

Policy Brief

Social Innovation for Youth Development in Timor-Leste

UNICEF Timor-Leste | April 2025

I. Introduction

Timor-Leste is navigating a crucial stage in its development, where the integration of social innovations can positively impact solving problems and accelerate progress for Timorese children. At the same time, it also holds the potential to catalyze youth development. With a significant portion of its population comprising young individuals, Timor-Leste faces both challenges and opportunities that can shape its future. Social innovations and entrepreneurship emerge as a promising avenue for youth development, capable of addressing pressing issues such as unemployment, education, health, and social protection. These approaches also contribute to economic diversification and reducing the nation's reliance on oil.

This policy brief explores how targeted social innovations can help achieve child-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—in particular SDG 4: Quality Education and SDG 8: Decent Work and Economic Growth—empower the youth of Timor-Leste, transforming them into active contributors to the country's progress and support to the government in building or updating national systems themselves.

This policy brief builds on key findings from the report "Enabling Child-Centric Innovation in Timor-Leste: Mapping the Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship Ecosystem", which served as the first step toward developing UNICEF Timor-Leste's Innovation Strategy. The research identified key barriers and opportunities, which are addressed in this policy brief. It also highlighted potential UNICEF programmes and partnerships to unlock innovative social impact for children and adolescents. Additionally, it allows us to assess entry points for Digital Public Goods. This study was built resorting to snowball sampling because the Timorese context suggested participant research as more appropriate, due to the little previously available data on the matter. It draws from multiple sources of information that include a mix of primary and secondary research methods for data collection including interviews, field observation and peer recommendations.

The key findings from this work are:



Ecosystem Overview: Timor-Leste's social innovation ecosystem is in a nascent stage. Government and UN agencies dominate the landscape, while private sector engagement remains limited and access to financial resources by entrepreneurs remains a huge barrier.



Infrastructure Disconnects Population from Digital Opportunities: Timorese youth face what can be described as a "Digital Triple Isolation", characterized by unreliable electricity networks, costly telecommunications, and low digital skills.



Opportunities for Growth: The country has an untapped youth population, a growing interest in entrepreneurship, and potential for collaboration across sectors. New infrastructure projects, such as expanded broadband access, are poised to support digital innovation.

Social innovations are important because they provide creative, scalable solutions to address complex challenges affecting children and adolescents worldwide. By leveraging new ideas, technologies, and collaborative approaches, social innovations help UNICEF meet its mission to promote the well-being of children, particularly in vulnerable and marginalized communities.

UNICEF Timor-Leste believes there is an opportunity to engage with the IX Constitutional Government through social innovations for youth development in the following areas:



1. Education and Human Capital Development

1.1. Digital and Alternative Education Platforms: Social innovations that remove barriers to education, particularly for marginalized and rural communities, align well with the government's aim to ensure equal and inclusive access to education for all youth.

1.2. Vocational and Lifelong Learning: Innovations that focus on preparing youth for the labor market and equipping them with 21st century skills support the government's focus on employment-oriented education and lifelong learning.



2. Infrastructure and ICT

2.1. Expanding Internet Access: Innovations that promote digital inclusion, such as creating low-cost internet access in rural areas, align with the government's goal to develop ICT infrastructure and establish widespread connectivity across the country.

2.2. Capacity Building in ICT: Initiatives that provide ICT training for youth, support the government's aim to improve public sector management and prepare citizens for the digital economy.



3. Social Inclusion

3.1. Social innovations that provide job opportunities and training for youth from vulnerable groups align with the government's efforts to reduce poverty and social inequality. These groups include women, people with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged families.

3.2. Community-Based Support Systems: Innovations that strengthen social services and community-based support centers for youth align with the government's aim to improve access to social security, particularly through programs targeting vulnerable populations.

