

What do Timorese Youngsters Think about the Sustainable Development Goals?

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Abstract Timor-Leste has been a member of the United Nations since 2002 and, therefore, is committed to following the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity. In a society where education is of poor quality [1], domestic violence remains a matter of private resolution within families, but it is still a political concern, among other challenges that youngsters face in becoming responsible adults and more proactive citizens. With this study, and through a questionnaire administered to 164 high school students from different public and private schools, we aim to understand what youngsters know and think about the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The results show that, despite not being very familiar with the SDGs, youngsters recognize Quality Education (SDG4) as the most important goal for the country. They acknowledge that there is some violence in the country, particularly against women. As suggestions, they point towards public institutions being trustworthy, honest, and transparent in the selection of positions, and the creation of more job opportunities for youngsters.

Keywords Sustainable Development Goals, Youngsters, Timor-Leste

1. Introduction

Timor-Leste declared its independence from Portugal on November 28, 1975, but it remained independent for only ten days until the Indonesian invasion on December 7, 1975, which lasted for 24 years. During the Indonesian occupation, it is estimated that approximately 200,000 people died due to war and famine. In the months following the invasion, around 60,000 people were killed, and the initial years saw the establishment of nearly 150 concentration camps [6].

Since gaining its independence in 2002, Timor-Leste has made significant progress in sustainable development. Emerging from a period of conflict and instability, stemming from a traumatic struggle for independence and violent occupation, the government and people of Timor-Leste managed to lay the foundations for peace, stability, and nation-building during the first decade of independence. However, there are still many development challenges, especially in rural areas. In 2014, 41.8% of Timorese still lived below the national poverty line, though this represented an improvement from the 50.4% recorded in 2007. Life expectancy has increased by 10 years since 1999. Agriculture remains the primary source of livelihood for 70% of the population, with a focus on subsistence farming.

Seasonal food insecurity in rural areas and malnutrition continue to be issues, particularly concerning the lack of micronutrients for children and mothers [5].

Violence against women is a topic that receives little attention in the political spotlight. According to 2016 data from the Demographic and Health Surveys, 58% of women in the Ermera municipality are victims of gender-based violence. Throughout Timor-Leste, according to the same data, 50% of women suffer physical and sexual violence from their partners. Article 36 of Law No. 7/2010, which addresses domestic violence, states that these crimes are of "public nature," meaning that the criminal process is not dependent on the victim's complaint; it only requires a report or knowledge of the crime for the Public Prosecutor to initiate a legal proceeding.

The intention of different governments to develop strategies that contribute to economic, educational, and social development is evident, as can be seen in the Strategic Development Plan (PED) 2011–2030. This plan aims to make Timor-Leste a "prosperous and strong" nation with medium to high incomes, a healthy, educated, and secure population by 2030 [4]. However, the government of Timor-Leste has recognized that the unemployment rate is high, especially among economically marginalized young people, which can become a source of instability [5].

Timor-Leste has been particularly successful in establishing peace and stability. In recent years, the country

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has not experienced prolonged periods of violence or instability that would require external intervention forces. An essential factor that has helped Timor-Leste move beyond conflict and achieve lasting peace is strong political leadership, which has largely managed to unite the country. The Timorese state has also effectively handled the issue of reconciliation with Indonesia and Timorese citizens who supported the Indonesian occupation before independence. This has improved social cohesion and normalized relations with Indonesia, including at the border between the two countries.

The reconciliation and peace-building process in Timor-Leste, under the theme "Promoting Reconciliation: Towards Peace and Prosperity in Asia," was the focus of the joint ICAP-CAPDI Conference held at the Dili Convention Center on April 25 and 26, 2012. Timor-Leste has accumulated an impressive record in terms of democracy and human rights.

2. The Future of a Nation Lies in Its Youth

Timor-Leste is currently the seventh youngest country in the world, with 67.5% of its population being under 30 years of age. There is a significant growth in the number of young people. While this situation presents significant challenges, it also offers tremendous opportunities for the emerging nation. Youngsters are the future of a nation: as they enter the workforce and master new technologies, they will be a force that drives the country towards economic growth and development – unless there are no opportunities for youngsters!

Young people are recognized as agents of change, entrusted with achieving their own potential and ensuring a world suitable for future generations. When equipped with the skills and opportunities needed to develop their potential, youngsters play a crucial role in advancing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as they are in direct contact with the issues relevant to the 2030 Agenda and possess a unique capacity to generate solutions to achieve them, whether through new exponential technologies, community engagement, academic research, or other means.

