advocacy effort. | Try to do too much and scatter your energies. |
| Identify your allies and collaborate with them to strengthen your effort. | Be competitive with other stakeholders working on the issue. Instead, partner with them for the common cause. |
| Be patient and persevere. Advocacy is a slow process and results take time. Continue appealing to authorities with persuasive evidence. | Give up or become argumentative or confrontational. |



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