NEW VOICES:
The Engagement of Young Timorese in the Political Process
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This research was jointly conducted by Counterpart International and Belun.

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Counterpart International and Belun work together to develop and deliver training to 100 suco councils in Baucau, Covalima, Ermera, Liquica and Oecusse, to equip local leaders with the skills to enable them to effectively identify and respond to the needs of their community.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Overview

The 'New Voices' research project was conducted to investigate the political attitudes and opinions of new voters aged 17 to 20 years, in the leadup to the suku and national elections to be conducted in 2016 and 2017. Specifically, it explores new voters' attitudes towards participating in campaigns and upcoming elections, their perceptions and opinions of their elected representatives at suku and national level, and the avenues that they see available to themselves in becoming involved as future leaders.

The upcoming suku and national elections mark an important milestone in Timorese political history. These elections will be the first time in which the 'independence babies'—those born after the 1999 popular referendum for Timorese independence—will be eligible to vote. Unlike older voters who grew up during Portuguese rule or Indonesian occupation, and who potentially took part of the historic 1999 referendum, these new voters have only ever experienced independent Timorese government. Their political attitudes have therefore been largely formed through observing their Timorese leaders campaign for, and take, office, and by watching their elected Timorese representatives make important decisions that shape the political, economic and social development of the country.

In order to get a deep understanding of new voters’ attitudes and perceptions of the political process, their elected representatives, and the potential avenues that are open to them as future leaders, this research used qualitative methods. Eight focus group discussions (FGDs) were conducted of eight participants each (four men and four women) in the Municipalities of Baucau, Covalima, Dili and Liquica, totalling 64 respondents. FGDs were conducted in a mixture of urban and rural areas, with two FGDs specifically for tertiary students (university, and technical college.)

Perceptions of National Leaders

Participants in this research tended to be either neutral or critical when describing the perceived responsiveness of Government and Parliamentary representatives. Only a very few stated that they were happy with their national leaders, citing examples where the Government had provided emergency assistance following a fire. For the remainder, they were either neutral, making statements such as “some leaders listen and some don’t; some do things and some don’t”, or they were openly critical, citing broken election promises and failure to meet basic community needs. A very common theme, noted in all eight FGDs, was that while election campaigners certainly focussed on many policy areas of interest, such as improved roads, electricity, water, job creation and the
provision of hand tractors, following election into office they “lost interest” in these issues, and in the communities to whom they made those promises.

In addition to broken campaign promises, many participants also noted the development ‘gap’ that exists between urban and rural, elite and ordinary Timorese. Regardless of whether they were university students in Dili, or living in remote farming communities, participants from every FGD raised this as an important issue. The most commonly listed areas where participants felt national leaders needed to pay more attention were basic health and education, roads, fresh water and electricity, support for local cooperatives and groups, and support for people with disabilities.

A final area of concern raised by a number of participants related to political party manoeuvring which they felt diverted attention away from the business of governing, and the tendency to grant contracts based on relationships rather than merit, giving preferential treatment to people of the same political parties, family relations, or to veterans. As they explained, even if the work was fully carried out, failure to grant contracts based on merit meant that communities miss out, because of slow implementation or other issues.

**Perceptions of Suku Leaders**

Compared to their largely negative attitudes towards national leaders, participants had more mixed perceptions of their suku leaders. Some were happy with their suku leaders, stating that they listened to community members, and were effective in resolving problems that arose in the suku. Others were critical of their suku leaders, with the most common criticism that they were ‘passive’ or ‘inactive’ in their role and therefore not contributing to suku development. Other common criticisms included failing to listen to community members, failing to coordinate with other stakeholders or blocking different initiatives in the suku, and in one case stealing suku property for private benefit.

When asked why they thought these problems arise with their suku leaders, participants raised a number of contributing factors. This included the pakote electoral system which they claimed led to higher levels of nepotism on suku councils, local culture which favoured those who were traditionally empowered to rule, and the generally low standards of education required for suku leaders. Some participants were in favour of raising the required educational standards, in order to open the way for younger, more dynamic suku leaders. Other external contributing factors were also raised, including suku leaders’ limited power to affect national decision-making, low monthly incentives to do their work, and in some situations, the failure of young people to listen to and follow their suku leaders.

In addition to complaints related to individual suku leaders, a major theme that emerged across all eight FGDs was the tendency of suku leaders to be less responsive to young people, reflecting the general conservatism of local governance. This included failing to give young people opportunities to speak in
Attitudes Towards Elections

Compared to other democracies around the world, the percentage of voters in Timor-Leste is remarkably high. This high level of interest in voting continues to be expressed by new voters.

Despite participants’ general feeling of disenfranchisement with their elected representatives, they were clear that the answer was not to disengage from the political process, but rather to engage more closely. Sixty-two of the sixty-four participants stated that they planned on voting in the upcoming elections. It is probable that this result is misleadingly high, as some participants likely gave answers they thought researchers wanted to hear. However it was also clear from the qualitative discussions that followed that there continues to be a high level of interest in the electoral process. The vast majority of participants stated that they believed that the electoral process is effective and legitimate, and they particularly valued the secrecy of the election booth in order to avoid pressure or other problems. They were also very interested in attending political campaigns, and in joining a political party in order to become more involved as future leaders.

Many participants had witnessed or heard about political parties paying voters for access to their electoral cards during the electoral consolidation period, or paying them to vote for a particular party. Most participants were against this practice, but one young person stated clearly that he looked forward to voting, “because of the money”. A number of participants pointed out that even if they chose to accept the bribe, the secrecy of the voting booth meant that no-one would ever know who they voted for. While there was some level of fear concerning violence following an election, participants had not experienced, and were not concerned about being pressured or intimidated to vote a certain way.

Attitudes Towards Political Campaigns

There appears to be an increasing sophistication in young people’s analysis of politics in Timor—particularly for those in the urban areas, with greater access to education. Having witnessed many broken campaign promises in the past, participants were very cynical about promises made by political parties or local leader candidates during elections, and were actively considering ways to become more sophisticated in judging whether or not a candidate is trustworthy. This included examining the candidate’s previous performance in office, asking specific questions about policy platforms, and even recording promises made during campaigns so they could remind the candidate once he or she took office.

In choosing who to support, participants focussed on policy platforms rather than simple affiliation to a political party (alternately referred to as ‘party’ or
‘colour’). At the national level, participants were most interested in how the government provides for basic needs such as water, roads, electricity, health, education, and other such services, and addresses inequities between urban and rural areas. At the suku level, participants were most interested in a suku leader that was ‘active’, looking for ways to collaborate with others and develop the community.

**Avenues for Involvement in Political Life**

The primary method that participants saw in getting involved in political life was to join a political party. Of the sixty-four participants, only three spoke of other paths they could take, such as getting involved in church groups, and/or joining the *Uniaun Nasional Eskuteriu* Timor-Leste, led by the Catholic Church.

Despite the cynicism that participants expressed when speaking of political campaigns and promises, there was a general enthusiasm to joining a political party. Reasons included the desire to test their own capacity rather than simply criticising, using the opportunity to learn and grow as future leaders, interest in the benefits they might receive as party members, and concern that they might be left behind if they stay neutral.

While getting involved in national political life was generally considered too difficult, participation at the community level was generally considered more accessible. Discussions around the actual contributions that participants have made to their community yielded mixed results, with some participants actively starting up cooperatives and other initiatives, and others noting that they made no real contribution.

A major theme that emerged across all eight FGDs concerned the different modalities of leadership. Overwhelmingly, participants viewed ‘becoming a leader’ as a formal granting of authority/position—for example, being elected to the role of *xefe suku*, or Member of Parliament, or President of the Republic—rather than valuing the informal contributions that they can make as an important part of exhibiting leadership. While many participants spoke of contributions they either made to the community now, or wanted to make in the future, there was no clear link drawn between these contributions and what it takes to become a leader. This represents a potential missed opportunity in nurturing other conceptions of leadership amongst young people, placing value on the informal or non-political contributions that are made to the community as part of the path of ‘becoming’ a leader, or as an end in its own right.
INTRODUCTION

Overview

This research was designed to provide a snapshot of the perceptions of young people in East-Timor about their elected representatives, their attitudes towards and engagement in the political process, and their priorities, values and dreams for the future—all from their own perspective and in their own words.