Again, youngsters have a central role in achieving sustainable development on a global scale through the implementation and monitoring of the 2030 Agenda. The United Nations recognizes that with the necessary skills and opportunities, youngsters can become a driving force to support and contribute to sustainable development while maintaining global peace and security [2,3]. When youngsters have the opportunities and resources they need, they become a driving force towards generating significant social change.

As such, the United Nations has identified five roles that youngsters can play in this regard: (1) Critical thinkers (identifying and challenging current power structures); (2) Change agents (taking action and mobilizing people through connectivity and the use of social technologies); (3) Innovators (bringing new perspectives and developing new solutions to current problems); (4) Communicators (disseminating knowledge about the 2030 Agenda and its monitoring); and

finally, (5) Leaders (leading their communities and countries through organizations, networks, civic engagement, and other means, extending opportunities to marginalized young people in their context) [3].

According to UN Secretary-General António Guterres, "The world needs young people more than ever." He emphasized the need for their energies, ideas, innovations, and talents during the opening of the Youth Forum 2023, held from April 25 to 28, to discuss a better future.

It becomes evident that youngsters should integrate themselves as effectively as possible into the society that is their heritage. It's about finding a balance between their active participation in society and providing them with more opportunities to express their views, all with the aim of preparing young people for a world in continuous transformation.

3. Timor-Leste and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

The Government of Timor-Leste adopted the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) through Government Resolution No. 34/2015 on September 23, two days before their formal adoption at the United Nations General Assembly. This resolution also mandated the establishment of a working group on the implementation of the SDGs, to be chaired by the Office of the Prime Minister. The adoption of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs was later ratified by Parliamentary Resolution No. 19/2015 on November 18. This resolution also recommended that the Government of Timor-Leste align its planning and budgeting systems with the SDGs. Subsequently, the Government issued a directive (Directive No. 038/2015/XII/PM on December 22, 2015) establishing the SDGs Working Group and a decree (Government Decree No. 1/2016 on February 1) that made it mandatory to reflect the SDGs in annual plans and budgets (Roteiro, 2017).

The United Nations' 2030 Agenda, of which Timor-Leste is a member country, is an action plan for people, the planet, and for prosperity. All countries and stakeholders are expected to engage in collaborative partnerships to implement this plan. The seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) build upon the legacy of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and aim to accomplish what the MDGs did not achieve. These seventeen goals seek to fulfill the human rights of all and achieve gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls. They are integrated and indivisible, and they balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental.

SDG 1. No Poverty. End poverty in all its forms everywhere.

SDG 2. Zero Hunger. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.

SDG 3. Good Health and Well-Being. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.

SDG 4. Quality Education. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

SDG 5. Gender Equality. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.

SDG 6. Clean Water and Sanitation. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.

SDG 7. Affordable and Clean Energy. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all.

SDG 8. Decent Work and Economic Growth. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.

SDG 9. Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.

SDG 10. Reduced Inequalities. Reduce inequality within and among countries.

SDG 11. Sustainable Cities and Communities. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.

SDG 12. Responsible Consumption and Production. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.

SDG 13. Climate Action. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.

SDG 14. Life Below Water. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.

SDG 15. Life on Land. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.

SDG 16. Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

SDG 17. Partnerships for the Goals. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.

4. Methodology

4.1. Sample

In this cross-sectional study, 164 students (103 of them female) from the General Secondary Education in the municipalities of Díli, Lautém, Manufahi, Baucau, Oecusse, Ataúro, Aileu, Bobonaro, Viqueque, Manatuto, Ainaro, Liquiça, and Cova Lima participated.

4.2. Instrument

The questionnaire was created specifically for this study using Google Forms in Portuguese and then translated into Tetum and English with the assistance of professionals who are members of the United Nations in Timor-Leste. In the first part of the questionnaire, it was mentioned that participation in the study would be voluntary and anonymous. For more information about the SDGs in Timor-Leste, there was the option to watch a two-minute video available at

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sEbQI80L06E&list=PLR_5ws5Sj61yLf_5J9V0e4XBrrxDMGuJQ.

4.3. Procedures

To test the students' understanding, the experimental version of the questionnaire was completed by five high school students. After obtaining the final version of the questionnaire in Portuguese and its respective translations into English and Tetum, Physical Education teachers from the Faculty of Education, Arts, and Humanities, who were trained at the National University of Timor Lorosa'e (UNTL), received a detailed explanation (item by item) of the questionnaire in Portuguese, Tetum, and English. The questionnaire was filled out through a link, and data collection was directly uploaded to the Drive of the Department of Physical Education and Sports in the months of May and June 2023. A research letter was issued by the Department of Physical Education and Sports of UNTL, addressed to the Director of each secondary school in each municipality, to explain the purpose of the study and request the participation of the students.