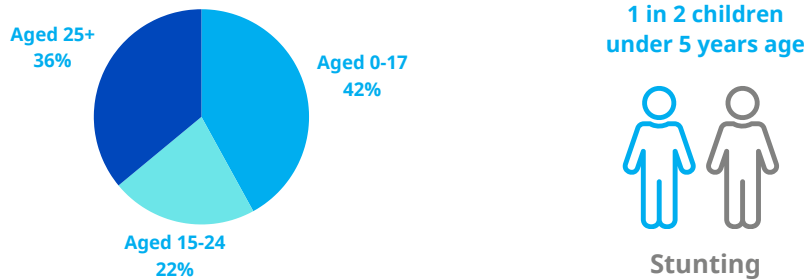


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II. Background

Timor-Leste is one of the world's youngest countries in terms of both nationhood and demography. Since independence, the population has increased by 40%, from 955,000 in 2002 to 1,341,737 in 2022. As a result of this "baby boom," children aged 0-17 years account for almost half (42%) of the Timorese population and adolescents (15-24 years) make up nearly a quarter (22%) highlighting the prominence of youth in Timor-Leste's demographic profile (INETL 2022).

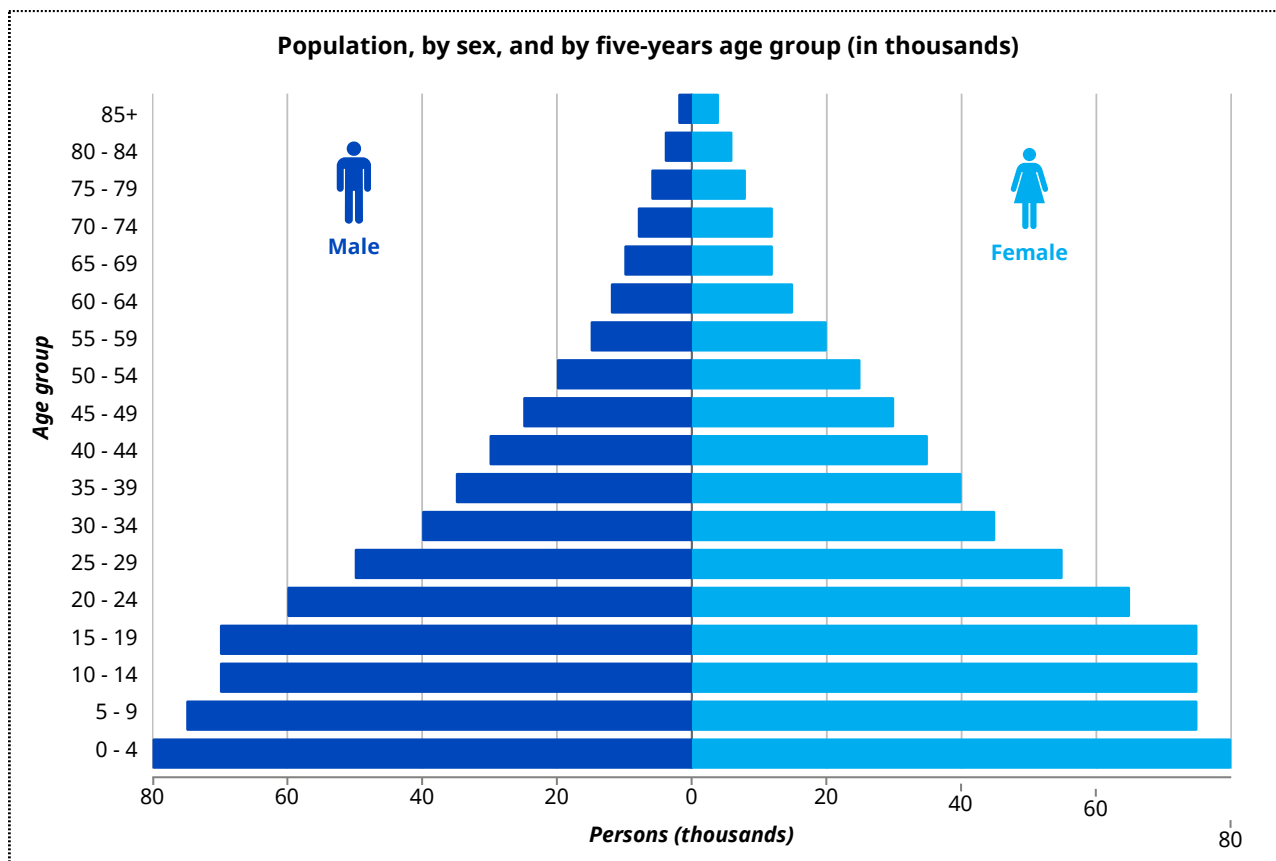
One in two children in Timor-Leste under five years of age is stunted (General Directorate of Statistics-GDS/Timor-Leste, Ministry of Finance/Timor-Leste and ICF 2018). This is one of the highest rates of stunting in the world, estimated to induce economic losses equivalent to 2% of GDP per year (World Bank 2018).