There are good reasons for conducting this research. In the context of Timor-Leste, where estimates put approximately 34% of the population in the 12-29 year age group\(^1\), it is essential that young people's political perspectives and priorities are taken seriously. However, there is little known about the political attitudes of this demographic. While it is commonly presumed that young Timorese people are becoming increasingly apathetic about politics and their role in the democratic process, in line with the increasing apathy of young people globally,\(^2\) there is little real evidence indicating whether in fact this is correct. There is also limited evidence indicating what the main drivers are for young Timorese people's political engagement—or disengagement.

In addition, this research is timely, with upcoming local and national elections marking the first time that the ‘independence babies’—those born after the 1999 popular referendum for Timorese independence—will be old enough to vote. The coming of age of these new voters potentially marks the beginning of a new chapter in Timorese political life. While these new voters will have heard many stories about life during Indonesian occupation and Portuguese colonial rule, they did not experience it directly. Rather, their political views have been shaped through observing their Timorese leaders campaign for, and take, office, and watching their elected Timorese representatives make important decisions that shape the political, economic and social development of the country.

In order to capture the perceptions and priorities of this new generation of voters, and to mark the beginning of this new chapter in Timorese political life, this research focuses on the political attitudes of first-time voters aged 17-20 years. Specifically, it examines their attitudes towards engaging in the political process, their perceptions and opinions of their elected representatives, and the avenues that they see available to themselves in becoming involved as future leaders.

It is expected that the results presented in this report can be used for a variety of purposes. This includes informing communications and outreach strategies of electoral bodies and civil society organisations in engaging young people, informing political and civil society leaders of young people’s political priorities.

\(^1\) Census
and concerns, and throwing the spotlight on some factors that are undermining young people’s political participation—and identifying potential paths forward.

**Methodology**

The methodology chosen for this research was wholly qualitative, using focus group discussions (FGDs) as a method of encouraging open-ended discussion between participants as they explored their political thoughts and opinions. The research framework and FGD questions are included in Appendix A of this report.

While most political perception research tends to be in the form of quantitative surveys, such an approach would not have been appropriate in this case because there is so little known about the issues and factors that young Timorese people weigh up in engaging in the political process. The focus of this research was therefore on capturing their opinions and perceptions from their own perspectives, and in their own words—requiring a qualitative approach. Nonetheless, it is worth noting that this foundational research may form a useful basis for further quantitative studies in the future, gathering and tracking the changing perceptions of young people across Timor-Leste.

Eight FGDs were conducted with eight young people each (sixty-four participants in total) across urban and rural areas in the Municipalities of Baucau, Covalima, Dili and Liquica. The research included an equal number of young men and young women, and each FGD ran for approximately three and a half to four hour. Of the sixty-four participants, sixteen had received schooling to the level of SMP (pre-secondary), thirty had received schooling to the level of SMA (secondary), and eighteen were engaged in university or technical college studies (tertiary.) One participant identified herself as having a disability.

Case study sites were strategically chosen to include a geographical spread across the country, with Baucau in the east, Covalima in the west, and Dili and Liquica in the centre. Half of the case study sites covered participants from urban areas, and the other half covered participants from rural areas. FGDs in Dili and Liquica were with tertiary students only (university and vocational college), in order to capture the opinions of the next generation of leaders.

Sampling was purposive in each case study site, with participants identified by Counterpart and Belun coordinators to ensure that they fit the twin requirements of being a first-time voter, and being aged 17-20 years. Due to fieldwork error, there was one participant who had already voted in prior elections and was 22 years of age. The other sixty-three participants fit the sampling guidelines of being first-time voters aged 17-20 years.

FGDs were conducted as follows:

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3 In FGD conducted in suku Maudemo (Tilomar), 25 May 2016. This information only emerged once it was too late in the FGD to remove her.
Because of the purposive sampling approach, there is some bias that is built into the methodology. When identifying potential FGD participants, Belun and Counterpart coordinators also looked for those who “knew how to talk”—that is, those who would be more engaged and open in sharing their opinions. The results presented in this report should therefore be understood as representing the opinions of those who are more vocal, and possibly be more politically-minded.

In addition to usual fieldwork challenges, one of the issues that was faced by the research team was the fact that this line of questioning was very new for the research participants. For many of these young people, this is likely the first time that they have been asked for their political opinion by someone they considered to be an authority figure. Many were shy to begin with, and there was an initial tendency to treat the FGD as an exam, giving answers that they thought the research team wanted to hear. Unsurprisingly, this tendency was more of an issue with simple ‘yes/no’ questions (e.g. ‘do you plan to vote in the upcoming elections?’), and less of an issue with the deeper qualitative discussions that followed, which focussed on why and how they had come to form particular attitudes. Researchers used various means to deal with this issue, including using a game to encourage participants to speak about their feelings about elections, and asking respondents to write down some responses so they were confidential—but it remained an issue throughout the fieldwork.

PERCEPTIONS OF ELECTED REPRESENTATIVES

National Leaders

When asked if they felt that their political leaders at the national level listened to and were responsive to them, participants’ responses were nearly all neutral or critical, with only a very few stating that they were happy with their national leaders. Importantly, however, this feeling of disenfranchisement with national leaders did not appear to have a negative impact on their desire to vote, which is still extremely high.
In only one of the eight FGDs did some participants express a general sense of satisfaction with their national leaders’ responsiveness to community needs, citing provision of emergency assistance when some houses were burnt down and the building of a road as positive examples. Interestingly, these participants were from one of the more remote suku where they also noted that there was limited access to water and electricity. This possibly indicates that they have lower expectations regarding the national Government, and how involved national leaders should be in their lives.

Opinions in the other seven FGDs ranged between neutral to critical. Some participants did not appear to have any strong opinions either way, simply making broad statements such as, “some leaders listen and some don’t; some do things and some don’t.” Others were more nuanced in their response, noting the differences between different leaders, and the complexity of governing an entire country. As one UNTL student explained, “sometimes we just generalise, we see one leader who is no good so we say they are all no good... but this is not always right.” Similar comments were made by a participant in Baucau who, when talking about issues of transparency and corruption noted, “some people say there is no transparency in how they work... But in my observation some work without transparency, but I can also confirm that some leaders are very transparent.”

The most common response, however, was open criticism of their national leaders—and the major theme for criticism was that leaders tended to only be interested in communities during election campaigns, and did not follow up on their campaign promises following election into office. This issue was raised across all eight FGDs. As one UNTL student recounted,

> In my suku back home, they are always talking but don’t do anything. They say, ‘if I get this position, I will repair your road’ but they never do it. Then when someone brings a proposal to them, they say ‘but it’s not just us in Government, you can’t have such heavy expectations of us’. They just talk like that, so we don’t trust them. We just get together the men in the community, and fix it ourselves.

