



# State, Society & Governance in Melanesia

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## Steps Towards Achieving Inclusion for People with Disabilities in Timor-Leste

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Timor-Leste is one of the least developed countries in the Asia–Pacific region, ranked at 128 out of 187 countries on the 2014 Human Development Index. To help address high levels of poverty and inequality, the country is a signatory to the United Nations' 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which commits to achieving the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) by 2030. These goals are built on the principle of 'leaving no one behind', meaning that the goals cannot be considered achieved if they are not met for everyone, including people with disabilities. This In Brief suggests how Timor-Leste can ensure that people with disabilities are not left behind in the country's continued progress towards inclusive and sustainable development.

### Disability Cannot Be a Sideline Issue

There is a clear link between poverty and disability. Living in poverty, with the associated risks of malnutrition, lack of access to clean water and exposure to unsafe environments and working conditions, can lead to health problems and impairments that may lead to disability (Mitra et al. 2013). People with disabilities and their families are more likely to be poor, partly because they face additional costs, including paying for assistive devices and costlier transport options, as well as indirect costs due to being unable to access schooling and employment opportunities (Braithwaite and Mont 2008). Thus, disability must be a central consideration in Timor-Leste's efforts to overcome poverty.

### Barriers and Challenges

Timor-Leste's constitution guarantees non-discrimination and equal treatment for all people, regardless of gender or mental or physical disabilities.<sup>1</sup> In reality, however, people with disabilities are not yet able to fully and equally enjoy their rights. People with disabilities are often 'invisible' in their communities, and discrimination and stigma is widespread. There is evidence of shackling and restraining of children and adults with disabilities, particularly those with psychosocial

impairments (UNMIT 2011). Negative terms are still commonly used, including *aleijadu* (crippled) and *ema bulak* (crazy person). A mixture of religious and animistic attitudes can perpetuate negative discourses of disability, seeing a person's impairment as a result of *tolok* (curse), or punishment from God or ancestor spirits (ibid.).

These attitudinal barriers, combined with other factors such as physical inaccessibility, lack of accessible transport and lack of information, mean that the basic needs and fundamental rights of people with disabilities are not being met. The 2010 census found that 72 per cent of people with disabilities had never attended school. A 2013 study found that discriminatory attitudes of healthcare workers, inaccessible health facilities and lack of knowledge about available services mean that people with disabilities in Timor have unmet health needs (McCoy et al. 2013). Recent interviews undertaken by the national disabled person's organisation, Ra'es Hadomi Timor Oan, found that, of 49 women with disabilities across the country, 65 per cent do not work or engage in livelihood activities, leaving them reliant on family or community members (RHTO 2015).

Coordinated action is needed to overcome these barriers and challenges. But the government of Timor-Leste appears not to be placing sufficient attention on the issue of disability inclusion. The government has not yet signed or ratified the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities, despite making a number of promises that it would do so, including during the 2011 [Universal Periodic Review](#) process. The government has developed a National Policy for Inclusion and Promotion of the Rights of People with Disabilities, but limited action has been taken to implement it.

The government is also making policy and programming decisions based on an incomplete picture of the disability prevalence in the country. The 2010 census found that 4.6 per cent of the population have a disability. However, the census used a limited definition of disability, and only captured information for a limited range of impairments. Applying the

World Health Organization and World Bank (2011) estimate — that 15 per cent of the world's population are people with disabilities — means that there could be more than 175,000 people with disabilities in Timor-Leste.

### Priorities for Action

Government, development partners and broader society need to support the inclusion of people with disabilities. Otherwise, people with disabilities will be left behind, and Timor-Leste will not be able to meet its commitment to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. We think there are four key steps that will help Timor do better:

#### COMMIT to better data collection

Better data are needed to inform policy and programming decisions. Mainstream data collection efforts must be disaggregated by disability, using internationally agreed approaches that are made culturally and linguistically appropriate to the Timorese context, and specific information about the lives of people with disabilities should be gathered.

**APPLY** the disability action plan in all planning and budgeting processes

The National Action Plan for People with Disabilities (2014–2018) includes actions relevant for 10 different line ministries and secretaries of state. However, anecdotal evidence shows that the action plan commitments have been applied by only a few institutions. The Ministry of Social Solidarity, which has the mandate to coordinate whole-of-government disability inclusion, should distribute guidelines during annual planning and budgeting processes to ensure disability actions are included by all agencies.

**RATIFY** the Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD)

Ratifying the CRPD would create extra incentives and clear guidance for the government to be doing more. Ratifying goes beyond just preventing discrimination on the basis of disability. After a state ratifies the CRPD, it is required to establish structures within government to coordinate implementation and to ensure all legislation and policies align with CRPD specifications. Ratifying also opens up new sources of technical and financial support, available to state parties to help them implement the CRPD.

**ENSURE** participation in all areas of life

Most importantly, all mainstream education, health, employment and livelihood programs must consider and include people with disabilities. In the context of decentralisation, opening spaces for participation of people with disabilities in

local governance processes is crucial to ensure development programs reflect the needs and priorities of all citizens.

Facilitating the involvement of people with disabilities in these processes may need to be supported by programs aimed at changing negative stereotypes and demonstrating that people with disabilities are not just 'objects' in need of charity but can be 'subjects' capable of contributing to their communities.

Together, these four actions, which we call the 'CARE' approach, will help lead to empowerment for people with disabilities and an inclusive society for all people. From our perspective, the government of Timor-Leste cannot achieve the Sustainable Development Goals without considering and including people with disabilities. They cannot be left behind.

### Author Notes

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### Endnote

1. Sections 6 and 21 of the Constitution of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (2002).

### References

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