The rural and urban populations are 28.6% and 71.4%, respectively (INETL 2022). Based on this categorization, we can extrapolate that urban and rural youth are split into approximately 125,125 and 312,378 people, respectively. Most indicators regarding the country reveal a large disparity between rural and urban areas with the former facing deeper isolation, worse WASH conditions, higher level of food insecurity, disaster vulnerability and financial exclusion.

The demographic profile of Timor-Leste presents both a formidable opportunity and a significant challenge. With 65% of the population under the age of 35, the nation has a vast reservoir of potential labor.

Figure 1: Timor-Leste population by sex and by five-year age group (in thousands)



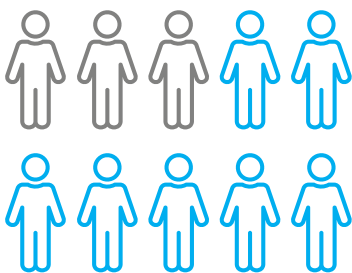
Source: The Population and Housing Census 2022, INETL, I.P



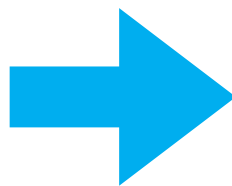
However, this potential is undermined by high rates of youth unemployment and underemployment. About 30% of youth aged 15-24 are not engaged in employment, education, or training (NEET), and the youth unemployment rate stands at 9.6%, more than double the 4.7% rate among adults aged 25-64 (ILO 2022). Besides being the main driver for youth emigration, this situation has social implications, including the rise of violent and antisocial behavior among youth (Fundasaun Mahein 2024). Of particular importance is the adherence of youth connecting and finding a sense of community with Martial Arts Groups (Fundasaun Mahein 2019) which have now been suspended by the IX Constitutional Government.

The challenges faced by these young people are multifaceted, ranging from limited employment opportunities to inadequate access to education and training. These challenges are further compounded by the country's high vulnerability to natural disasters, particularly floods (IFVH and Bündnis Entwicklung Hilft 2023), and its dependence on the oil industry for economic stability. This reliance is set to drive the country to a "fiscal cliff" by 2034 due to the declining revenues from its depleting oil fields and the ongoing pace of withdrawals from the sovereign wealth fund.

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III. What are Social Innovations?

Given the various definitions of social innovations, for the purpose of this policy brief, we can define them as “new or improved solutions that contribute to progress for children or young people in child-related Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)” (UNICEF 2020). Simply put, social innovations are about doing new things to solve problems in social challenges.

Social innovations are an emergent field, mostly practice-led and so undertheorized. Like other cross-cutting fields, social innovation is a multidisciplinary phenomenon supported in tools such as human-centered design, entrepreneurship and systems thinking but it does not rely on a single methodology.

UNICEF pursues innovation in four broad categories in which it already has significant experience: digital innovations, innovative financing (non-traditional mechanisms for raising resources to meet children’s needs are built), physical products, and programmes.

In fact, there are already many social innovations which delivered results impossible to ignore.

Example of Social Innovations:

1

UPSHIFT Social Innovation Programme:

UPSHIFT allows young people, especially for marginalized groups, to learn 21st century transferable skills through experiential learning which has a proven ability to favor advanced learning outcomes. UPSHIFT focuses on empowering adolescents and young people through skills training, entrepreneurship, and innovation support, helping them build resilience and economic independence.

2

Learning Passport (Education):

This **digital platform** already present in Timor-Leste ensures that children and adolescents in fragile or disrupted contexts continue their education, thereby safeguarding their right to education and contributing to their social development and protection.

3

Primero: (Child Protection, Education, and Social Welfare)

Primero is a case management platform designed to support sectors like child protection, education, and social welfare. It enables governments and organizations to securely track, manage, and respond to cases involving vulnerable children and families, ensuring timely and coordinated interventions across services.

These innovations reflect UNICEF’s multi-sectoral approach to social innovation, ensuring that children and adolescents benefit from improved services and outcomes across several key areas of intervention.

Frugal Innovations

Frugal innovations are solutions developed under resource constraints that aim to deliver high social impact at low cost. UNICEF uses them as a strategy to bridge gaps in essential services for children and communities, particularly in areas where traditional, high-cost solutions are impractical (UNICEF 2020).