Similarly, another participant from Letemumo, Covalima, noted,

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4 FGD Laisorulai de Cima (Quilicai), 24 May 2016.
5 FGD Laisorulai de Cima (Quilicai), 24 May 2016.
6 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016; FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016; FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
7 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
8 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
9 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
Political parties come into our suku, they talk about a lot of things to us, that they will bring roads, electricity, fresh water. They talk but when they are voted in they don’t look to us. It’s always like this.10

Similar comments were made across all eight FGDs, with participants listing various broken promises ranging from community infrastructure such as new roads, electricity and water,11 to more personal benefits such as hand tractors,12 to major policy initiatives such as job creation.13 As participants went on to explain, however, once elected into office they “lost interest” in these issues, and in the communities to whom they made these promises. As one young person put it, “the reality is that when they win it never comes about... when they win they are not interested in us.”14 Or, as another young person put it,

They campaign with the slogan: if I am elected you will have a good life. But the reality is different. They sit in nice chairs but don’t do anything. People continue to live poorly... And they keep changing, they need to do their work for the full five years, this makes me as a student not very satisfied.15

In addition to this common complaint of leaders failing to live up to electoral promises, another major theme was the developmental ‘gap’ between urban and rural, elite and ordinary Timorese. There was a striking similarity in these complaints, which applied regardless of where the participants came from. For participants from rural suku, they reflected on the services that were available to urban areas but were not provided in their community. As one young person put it,

When they are looking to Timor, they need to look to all of us, they can’t just give to some and not to others... Why do they go to school in Baucau? Because here there is no electricity, so lots of children go there.16

For those who arguably have greater access to the benefits of development—young people from Baucau, Tibar Technical College and UNTL—their focus was on the same issues, the need for national leaders to look to basic needs of under-privileged communities and individuals. For example, one participant in Baucau explained, “in the remote areas they have so little. And those with mental illnesses, they don’t give them any priority.”17 Similarly, a student from UNTL

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10 FGD Letemumu (Quilicai), 25 May 2016.
11 FGD Letemumu (Quilicai), 25 May 2016; FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016; FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016; FGD Laisorulai de Cima (Quilicai), 24 May 2016; FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
12 FGD Suai Loro (Suai), 26 May 2016.
13 FGD Maudemo (Tilomar), 25 May 2016; FGD Biseuk (Tilomar), 24 May 2016;
14 FGD Maudemo (Tilomar), 25 May 2016.
15 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
16 FGD Laisorulai de Cima (Quilicai), 24 May 2016.
17 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
spoke about “the needs of rural areas, because there is no electricity in many places, and roads, also people with disabilities.” Taking a slightly different perspective by focussing on the difference between elites and ordinary Timorese, another participant pointed out, “We have free schooling, but the quality is not very good. You look at the Minister’s children, they never send their children to the public school.” The most commonly listed areas where participants felt national leaders needed to put more focus were basic health and education, roads, fresh water and electricity, support for local cooperatives and groups, and support for people with disabilities.

While there was a common perception of unfair and uneven distribution of development benefits across the country, the major difference between political perceptions of participants in urban and rural areas tended to be in the sophistication of their analysis, with participants from Baucau, Tibar Technical College and UNTL tending to be a little more informed and outward-looking in their discussions. For example, when speaking of the importance of education, a Tibar student was able to cite statistics on budget expenditure: “our budget for education is 8%, but in other nations the budget for education is closer to 20%.” By contrast, participants in the other five FGDs tended to focus on the specific needs in their individual community.

Another issue that was raised by a number of participants in Baucau had to do with the national government granting contracts based on political party or family relations, or granting contracts to veterans. As one participant described,

Road projects they give to the veterans, then they give electricity projects to the veterans. But we have to think: in the past they carried a gun. I’m sorry, this isn’t... to say that they don’t know how to do these things. But what they know most about is carrying a gun and fighting for independence. They were strong in this. During the war they didn’t study how to improve the economy...

As he went on to explain, while he had no problem with people receiving projects if they are able to carry them out, they are often “too slow” in implementing, which meant that communities did not benefit from the project as they should.

Finally, a number of participants reflected cynically on political party manoeuvring, which they felt diverted attention away from policy platforms and the business of governing. One participant stated that he would like to see politics move away from political parties to independent candidates, in order to avoid the problems associated with political factionalism. Another participant

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18 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
19 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
20 FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016.
21 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
22 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
commented on the emergence of many small political parties, noting “you can see that now there are many political parties, there are more small parties starting up. But what scares me is the question for the future: are these small parties able to collaborate with others and look to the future?” And a third commented critically on the ideological focus of political parties during election campaigns, stating “they see themselves in terms of being an historical party, so they just promise but don’t do anything.” As he went on to explain, The politicians use the strategy of bringing each other down, saying that party didn’t fight in the war... that because of this that leader is no good... they use this approach of bringing people down so that you will vote for them.

Suku Leaders

Compared to their largely negative attitudes towards their national leaders, participants had more mixed perceptions regarding their local (suku) leaders. This reflects the results of other research, which has also noted the generally higher level of dissatisfaction with national government and political leaders than with local authorities.

Some were happy with their local leaders, making statements such as “our local leaders listen to us. They resolve problems and work with the police.” Others found their local leaders disappointing: failing to listen to community members, failing to coordinate with other stakeholders, not having a clear plan or implementing projects in the suku, and in one case even selling suku property (guitars) intended for young people and keeping the profit. Similarly to their perceptions of national leaders, however, participants’ frustration did not appear to have a negative impact on their desire to vote. As one participant who was unhappy with her xefe suku succinctly put it, “We will vote, but for someone else.”

23 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
24 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
25 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
27 FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016.
28 FGD Biseuk (Tilomar), 24 May 2016.
29 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016; FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
30 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016; FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016; FGD Biseuk (Tilomar), 24 May 2016; FGD Maudemo (Tilomar), 25 May 2016.
31 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
32 FGD Maudemo (Tilomar), 25 May 2016.
A very common response that was given when asked about their local leaders was that they were ‘inactive’, ‘passive’, or ‘not interested’ in making things happen in the suku. As young people, they wanted to see more development in the suku, and more opportunities for young people to get ahead and to get involved—which tended to not happen in the context of what they saw as local leader ‘inactivity’. The main areas where participants wanted to see their local leaders become more active included creating vocational centres and building toilets, caring for the local environment, managing local animals to promote public health and ensure they don’t destroy crops, sports programs, groups to cultivate crops, sewing tais, fishing groups, or chickens or other livestock, or forming women’s groups, as well as dealing with local problems.

Situations of local leader ‘inactivity’ varied from one place to the next, but one example that was given involved a xefe suku refusing to sign a permission form for an NGO to implement their project in his suku—leading to them taking the project elsewhere.33 As one participant put it, “our xefe suku and xefe aldeia don’t listen or do anything, they say there is no budget to do anything.”34 In another suku, a participant explained “we need to fix the quality of local leadership: there are government programs to implement, [but] many of them are not serious in managing them.”35 For a third participant, he argued that “we want to find a community leader who has the capacity, who can collaborate, and who understands his role to facilitate development in the suku.”36

When asked why their local leaders were not active, there were a few different explanations that were offered. According to one participant, this issue has been exacerbated by the ‘pakote’ electoral system for local leaders.37 As he put it, because the xefe suku simply put members of his or her family on the suku council, they often did not have any clear plan for suku development. Others mentioned the low financial incentives that are given to suku leaders, for what if done properly is a very demanding role.38 A number of participants also stated that there was an issue with the older generation preferring those who are traditionally empowered to rule, but who did not have a clear plan for suku development. As they argued, the required level of education for local leaders

33 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
34 FGD Maudemo (Tilomar), 25 May 2016.
35 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
36 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
37 Pakote electoral system was introduced in Law 3/2009. It is a closed list system in which suku council members are chosen by the xefe suku, rather than directly elected by community members. This system is no longer in operation, as Law 3/2009 has been replaced by Law 9/2016 – Law on Sucos.
38 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
should be raised—potentially opening the way for younger, more dynamic leaders.\textsuperscript{39}

However, while there were a number of complaints that were made about local leaders, there were also participants who were reflective about the role and power of \textit{xefe suku}, noting that it was easy to blame local leaders for issues that are outside of his or her control.\textsuperscript{40} As was noted by one participant,

\begin{quote}
We blame the \textit{xefe suku} when he doesn't do what people want, but at national level they don't listen to him. Because he's not the president, he doesn't have power... The \textit{xefe suku} has no funding in his own pocket to fix the \textit{suku}, he can't do that.\textsuperscript{41}
\end{quote}

Similarly, another participant reflected that while community members may complain about their local leaders, the \textit{xefe suku} sometimes finds it challenging to get the young people to follow his lead:

\begin{quote}
As I see it, the \textit{xefe suku} does great things, but us young people, some of us trust him and some of us don't. Sometimes he asks us to [help him] and some help him, but some of us don't help.\textsuperscript{42}
\end{quote}