5. Results

The current study aimed to understand the perception of secondary school students regarding the SDGs through a questionnaire created for this purpose. Internet issues can still pose a challenge for research and investigation due to its low quality. Nevertheless, as a first study of this kind, the participation of 164 students within a two-month timeframe is considered very positive.

Most of the students demonstrated an awareness that the SDGs were created by the United Nations. However, the number of students decreases as the knowledge becomes more specific, as seen with the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. Only forty-five students accurately identified the exact number (seventeen) of SDGs.

Fifty-one percent of the youngsters in this study considered that SDG 4, Quality Education, was the most important for Timor-Leste's development, followed by 36% for SDG 3, Good Health and Well-Being, and the third most important, as per 26% of the young people, was SDG 6, Clean Water and Sanitation.

In this study, only SDG 16, Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, was explored in more depth. It was evident that young people are aware of the path that still needs to be taken for Timor-Leste to become a country with peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, responsible, and inclusive institutions at all levels. The youngsters were clear in stating that the allocation of positions should be more transparent and rigorous, with one student expressing the view: "Eliminate the family system in Timor, meaning equality for all citizens without looking at whether they are family or relatives."

Most youngsters consider that Timor-Leste is a country

with some level of violence, whether it's physical, verbal, against women, or against children. Specifically, 49.4% indicated violence against women, including domestic violence, followed by 44.5% for violence among youngsters. Violence is often related to political parties, as one participant expressed: "A stable party, as parties always have problems, and governments are unstable, so people also don't feel 100% secure."

They admit that various crimes are practiced in the country, with violence against women and among young people being the most prevalent: "In our beloved country, there are several crimes, but the ones that happen most frequently are domestic violence and violence among young people." The youngsters in the country haven't forgotten the issue of martial arts as an indicator of violence among young people. However, they mentioned that more knowledge and training are needed to better value this sport as a means of the holistic development of young people who practice it, rather than using it as a means to resolve conflicts through violence: "My suggestion is to value more the internal organizations of our country, especially martial arts because the country needs knowledgeable young people and doesn't need smart alecks who only resort to violence."

Despite being young and seemingly with no interest in politics, they recognize the favoritism of family and friends in obtaining institutional positions: "Regarding job vacancies, there are still many people who use the favoritism system (family) to secure a job! While people with little power have difficulty finding employment, so they engage in small businesses like selling vegetables or working in Chinese stores."

According to the young people in this study, there is a need for "transparency, rigor, and good management of public finances." This sense of transparency and rigor should start with lower governance positions in the sucos and villages. There's no doubt that a harmonious and secure environment promotes a climate of peace: "To ensure that our suco or village is in a state of peace and stability, we have to create a calm atmosphere in our own society."

The youngsters suggest that security forces should work together for the security of the country: "I suggest creating an organization with the aim of promoting the lives of the population, and we need to maintain a good line of coordination with national security, with the purpose of living in peace and stability." They also pointed out that public institutions should be trustworthy and offer more employment opportunities for youngsters, without neglecting the less privileged: "In the development of peace, justice, and efficient institutions in Timor, we need to create jobs for young people who work honestly and help each other, especially those who are in great need."

The youngsters in this study emphasized that "to achieve peace in Timor-Leste, trustworthy organizations are needed" that "work honestly" in "creating jobs for young people and even the creation of new laws to achieve sustainable development goals."

Timor-Leste is a country with a very young population. However, youngsters are not actively involved in the country's

policies, and they have few opportunities to formally express their ideas and views. In essence, youngsters are asking to be further heard by the government: "In achieving peace, justice, and institutions with great competence in our country, we need collaboration between the government and the people, in this case, us, the youth." Youngsters agree with the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres when affirming that more unity is needed: "Through unity, we can work harmoniously, continue to help each other, and work together between the state and the people" to end poverty, protect the planet, and ensure that all people enjoy peace and prosperity.

6. Conclusions

In short, despite not being very familiar with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), youngsters do recognize the importance of Quality Education (SDG 4). They admit that there is some violence in the country, especially against women. As suggestions, they point to the need for public institutions to be trustworthy, honest, and transparent in selecting positions and to create more job opportunities for youngsters.

If we want to keep educating free and responsible citizens, we cannot continue to neglect their education and personal development, nor can we ignore the need for their civic and political capacity.

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