These innovations often leverage simple technology, local resources, and cost-effective processes to solve pressing social issues. Frugal innovations are designed to be affordable, accessible, and scalable, ensuring they reach underserved populations, particularly in low- and middle-income countries such as Timor-Leste.

Examples include low-cost medical devices, educational tools, or digital solutions that can operate in low-resource settings, addressing challenges like healthcare access, education, and safe drinking water in a sustainable way.

IV. A Supportive Ecosystem for Advancing Social Innovations

Innovations, particularly in a developing context like Timor-Leste, cannot succeed in isolation. They require a well-structured ecosystem that brings together various actors—government, private sector, educational institutions, NGOs, and international agencies—to foster a collaborative environment. Each stakeholder has a different role to play, which changes according to the ecosystem's stage maturity (Stam and Spigel 2016).

An innovation ecosystem provides critical support at each stage of innovation, from idea generation to implementation and scaling. The type of support changes according to the resources each stakeholder brings such as funding, human capital, infrastructure, market access, supportive policies and regulatory framework.

Without a robust ecosystem, individual innovations may struggle to overcome barriers like limited financial resources, weak digital infrastructure, and insufficient technical skills. Ecosystem building ensures that these barriers are addressed collectively, creating fertile ground for sustainable innovation and long-term economic growth. It allows the government to coordinate efforts and avoid duplicating initiatives, maximizing the impact of public and private investments.

Based on findings from the report "Enabling Child-Centric Innovation in Timor-Leste: Mapping the Social Innovation and Entrepreneurship Ecosystem", the country can be considered a nascent innovation ecosystem, with limited stakeholder engagement and a reliance on government and UN agencies for most initiatives. The report highlights that there are 8 Entrepreneur Support Organizations (ESOs) in the country [an indicator of ecosystem maturity], all of which are backed by government or international funding, with minimal private sector involvement. To provide a benchmark the average number of ESOs in ASEAN countries (restricted to available data of 7 out of 10 countries) is 90.

The lack of venture capital, private sector incubators, and essential financial resources further highlights that Timor-Leste's innovation ecosystem is still in the initial stages of development, needing more foundational elements like financial support, mentorship, and enabling regulatory frameworks.



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V. Challenges Faced by Youth Timor-Leste



1. Digital Divide: Limited Access Disconnects Youth from The Digital Economy

Adolescents in Timor-Leste struggle with limited access to affordable and reliable internet, which is a major bottleneck for innovation. This significantly hampers their ability to participate in the global digital economy. Internet penetration is only 45% (Kemp 2024), far below the ASEAN average of 68% (Bain & Company 2022). Timor-Leste has the slowest and most expensive internet in the ASEAN region, with an average speed of 6 Mbps, far below the ASEAN average of 74 Mbps (Cable.co.uk 2024) and the cost of 1GB of mobile data is USD \$1.92, higher than the regional average of USD \$1.38 (Cable.co.uk 2024). Consequently, digital tools and online resources remain largely inaccessible to many young people, limiting their ability to develop digital skills, engage in online learning, and participate in entrepreneurship. Furthermore, it should also be noted that although Timor-Leste has significantly increased electricity access, energy security¹ remains a challenge. Despite government subsidies, electricity costs for consumers are still high, and power outages occur frequently.



2. Education: Skills Mismatch and Inadequate Access to Training

The education system in Timor-Leste is not sufficiently preparing adolescents for the demands of the innovation economy. Despite a growing population of youth, many adolescents are unprepared for modern economic opportunities. The lack of access to advanced technical, entrepreneurial, and digital education results in a significant skills gap. Access to innovation-focused training such as Human-Centered Design, Lean Startup, Agile or Open Innovation is extremely sporadic or unavailable. This not only limits the ability of youth to engage in social innovation but also hinders economic diversification, keeping them trapped in low-skill jobs, informal employment, or unemployment—and unable to contribute to innovation-driven development.



3. Few Path ways to Entrepreneurship

Opportunities for adolescents to explore entrepreneurship as a viable career path are limited. The ecosystem lacks targeted support structures like youth-focused incubators, accelerators, and mentorship programs that could guide young entrepreneurs from idea generation to market entry. Entrepreneurial support needs to start at an earlier level and stage to be accessible to adolescents. While there are some initiatives, such as government-backed programs and international aid projects, these are often not youth-specific or designed to meet the unique needs of young innovators. As a result, many adolescents are unable to access the resources, networks, and mentorship necessary to turn their innovative ideas into real-world solutions.