While participants’ perception of the quality of local leadership varied from one \textit{suku} to the next, a major theme that emerged across four of the eight FGDs was a feeling of disenfranchisement, that local leaders did not tend to be responsive to younger people, reflecting the general conservatism of local governance.\textsuperscript{43} Participants in Laisorulai de Cima stated that local leaders did not give them an opportunity to speak or to ask questions during community meetings, and were generally not responsive to their concerns.\textsuperscript{44} In Biseuk, a participant recounted:

\begin{quote}
Biseuk leaders never do programs for us young people. We talk but they don't listen. They just say 'you little ones, what are you talking about'?... We just manage ourselves. There is no leadership, they are not close to us.\textsuperscript{45}
\end{quote}

Similarly, in Baucau, a participant recounted that the only time the \textit{xefe suku} was interested in the young people's opinions was when he was campaigning for election:

\begin{quote}
\textsuperscript{39} FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016; FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016; FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
\textsuperscript{40} FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016; FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
\textsuperscript{41} FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
\textsuperscript{42} FGD Suai Loro (Suai), 26 May 2016.
\textsuperscript{43} FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016; FGD Biseuk (Tilomar), 24 May 2016; FGD Laisorulai de Cima (Quilicai); 24 May 2016; FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
\textsuperscript{44} FGD Laisorulai de Cima (Quilicai), 24 May 2016.
\textsuperscript{45} FGD Biseuk (Tilomar), 24 May 2016.
Before he became *xefe suku* he did a dialogue with the young people, sat together with them, that was good. But when he became *xefe suku* he no longer has any interest.\(^{46}\)

The frustration that participants felt in not being heard tended to amplify their general feeling of powerlessness: if the *xefe suku* chose to not listen or engage, there was little they could do. One participant suggested that young people could demonstrate against their local leaders, saying “If someone who becomes *xefe suku* doesn’t do anything, what can we do? Can we demonstrate? Us young people can demonstrate. That’s my opinion.”\(^{47}\) However, when pressed, it was also clear that she thought that mode of action would not achieve a great deal.

THE ELECTORAL PROCESS

**Attitudes Towards Voting**

Unlike many other countries around the world that need to encourage young people to vote in elections, political apathy does not appear to be an issue with young Timorese voters. There were high levels of trust in the electoral process, with all sixty-four participants agreeing that the process is effective and valuable in allowing voters to choose their leadership. Participants were very clear that they valued the right to vote, and particularly appreciated the secrecy of the vote. Most participants seemed comfortable with voting mechanisms, with only a small number of participants from two suku in Covalima explaining that they needed more information from CNE on the mechanisms of voting.\(^{48}\)

Participants were very clear that elections are important for Timor-Leste. For some, this came back to issues of legitimacy, as the voting process reinforces that power came from the people. As one participant put it, “If people choose the leader he will think: the people have chosen me and so I must lead and I must serve.”\(^{49}\) Others focussed on issues of effective governance, emphasising that they need representatives who will govern on their behalf, and make decisions. As another participant explained, without elections “everyone would be shouting, saying ‘we want to fix this or that’ … so elections are effective because we choose people we trust to represent us.”\(^{50}\) A few participants also contrasted the current democratic system with living in a monarchy, reflecting that the

\(^{46}\) FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.

\(^{47}\) FGD Biseuk (Tilomar), 24 May 2016.

\(^{48}\) FGD Biseuk (Tilomar), 24 May 2016, FGD Maudemo (Tilomar), 25 May 2016.

\(^{49}\) FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.

\(^{50}\) FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
current system was much better than the monarchical system of the past, when ordinary Timorese did not have the right to vote.\textsuperscript{51}

Sixty-two out of sixty-four participants stated that they planned on voting in the next *suku* and national elections. It is useful to note that this high positive response rate is confirmed by the recent quantitative Mid-Term Survey undertaken by Counterpart in the Municipalities of Baucau, Covalima and Oecusse, in which 232 out of a total 234 respondents aged 17 to 20 years stated that they planned on voting in the upcoming elections.\textsuperscript{52} In this survey, the three most cited reasons for planning to vote were ‘because I have a right to vote’, ‘because I want to choose (or change) my leaders’, and ‘because it is my duty as a citizen.’

As noted in Section A of this report it is likely that both qualitative and quantitative results are misleadingly high, as research respondents may have given responses they thought the researchers wanted to hear. Nonetheless, it is clear that there continues to be high levels of interest in voting amongst these young people. From the qualitative discussions that followed in the eight FGDs, where participants shared their reasons for wanting to vote, it was also clear that many participants had thought the issue through and placed a high value on their right to vote.

Given the high levels of interest in voting, there was little insight offered into the reasons for choosing \textbf{not} to vote. For the two participants who stated that they did not want to vote, they simply explained that this was because the *xepe suku* did not listen to them.\textsuperscript{53} Another participant also raised the issue of transport for those in the rural areas, who must walk a significant distance to get to the voting centre. As he explained,

> When I was a student in the mountains, people said ‘if the political party comes to help us with transport, we are prepared to go vote for them. If people don’t come to help, we won’t go to vote.’ Because we have problems with transport....\textsuperscript{54}

When asked why they wanted to vote, responses tended to fall into three main groups. The first group of responses was formalistic and offered particularly by young women, with participants simply noting that they were of an age to vote, had an electoral card, and therefore had an obligation to do so.\textsuperscript{55} For these young people, it was perhaps an unreflective statement that they should essentially ‘do as they were told’ by various authority figures including CNE, their teachers and others.

\textsuperscript{51} FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016; FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.

\textsuperscript{52} Given the low sample rate for this age group, these results are not statistically significant,

\textsuperscript{53} FGD Biseuk (Tilomar), 24 May 2016. (These two participants changed their mind during the FGD, and by the end of it stated that they did, in fact, plan on voting.)

\textsuperscript{54} FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.

\textsuperscript{55} All eight FGDs.
The second group of responses focussed on the importance of choosing leaders who they could trust to look to community needs, and further develop the country.\textsuperscript{56} As noted previously, when speaking of development participants were not interested in the larger infrastructural projects. Rather, they wanted to vote for national and local leaders who had the vision and interest to provide basic services to communities. At the national level, this included the provision of fresh water, electricity, roads for rural communities, improving the quality of education and health, services for people with disabilities, and other such priorities. At the local level, this meant choosing community leaders who would be active in suku development, with one participant explaining, "I want to choose community leaders who don’t just sit silently, don’t do anything, and they forget what they promised during the campaign."\textsuperscript{57}

When explaining why basic community needs should be of the highest priority, participants focussed in particular on issues of equity (needing to ‘look after rural areas, where they have so little’),\textsuperscript{58} as well as fear for Timor’s future (expressing the desire that Timor ‘not fall behind other countries.’)\textsuperscript{59} While participants expressed a strong desire to vote for leaders who would provide essential services, they were also very cynical about campaign promises that are habitually made to communities, but without any follow-up following election into office.

Finally, a third group of responses focussed on their rights as Timorese citizens. For most participants, the statement “it is my right as a citizen” was enough, with no need for follow-up explanation. However, some participants also explained this position a little further, with a UNTL student explaining that it was important for citizens to value and use the rights that they have: “if you don’t vote, then you are throwing away your own rights.”\textsuperscript{60} Taking a slightly different perspective, a participant from Baucau emphasised the egalitarian nature of the one person-one vote system, explaining that the vote gave ordinary people the chance to be heard and to break the privilege that would otherwise be held by elites:

> Imagine if everyone in Timor-Leste chooses to not vote, the leaders will simply choose [and give power to] each other, and year by year the ema boot will support each other, and they continue to be ema boot. And those who use the family [nepotistic] system will simply give positions to their family, so ema boot continue to be ema boot, and the poor will continue to be poor.\textsuperscript{61}

\textsuperscript{56} All eight FGDs.

\textsuperscript{57} FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.

\textsuperscript{58} All eight FGDs.

\textsuperscript{59} FGD Suai Loro (Covalima), 26 May 2016; FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016; FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016; FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.

\textsuperscript{60} FGD with UNTL students, Dili (Dili), 12 May 2016.

\textsuperscript{61} FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
In addition to these three most common types of response listed above, there were a small number of participants who focussed on what they personally could get out of voting in the national elections. For two participants, the collective nature of getting together with supporters of the same political party was attractive, with a participant from a rural suku explaining, “I want to go with others in the truck, all shouting together, it’s festive.” And for another participant, the main reason he wanted to vote was “because of the money”, because of what he would be paid by political parties if he voted for them. The issue of money politics is discussed in detail further on.

There were also two participants who linked the importance of the vote to Timorese independence. For example, one participant explained, “I must vote because my grandparents died for this country.”

**Political Campaigns**

The general feeling of satisfaction and trust expressed by participants regarding the electoral process contrasted strongly with participants' attitudes to political campaigning.

As noted previously, a common criticism focussed on the tendency of political campaigners to lie. As one participant put it, “They just lie, I don’t want anything to do with them.” Political manipulation was also spoken about, with one participant noting that political promises focussed only on the particular issues of that district, instead of looking to the needs of all of Timor-Leste:

> Political parties come and give promises such as ‘when I become President, I will do this for this district.’ But this is no good. Because you shouldn't promise like this; if you want to do it then you should do it in all 13 districts.

Statements about lies, manipulation and broken campaign promises were made across all eight FGDs, relating to both national and local elections, in which campaign lies were seen to be a normal part of politics. As one participant cynically put it, “Down the track if I campaign to become xefe suku, I will lie to the

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62 FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016; FGD Laisorulai de Cima (Quilicai), 24 May 2016.

63 FGD Laisorulai de Cima (Quilicai), 24 May 2016.

64 FGD Laisorulai de Cima (Quilicai), 24 May 2016.

65 FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016; FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.

66 FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016.

67 FGD Suai Loro (Suai), 26 May 2016.

68 FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016.
people. That’s politics... at the end it depends on me whether I implement [the promises that I made].”  

Despite this cynicism, and similarly to their attitude towards voting, participants were clear that this did not diminish their interest in attending and participating in campaigns. As they explained, political campaigns were the primary method through which they could find out what the candidates stood for, which will help them to make a decision on where to place their vote. As one young person put it, “elections are effective not just for voting. They make campaigns and you can ask questions that candidates can answer.”

Participants explained that the best way to respond to broken campaign promises was not to disengage, but rather to get smarter about how they engage and analyse what campaigners tell them. Many participants did not have a clear idea on how to do this—simply stating they would “go and listen to the campaign”. However, some participants who were more politically engaged had clearly thought about this problem and developed some possible strategies. For some participants, it was important to carefully observe what the candidate was promising, and to test whether he or she had clearly thought through how to go about achieving his or her promises: “I want to see local candidates who don’t just promise that they’ll do something, but say how they will do it, what approach they will take.” Similarly at the national level, another participant explained,

Before I get involved I need to observe them, do they have a plan? If there is a political campaign, I will ask them what their plan is. To combat unemployment? To combat violence? To combat the nepotism that happens all the time? I want to know how they will do that.

For another participant, it was most important to test whether the candidate was interested in the public good, or only in his or her private interests. As she put it,

They make plans but it always stays as a plan, is never realised. To vote you need to observe them closely before voting for them; when I put my trust in them, [I want] them to not look to their personal interests but to the public interest.

Another suggestion was to look not only at promises, but to also examine the previous performance of candidates who had already been in Government or Parliament. As one participant explained, before deciding whether to vote for someone he would “look to what they say, but also look back on what they have done if they were a Minister or had a seat in Parliament, or were a State

69 FGD Maudemo (Tilomar), 25 May 2016.
70 FGD Biseuk (Tilomar), 24 May 2016.
71 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
72 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
73 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
Others focussed on how they could try to hold people to their promises, with participants in two FGDs saying that they wanted to attend campaigns and record the promises that were made with their phones, so that they could remind people of their promises if they then took office. 

Finally, the point was made that it was important to be realistic about what promises could reasonably be carried out. As one participant explained, some campaign promises were simply too big and not realistic: “it’s important that we hold them strongly to their words when they promise something to us... [and ask ourselves] if they win leadership, is it actually possible? Can they do what they have promised to the people or not?”

To help them to assess which candidates to vote for, participants generally agreed that the information they were most interested in included the different political plans and platforms, and how the political party lists for national elections were structured. One participant also asked for other information about the political party to help him assess their ‘political maturity,’ however did not explain what this information would look like.

**Money Politics**

When asked about the different strategies that political campaigners use to get their vote, money politics emerged as an important theme. Some of the cases that were described were fairly innocuous, with party representatives offering to provide them with food or petrol for their motorbikes if they attended their campaign, or providing transport for people in the rural areas to help them get to the voting centre. However, participants in five out of the eight FGDs also described clear situations of electoral bribery, including people being paid money in exchange for providing photocopies of their electoral cards during the electoral consolidation phase, or in exchange for their promising to vote for a particular political party. Situations such as these were described in both urban and rural areas.

74 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
75 FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016; FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
76 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
77 FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016.
78 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
79 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
80 Laisorulai, FGD Letemumu (Quilicai), 25 May 2016.
81 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016; FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016; FGD Laisorulai de Cima (Quilicai), 24 May 2016; FGD Letemumu (Quilicai), 25 May 2016; FGD Maudemo (Tilomar), 25 May 2016.
Electoral bribery was a particularly strong theme in subdistrict Quilecai, with some participants openly stating that the possibility of being paid was a major motivating factor for them in deciding whether or not to vote. As one participant stated when asked why he wanted to vote, “I will vote to get money... I have heard this from some parties.” As another explained, “with political parties that come in, one has no money, the other has money. If one of them has a lot of money, then we will support them. You don’t need to support those that have no money.” And another participant stated, 

 Nobody has called me... but if people call me I will go because the political parties give money... You go participate in the party, and you get money to buy a motorbike. Some people say if there’s no money, there’s no need to get involved. They say if you get involved in their party there is lots of money to get a motorbike.

Cases of electoral bribery were also recounted in other case study sites. In Baucau, one participant recounted a situation where political representatives attempted to bribe the head of a community group, so that he would convince his members to vote for them:

There is one man who has gathered many young people, because his organisation gathers many people. Then the political parties wanted to get close to him, talk to him, try to influence him so that he could send all these young people to support their party. They promised that if he sent all the young people to support their party, they would fix his house, give him a motorbike, give money to him... But thank God he didn’t fall for this. He said that his organisation is not there to support politics.

Similarly in Maudemo, another participant explained,

When people come to campaign, for the president or for political parties, they pressure you. Sometimes they give money to people, saying 'you must vote for my party'... people have come to my brothers and said 'if I give money you should vote for my party.'

The majority of participants were very critical of electoral bribery, stating that it was important to vote with their conscience. As one participant put it,

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82 This was clearly a common practice: during lunch following the Laisorulai de Cima FGD, participants spoke openly with each other and the researcher, with USD$20 the generally accepted bribe that is paid in exchange for photocopies of people’s electoral cards.

83 FGD Laisorulai de Cima (Quilicai), 24 May 2016.

84 FGD Letemumu (Quilicai), 25 May 2016.

85 FGD Letemumu (Quilicai), 25 May 2016.

86 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.

87 FGD Maudemo (Covalima), 25 May 2016.

88 This perspective was given in all five FGDs where electoral bribery was raised as an issue.
Even though they promise, saying you need to go with my party and I will give you money, I don’t trust that. As Timorese citizens we should vote as we wish, according to the political party we see can develop Timor.89

There were many similar comments that were made across the five FGDs where money politics was raised as an issue. In two FGDs where some participants stated that they were happy to receive an electoral bribe, there were also other participants who were against the practice.