4. Limited Access to Innovation Funding

Access to financial resources remains one of the largest barriers to youth participation in the innovation ecosystem. Young entrepreneurs, particularly those working on socially innovative solutions, face significant challenges in securing seed capital, venture funding, or even microfinance. The absence of private sector investors, venture capital firms, and angel investors in the country further limits opportunities for youth to finance their ventures. While some government-backed and international programs provide small grants or loans, these are often insufficient and difficult for young innovators to access. This lack of funding channels discourages many potential youth entrepreneurs from pursuing innovative solutions to social challenges, thus stalling the development of a vibrant, youth-driven innovation ecosystem.



5. Low Economic Opportunities and Overreliance on Oil

Timor-Leste's economy is heavily dependent on its oil and gas sector, which accounts for 80% of the country's GDP (World Bank 2015). This reliance limits economic opportunities for adolescents outside of the petroleum industry. The lack of diversification into sectors like technology, agriculture, and services severely restricts the number of jobs and innovation opportunities available to young people. The informal sector carries an extremely high weight, and informal employment affects most of the population (over 70%), particularly young people aged 15-24 (over 90%).

¹ Energy security is defined as “uninterrupted availability of energy sources at an affordable price” by the International Energy Agency.

Figure 2: Key indicators of the labor market (KILM) by sex and age group

	Male	Female	Aged 15-24	Aged 25-64	Aged 65+	Total
Average actual hours of work per week	35.6	33.5	30.7	35.9	24.1	34.8
Informal employment rate (%)	75.3	80.4	93.8	74.8	89.1	77.3
Unemployment rate (%)	4.6	5.9	9.6	4.7	2.3	5.1
Youth unemployment rate, aged 15-24 (%)	7.4	12.4	9.6	-	-	9.6
Composite rate of labour underutilization (%)	25.8	33.3	56.1	23.4	32.8	28.9
Youth NEET rate, aged 15-24 (%)	31.1	33.6	32.4	-	-	32.4
Time-related underemployment rate (%)	0.8	0.2	0.2	0.6	0.2	0.6

Source: Timor-Leste Labour Force Survey 2021.

Moreover, government spending, which represents 87% of the GDP (World Bank 2024), is the primary driver of the economy, leaving few openings for private sector growth and youth-driven enterprises.

Timor-Leste's labor force participation rate is merely 30.5%, compared to 66.1% in Southeast Asia (ILO 2022). Youth specifically have even more challenges: the youth unemployment rate is nearly double the national unemployment rate, with the youth labour force participation rate at merely 9.2% – three times lower than the national rate. The impending "fiscal cliff" due to declining oil revenues and the rapid depletion of the sovereign wealth fund further exacerbates the economic insecurity faced by adolescents, who have few pathways to stable employment or entrepreneurial endeavors in non-oil sectors.



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VI. Incorporating Findings from the Youth Consultation Session

As part of the policy development process, a youth consultation session was conducted with 25 participants. The aim was to validate the key challenges identified in the policy brief and ensure that the recommendations reflect the lived experiences and needs of Timor-Leste's youth. The session used a mix of interactive and participatory activities inspired by design thinking methodologies, including brainstorming, group discussions and prioritization exercises. The prevailing key themes mentioned by participants included funding, mentorship, skill development, and access to markets and resources.

The following challenges were identified and prioritized based on the number of votes cast by participants:



Education and Lack of Mentorship/Training: This was the most frequently mentioned challenge, highlighting the critical need for capacity-building programs and accessible mentorship opportunities particularly at university level.



Lack of Funding/Capital Finance: Reflecting the difficulty youth face in accessing financial resources to launch or scale their entrepreneurial ventures.



Limited Local Production Capacity: Pointing to infrastructural and operational limitations, particularly reflecting Timor-Leste's reliance on expensive or unavailable imports due to underdeveloped domestic production and lack of industrialization ability.



Barriers to Market Access: These relate to the difficulty of legalizing startups, which affects their eligibility for funding.



Government's Policy: Related to perceived gaps or misalignment in policies supporting entrepreneurship.