However, for many participants, it was also clear that they had learned to play the game. While one participant recounted the situation of his aunt who felt she was morally obliged to vote for that party once she received a bribe because lying went against her religious convictions,90 most participants were more pragmatic. Participants in Baucau, Quilicai and Maudemo noted that while they could attend campaigns and even accept their money, this didn’t mean they needed to vote for them.91 As one participant explained, the secrecy of the voting booth protected him: “there is sometimes the thought that because they have already paid me money, I must go and vote for them... But no-one else is in the voting booth with you, when you vote they don’t know.”92 For those who choose pay bribes in exchange for voters’ promise to vote a certain way, there is simply no way for them to monitor whether or not a recipient votes as he or she promised to.

Pressures and Intimidation

The vast majority of participants were clear that they had not experienced, and did not feel, any significant pressure or intimidation from within their household or from other community members to vote a certain way. None of the sixty-four participants reported experiencing direct threats or intimidation that was designed to make them support a particular party. As one participant explained,

For me, people have not threatened me. They have just given their thoughts that I should vote one way or another, but I also have the right to look at how my suku and nation is being developed. Because I know that who I vote for is a secret.. When it is election time I need to go vote according to my thoughts about conditions [in my community].93

89 FGD Maudemo (Covalima), 25 May 2016.

90 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.

91 FGD Letemumu (Quilicai), 25 May 2016; FGD Maudemo (Covalima), 25 May 2016; FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.

92 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.

93 FGD Suai Loro (Suai), 26 May 2016.
While a few participants spoke of their local leaders telling them that they needed to choose a certain political party (which they easily resisted),94 the types of tactics that participants described were more along the lines of pressuring them to attend meetings and campaign events, rather than pressuring them to vote a certain way.

Of the sixty-four research participants, only two people stated that they had felt pressure from within their household. For one participant, this pressure came from his father who had joined a party and then also expected that he would do the same.95 For the other it was a similar story, but with his uncle.96 Both participants reported that they resisted this pressure because, as they each put it, family and politics should be separate.97

The main reason for participants’ general lack of concern around pressure or intimidation around voting came back to the secrecy of the voting booth. As one participant recounted,

In my house it is good... To give one example from the last election, my aunt and uncle went to vote. When they came back we were also there so we heard our uncle ask ‘who did you just vote for?’ Then my aunt said ‘that’s my secret, I won’t tell you.’98

Similarly, another participant explained, “I have not voted yet but I have seen that the voting booth is secret, people don’t know each other’s [votes]. This means it doesn’t create any problems.”99 Clearly secret voting is extremely important, as a number of participants spoke of the potential ‘problems’ that might emerge if they did not keep their vote secret, with one participant stating “some just argue with each other, and spy on each other... you should not say [how you voted] in front of other people.”100

While it was generally agreed that there was no real intimidation intended to make them vote a certain way, a number of participants noted that there was definitely pressure put on community members to attend different political party campaign events.101 For some, this was not a major problem, because while they

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94 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016; FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
95 FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016.
96 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
97 FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016; FGD with UNTL students, Dili (Dili), 12 May 2016.
98 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
99 FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016.
100 FGD Biseuk (Tilomar), 24 May 2016.
101 FGD Suai Loro (Suai), 26 May 2016; FGD Letemumu (Quilical), 25 May 2016; FGD Laisorulai de Cima (Quilical), 24 May 2016; FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
may attend the campaign meetings, this didn’t mean they needed to vote for the party: “you can get lots of information, down the track I will vote according to my conscience. Going to their events doesn’t mean you will vote for them.” Others, however, were more put out that there was pressure put on them to attend the campaign event: “I get angry... because sometimes they oblige us [to go to campaigns] and I don’t want to... they should not oblige us.” In general, however, there appeared to be a general openness towards attending campaign events together with family and friends, without then feeling obliged or pressured to vote for that party. As many put it, their purpose in attending the campaign was simply to listen, and then they would vote according to their own political conscience.

Nonetheless, while the majority of participants stated that they had not experienced direct threats, participants in four FGDs still spoke of their fear of political violence following an election. Generally, this was connected to political campaigners who they said ‘created problems’ if the election did not go their way. As one participant related,

> After voting we need to return through a suku and they always throw stones, this creates violence. They say “oh, that one won, in your suku that party won.” We always need to go through the suku, and people are talking about the political differences [between us and them] which leads to violence.

Similarly in Maudemo, a participant stated, “I am scared because with politics people can kill each other.” This was echoed by another, who said, “I feel a bit concerned, and a bit frightened because when I hear about elections, when the elections are over there is always some conflict. When the election is coming up, political campaigners always have some problem.”

### AVENUES FOR INVOLVEMENT IN POLITICAL LIFE

#### Joining a Political Party

Overwhelmingly, participants considered joining a political party the primary method to getting involved in political life, and potentially taking a leadership position in the future. Of the sixty-four participants in this research, only three participants spoke about other paths that would help them to become a leader,

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102 FGD Letemumu (Quilicai), 25 May 2016.
103 FGD Laisorulai de Cima (Quilicai), 24 May 2016.
104 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
105 FGD Maudemo (Tilomar), 25 May 2016.
106 FGD Maudemo (Tilomar), 25 May 2016.
such as getting involved in church groups, and/or joining the Uniaun Nasional Eskuteriu Timor-Leste, led by the Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{107}

Despite the cynicism that they showed concerning party politics during election campaigns, many participants exhibited a general enthusiasm to joining a political party. Similarly to their attitudes towards voting and attending political campaigns, their cynicism was seen as a reason to engage more deeply, rather than to disengage. As one participant explained, it is too easy to criticise from the sidelines: to really understand, he wanted to get involved and test his own capacity. As he put it, "If you just sit in your home and watch other people who are not effective, you can criticise them for being ineffective. But I want to try, if I have that position can I do it or not?"\textsuperscript{108} However, as he went on to explain, this meant that he needed to be smart in learning how the system worked, and to think through how he would get involved so he retained his principles:

If you observe community leaders, and the Government's administration, you can perhaps make some contribution to politics... [But] you need to really understand in order to participate. Because you might have many ambitions, but with your ambition you might also lose your dignity.\textsuperscript{109}

Some saw joining a political party as a challenge, a chance to prove their capacity, with one participant saying he was just as capable as anyone else to get involved, asking “why can other people do it, and I can not?”\textsuperscript{110} Others emphasised the opportunity to learn and grow, with another participant explaining, "I want to be involved in party politics because you can learn not only theory but also learn other things... in order to become a leader."\textsuperscript{111} Similarly, another participant stated:

If someone invites me to be involved in political party life, I will be happy. Because this means they see that I have the capacity... I can learn new things and I can listen to their plans about how their program will benefit the people... I will involve myself when I hear that their program is good and their values are good.\textsuperscript{112}

Many similar explanations were given across the different case study sites. In addition to learning and being recognised as an emerging leader, there were a number of other reasons that motivated participants. For example, one participant expressed concern about being left behind if he failed to join a party:

\begin{flushleft}
\textsuperscript{107} FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016; FGD with UNTL students, Dili (Dili), 12 May 2016; FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016.
\textsuperscript{108} FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016;
\textsuperscript{109} FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016;
\textsuperscript{110} FGD Laisorulai de Cima (Quilicaí), 24 May 2016;
\textsuperscript{111} FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016
\textsuperscript{112} FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016;
\end{flushleft}
If I don't participate [with a political party] now, in the future when I am old and want to get involved I don’t know what I will do. Because I will have no experience... I won’t be able to do anything.\textsuperscript{113}

Another participant emphasised the practical benefits of joining a party, explaining that because of Timorese communal culture—what he referred to as the “group system”—joining a political party made it “quicker” to get ahead because of the opportunities he might get through other party members. Regardless of the motivation, joining a political party was generally seen as useful thing to do.

**Conceptualising Leadership**

Participants’ general concepts around leadership tended to focus heavily on formal notions of authority, with few links made between individual or informal contributions that individuals could make as young people now, as part of their path to becoming a leader in their community. Leadership was generally understood as having a formal position of authority, granted by others through involvement in a political party, through elections, or through other means.

Some participants spoke about wanting to become a Government Minister or a Member of Parliament.\textsuperscript{114} Others spoke about wanting to take on local leadership roles in the suku council in the future,\textsuperscript{115} for example one participant explaining:

> Firstly, I want to become xefe suku... It doesn’t have to be xefe suku, it could also be xefe aldeia... Or maybe the lia-na’ìn, when I finish school I could tesi lia [resolve disputes] regarding land... I want to fix the suku infrastructure and open a youth employment centre.\textsuperscript{116}

When asked why they wanted to take on a leadership role, a few participants were very specific in their intentions—for example, wanting to stop slash-and-burn practices that destroy the environment,\textsuperscript{117} creating employment centres to deal with the emerging drug problem,\textsuperscript{118} or wanting to reduce the incidence of women contracting HIV/AIDS.\textsuperscript{119} However, most of the reasons that they gave for wanting to take on a position of authority were fairly broad, including

\textsuperscript{113} FGD Letemumu (Quilicai), 25 May 2016.
\textsuperscript{114} FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016; FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016; FGD Suai Loro (Suai), 26 May 2016; FGD Maudemo (Tilomar), 25 May 2016.
\textsuperscript{115} FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016; FGD Maudemo (Tilomar), 25 May 2016.
\textsuperscript{116} FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
\textsuperscript{117} FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016.
\textsuperscript{118} FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
\textsuperscript{119} FGD Maudemo (Tilomar), 25 May 2016.
“carrying people towards better development”, “improving my country” and other such sentiments. As one participant put it,

For me, what motivates me to get involved in politics is that when you become a businessman, the benefits are just for you. But if you become a politician you can contribute to the nation... and you need to think about anyone.

While discussions around leadership were very formalistic, when the discussion shifted from questions of leadership to their dreams for the future, or the contributions that they could make in their community, many other ideas emerged. Some spoke about their professional aspirations, such as becoming a judge, teaching farmers, becoming a carpenter, and studying (and then presumably working in) petroleum. As one participant explained, “my dream is not to become President. I want to study petroleum, because at school we study natural sciences. This is my idea of how I can contribute.” For one young man from a very poor family who stopped his schooling to earn money for his family, it was difficult to see beyond this reality. As he explained, “I got leave from my school and I now do business. I do this because others need it, so I give money to them in order to improve their lives.”

Participants also spoke of the contributions that they currently make. However, as stated previously, very few participants clearly made the link between contributing to their community (however defined) and being or becoming a leader. They considered that a formal leadership position would enable them to tackle some of the issues that they considered important. But they would only ‘become’ a leader when such a formal position was granted to them. Simply being active and initiative something in the community did not denote leadership.

Understandably, participants’ focus was on what they could achieve in their individual suku, with one person explaining, “as young people we need to change things... We can't go to Parliament but in the suku it's good if we can be a bit dynamic.” As might be expected in a diverse group of young people, the

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120 FGD Biseuk (Tilomar), 24 May 2016.
121 FGD Maudemo (Tilomar), 25 May 2016; FGD Laisorulai de Cima (Quilicai), 24 May 2016.
122 FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.
123 FGD Laisorulai de Cima (Quilicai), 24 May 2016.
124 FGD Letemumu (Quilicai), 25 May 2016.
125 FGD Biseuk (Tilomar), 24 May 2016.
126 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
127 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
128 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
129 FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.
contributions that they made and were willing to make were equally diverse, and not everyone felt a need or saw the opportunity to contribute to their community—reflecting the findings of the National Youth Survey conducted in 2007, which noted that many young men participated in activities that only benefited them, rather than the whole community.\textsuperscript{130}

One student stated that his family had advised him to focus on schooling and not be distracted by other activities in the community, stating “our suku needs an sports centre, and I tried to speak to young people about it; but my grandparents said I need to focus on schooling, then later I can do something.”\textsuperscript{131} Others simply didn’t see it as their role, with another participant explaining,

In my opinion we students who have not yet graduated can’t do anything in our suku. When we finish school we can have some thoughts or plans on doing things. When my schooling is finished and I become xefe suku I will do some things in suku Maudemo.\textsuperscript{132}

Yet others were surprised at the idea that they might be contributing to suku development, with one participant saying, “I feel a bit embarrassed, but I have not done anything for the community myself, if others don’t make me help. I only do things like [obligatory] general cleaning.”\textsuperscript{133}

However, other participants spoke about different contributions they made. Some spoke about everyday things that they did, such as studying hard, helping their family on the farm, earning money for their family, and picking up rubbish. As one participant put it, “if I want to make changes in my country, first I need to change how I behave in my family... for example, how I deal with rubbish: I should not just throw it away but put it in the rubbish bin.”\textsuperscript{134} Another spoke of working in a group led by the xefe suku in farming beans, which were then sold to the government.\textsuperscript{135} For another, it was important to involve herself in church groups and other positive influences in the community.\textsuperscript{136} They also spoke about the influences that they needed, including not involving themselves in alcohol or drugs, or making trouble in the community.

Yet others spoke of more formal contributions they had made to the community as a whole, such as creating small fishing and other cooperatives,\textsuperscript{137} and working

\textsuperscript{130} Secretariat of State for Youth and Sport (2007) \textit{National Youth Policy of Timor-Leste} p. 8

\textsuperscript{131} FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.

\textsuperscript{132} FGD Maudemo (Covalima), 25 May 2016.

\textsuperscript{133} FGD Maudemo (Covalima), 25 May 2016.

\textsuperscript{134} FGD with Colegio Tibar students (Tibar), 13 May 2016.

\textsuperscript{135} FGD Biseuk (Tilomar), 24 May 2016.

\textsuperscript{136} FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016.

\textsuperscript{137} FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016; FGD Baucau vila (Baucau), 23 May 2016; FGD Maudemo (Tilomar), 25 May 2016.
together to plant trees or contribute in other ways to the community. Some spoke of needing the *xefe suku* to lead their group: “as young people we are happy if we see the *xefe suku* making plans to work with us, such as forming a group to catch fish, manage chickens, cultivate vegetables.” Others had simply gone ahead and created the group for themselves:

Our group has planted trees in Betano, and we invited our administrator and the *xefe suku* and our parents to see it. We now also have a plan to rehabilitate the church, through the coordination between church and local leader.\footnote{FGD with UNTL students (Vera Cruz), 12 May 2016.}

However, while their willingness to contribute to the community varied from one person to the next, a common perception amongst the research participants was in how leadership was defined. This was the case even for those who had become more active contributors to their community.

**CONCLUSION**

Discussions with the 64 young people who participated in this research clearly show that they are still very interested in the political process, and in how they can get involved. Unlike many other parts of the world where there is growing disinterest in traditional political engagement amongst young people,\footnote{IDEA (2013) *Annual Democracy Forum 2013: Youth Participation in Politics and Elections* (Background Paper), p. 5-9.} participants in this research continued to display a high interest in voting, in attending political campaigns, and in joining political parties. While they are cynical about political leaders and political manipulation, they do not see this as a reason to disengage from the process—but rather, to engage more deeply. While it is acknowledged that methodological issues and sampling bias in the research has likely resulted in higher levels of political interest than might be found in the general youth population, it is nonetheless clear that levels of interest in the political process remain high.