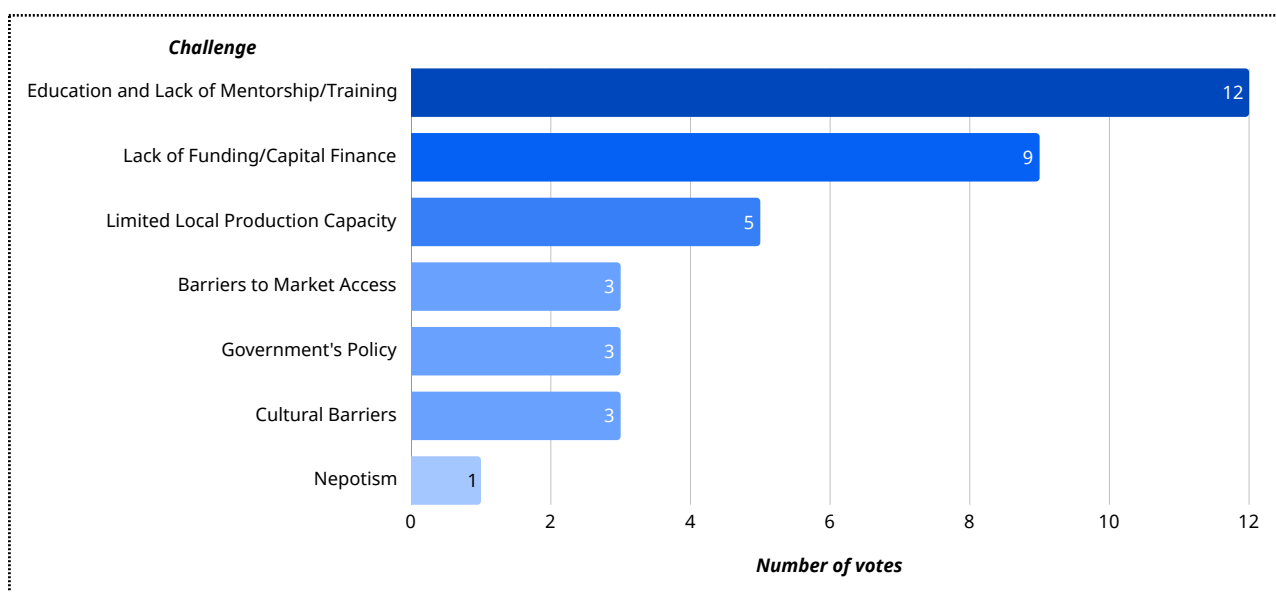


Cultural Barriers: Participants noted societal norms or attitudes that discourage risk-taking or entrepreneurial pursuits (for example: traditional practices such as "barlake"²), while culturally significant and deeply respected, can pose challenges to entrepreneurship. The high financial obligations associated with barlake may limit disposable income and deter individuals from investing in entrepreneurial ventures, particularly for youth and families with limited economic resources.



Nepotism: Highlighting its role as a barrier limiting fair access to resources and opportunities for youth entrepreneurs.

Figure 3: Challenges Identified on Youth Consultation Session



² Barlake is a traditional practice in Timor-Leste involving the exchange of goods or wealth between the families of a bride and groom during marriage arrangements. This custom symbolizes the union of two families, mutual respect, and the acknowledgment of the bride's family for their role in the community.

VII. Recommendations for the Government to Implement Social Innovations

1 Strengthen Digital Infrastructure

- **Action:** Invest in expanding digital access across the country, particularly in rural areas where connectivity remains limited. This can be achieved through partnerships with private telecommunications companies and development partners to ensure affordable and reliable internet access. UNICEF's Giga Initiative (in partnership with ITU) aims to connect every school to the internet, providing digital access for education in underserved areas and can support the government in this endeavor.
- **Impact:** Improved digital access will enable broader participation in social innovation activities, provide educational opportunities, and support entrepreneurial ventures led by young people.

2 Create Decentralized Innovation Hubs and Incubators

- **Action:** Establish innovation hubs and incubators in key urban and rural areas at local level government. These spaces will allow for young innovators to collaborate, access mentorship, and develop their ideas into scalable social innovations with reliable infrastructure.
- **Impact:** These hubs can foster a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship among young people, equipping them with the tools and support needed to address local challenges through innovative solutions.