The secrecy of the voting booth was raised as a particularly important issue by participants in this research. While the young people reported that they did not feel undue pressure or intimidation that would force them to vote a certain way, the main reason for their lack of concern was that no-one would ever know who they voted for. The same reasoning applied with regard to electoral bribery, with a few making the point that they could even go ahead and receive a bribe, but still vote with their conscience without anyone ever knowing. This carries two potential implications. First, it is clear that many people feel a need to hide who they are voting for—indicating ongoing sensitivities, even if the participants have not directly experienced pressures or intimidation for themselves. And second, it sends a message to policy makers that the secrecy of the vote should continue to be valued and protected, at both local and national elections.
While the level of interest that young people displayed in the traditional political process appears to be higher than other parts of the world, there is one trend that is similar to other global movements. Like other young people around the world, participants in this research were significantly more interested in policy platforms, ideas around equity and the meeting of basic needs than they were in the symbolism of particular political parties. In this respect, attending a campaign or joining a political party was seen as a means to achieving these ends, rather than a symbolic expression of their affiliation or identity. It is possible that their focus on political parties simply reflects a lack of alternate options through which they could engage politically.

The majority of participants had a good understanding of the voting process, having witnessed family members take part in previous elections. Given the focus on electoral secrecy, and the overall focus on political parties in the Timorese political environment, what may be lacking is an opportunity for young people to speak with each other about the issues that they care about. While the focus of young people on issues of equity and basic needs was strikingly similar across all of the FGDs, it was clear to the research team that most of the participants were unaccustomed to being asked for their opinion—potentially leading them to feel more isolated in their political opinions than they need to be.

While there is the Timor-Leste Youth Parliament, various Church-led youth groups, and other NGO programs designed to meet young peoples' needs, nearly all participants focussed only on political parties during their discussions of how to become a leader. Only one participant mentioned some Church-led youth initiatives, and secular/non-political youth forums and organisations were not mentioned at all. Strengthening existing avenues and/or opening new avenues for young people to access information and engage with each other on the issues that they care about may also work to address some of the other areas of concern that have been identified through other research—particularly susceptibility to rumour and manipulation.

Finally, there appears to be a missed opportunity in current formalistic understandings of what denotes leadership and what it takes to 'become' a leader. As noted previously, participants' understanding of leadership tended to focus on the formal position of political authority, rather than any informal contributions that they could make—representing a potential missed opportunity in nurturing different modalities of leadership amongst young people in the community. One way to address this missed opportunity might be an information campaign, contest or associated initiatives to help emerging leaders recognise the value of these informal, non-political contributions—either

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as part of the path to becoming a leader, or as a form of leadership in its own right.
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- Counterpart International (2014) *Ba Distrito Baseline Survey* [Report]. USAID. Dili, Timor-Leste


Overview and Justification:

The purpose of this research is to investigate the driving factors for young people who have not yet had the opportunity to vote, in choosing whether and how to engage in Timorese political life at suku and national level—as voters, and as active participants in the political process.

It is important to understand what motivates young people in engaging in political life, as they represent a sizeable portion of the Timorese population, with estimates putting approximately 34% of the population in the 12-29 year age group. There is also research indicating that the younger generation is feeling disconnected from Timorese society—indicating a need to find out why, and to re-engage with this cohort. This research is therefore focussed on capturing the perspectives of young (first-time) voters, in order to identify potential obstacles and opportunities for engagement, and to develop outreach strategies that will encourage them to engage in the Timorese political process.

There is also a longer-term aim for this research. The upcoming elections for members of suku council, the National Parliament and the President of the Republic will mark the first time that voters born during Timorese independence will be old enough to vote. The coming of age of these new voters potentially marks a new period of Timorese political life: while these new voters will have heard many stories about life during Indonesian occupation and Portuguese colonial rule, they did not experience it for themselves. Their political views have been shaped entirely during Timorese independent government. Because of this, it is possible that they will not be motivated by the same factors that other, older voters may consider to be important when choosing whether and how to vote, or to otherwise engage politically.

This research therefore represents an opportunity to check in and reflect on the direction of political life and engagement in Timor-Leste, providing a ‘snapshot’ of political attitudes that might be used to identify obstacles and opportunities for political engagement into the future.

Analytical Framework

This research is focussed on the attitudes of young people who have not yet had the opportunity to vote, in order to identify the motivating factors in choosing whether and how to engage with the suku or national-level political process—as voters, or as upcoming leaders. Respondents’ perceptions and attitudes will be gathered and analysed according to four critical areas:
A. Young people’s attitudes, as it relates to their feeling of being adequately represented by suku and national leaders, and the capacity of the system to foster such representation.
B. Young people’s attitudes, and their level of optimism in being able to meaningfully engage in the political process as voters and as leaders.
C. Young people’s attitudes, as it relates to their preferred modality/modalities for political engagement.
D. Important issues and influences for young people as they engage socially and politically.

**Methodology and Sampling**

This research takes a qualitative approach, in order to gain deeper insights into political attitudes, from the perspectives of participants themselves. The methodology will use focus group discussions (FGDs), as a method of encouraging open-ended discussion between participants as they explore their thoughts and opinions.

As qualitative research, the focus is on gathering a snapshot of new voter attitudes, rather than making any claims to representative sampling. Nonetheless, in order to reach a broad cross-section of young people, case study sites have been strategically chosen, including geographical spread of east, west and Dili-based, and urban-rural sampling of half urban and half rural. Two FGDs in Dili will focus specifically on young university students, as the next generation of leaders. Through this approach, it is expected that a broad sample of educational attainment and employment status will be reached.

One FGD will be held per case study site as follows:

1. FGD Baucau vila (8 first-time voters, 4 men and 4 women.)
2. FGD Quilecai vila (8 first-time voters, 4 men and 4 women.)
3. FGD suku Laisorolai de Cema (8 first-time voters, 4 men and 4 women.)
4. FGD Suai vila (8 first-time voters, 4 men and 4 women.)
5. FGD suku Maudemo (8 first-time voters, 4 men and 4 women.)
6. FGD suku Biseuc (8 first-time voters, 4 men and 4 women.)
7. FGD UNTL students (8 first-time voters, 4 men and 4 women.)
8. FGD Tibar Technical College students (8 first-time voters, 4 men and 4 women.)

FGDs will go for 3.5 hours, from 9am to 12.30pm.

The sampling method for FGD respondents is purposive, specifically targeting young people aged 17 to 20 years, who will be identified via youth representatives sitting on the suku council.
AGENDA – FGD Questions

Introduction
- Explain that the objective of this research is to seek better understanding of their experience and feelings about the political process
- Participants don’t need to discuss the names of political parties – we aren’t interested in that information
- This research is confidential
- Conduct an icebreaker

1. As a citizen, you all have the right to decide whether to vote or not. It’s your decision to make. So, do you plan on voting in the next suku election? Will you also vote in the national election? Why or why not?
   a. If you don’t plan on voting, what do you think would need to happen for you to change your mind and vote?
   b. If you do plan on voting, what information is important to you to help you decide on who to vote for? Where do you normally get your information to help you decide? Please give some examples...
   c. Do you ever feel pressured, or that you are expected to vote a certain way? Please explain a little...

2. Do you feel that voting is an effective way of making yourself heard?
   a. If yes, why?
   b. If no, what do you think would be a better way of making yourself heard?

3. Thinking about the Timor-Leste government, do you think that your leaders are interested in listening to what you have to say about important issues?
   a. Why or why not? Please give specific examples...

4. Do these comments also apply to your suku leaders, or are they different? In what way? (what is the same, or what is different?)

5. As a Timorese, what do you think should be improved or changed in the future?
   a. What do you think you could do about those issues?
   b. Are you currently doing those things?
   c. If not, what things are stopping you from getting involved?

6. As a member of your community, what do you think should be improved or changed?
   a. What do you think you could do about those issues?
   b. Are you currently doing those things?
   c. If not, what things are stopping you from getting involved?

7. When people say you should get involved in vida politika, what do you think they mean? Do you feel like you have an obligation to make Timor-Leste better?

8. As a Timorese citizen, do you think you have good opportunities to get involved in political life?
   a. If yes, what do you think are the easiest ways to get involved?
   b. If yes, what do you think are the most effective ways to get involved?
   c. If no, what do you think would be needed to improve opportunities to get involved in political life?
9. What will motivate/encourage/stimulate you to shape your political perspectives?
10. Do you have any desire to engage in the political process in the future? If so, how? If no, why not?