3 Implement Capacity-Building Programs for Youth

- **Action:** Launch national-level programs that provide training in digital skills, entrepreneurship, and problem-solving for young people with special focus on university level. This can be integrated into existing educational curricula and delivered through community-based programs. UNICEF's UPSHIFT programme is a valuable aid for this action.
- **Impact:** By building capacity, the government can empower youth to lead social innovations, drive economic growth, and contribute to solving local problems such as unemployment and poverty.

4 Establish a National Social Innovation Fund

- **Action:** Create a dedicated fund to support youth-led social innovation projects, with an emphasis on projects that address national development priorities such as education, health, and climate resilience. The first edition of the fund could focus on frugal innovations according to the priorities mentioned.
- **Impact:** A national fund will provide seed funding to young innovators and ensure that promising ideas receive the financial support necessary for development and scaling, promoting inclusive development.

5 Enhance Social Protection Policies through Innovation

- **Action:** Leverage social innovations to improve the delivery of social protection programs, such as cash transfers, healthcare services, and education subsidies, particularly for marginalized groups like rural families, women, and people with disabilities.
- **Impact:** Innovation can make social protection programs more efficient, responsive, and accessible to those who need them most, ensuring that vulnerable populations are better supported.

6 Build Government Capacity for an ASEAN-Aligned Startup Ecosystem

- **Action:** Provide targeted training to public servants in innovation and entrepreneurship to support the development of a National Strategy for Entrepreneurship. As there are multiple benchmarks and sources of information available, it is recommended Timor-Leste follows the good practices mentioned in the "ASEAN Guidelines on Fostering a Vibrant Ecosystem for Startup" that governments can follow. These guidelines have been included in the policy brief as an annex.
- **Impact:** Strengthened government capacity will improve coordination and policymaking, while alignment with ASEAN standards will foster youth entrepreneurship and attract public and private investment in innovation.

These recommendations aim to create an enabling environment for social innovations that align with Timor-Leste's development goals and foster youth-led initiatives to address the country's most pressing social challenges.

The ASEAN Guidelines on Fostering a Vibrant Ecosystem for Startups across Southeast Asia

Guideline	Details
Guideline 1: Establish a policy lead, develop a clear definition, map out a profile of active startups as a starting point, and define overarching objectives.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish a policy lead to drive a comprehensive startup policy at the national level, reducing duplication and ensuring efficiency. Define the term "startup" for policy clarity and coherence. Map the characteristics and performance of the startup ecosystem, identifying bottlenecks and trends.
Guideline 2: Consider startup impact in framework condition policies.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct an "SME Test" to assess the impact of regulatory reforms on startups. Integrate startup considerations in broader framework condition policies, such as skills development.
Guideline 3: Identify policy priorities and actions for an end-to-end ecosystem.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Focus on the major bottlenecks affecting startup activities and design targeted, evidence-based policies. Prioritize development areas, including entrepreneurial activity and aspirations, based on the country's level of economic development.
Guideline 4: Acknowledge that progress may be long run, particularly in younger markets.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recognize that ecosystem maturity takes time, and that success requires a long-term commitment beyond election cycles.
Guideline 5: Build partnerships, particularly between higher and lower middle-income countries.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Foster regional cooperation for shared policy learning and harmonization of framework conditions through dialogue, joint initiatives, and resource pooling.
Guideline 6: For targeted measures, build competition into eligibility criteria and establish clear exit mechanisms.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Develop incentives with competitive eligibility criteria and clear exit conditions, such as sunset clauses, to ensure impactful and sustainable support.
Guideline 7: Continue to test the policy environment for startups, particularly in new and technology-rich sectors, for instance through regulatory sandboxes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Use regulatory sandboxes to adapt regulations to fast-evolving, technology-rich sectors while maintaining adequate protections and simplicity.
Guideline 8: Engage in regular dialogue and collaborate with the private sector.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Facilitate systematic dialogue with private sector actors to improve the relevance and impact of public policies, leveraging support from large companies and sector associations.
Guideline 9: Attempt to level the playing field for underrepresented groups.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Ensure transparent, inclusive measures that meet the needs of underrepresented groups, such as women and rural entrepreneurs, by addressing access barriers and providing targeted skills and networking support.
Guideline 10: Make measurement and monitoring and evaluation (M&E) a cornerstone of policy.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish clear KPIs, continuously monitor performance, and conduct post-implementation evaluations to refine and adjust policy actions effectively.

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