



Lessons from *Bukae*: Building a Transformative Reparations Program with Survivors of Sexual Violence in Timor-Leste

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Front Cover Image

Women survivors pose with their memory books and portraits during the official launch at the Covalima Municipal Office, July 2026.

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About Asia Justice and Rights

Asia Justice and Rights (AJAR) is a regional human rights organisation based in Jakarta, Indonesia. AJAR works to increase the capacity of local and national organisations in the fight against entrenched impunity and to contribute to building cultures based on accountability, justice and willingness to learn from the root causes of mass human rights violations in the Asia Pacific region.

About Asosiasaun Chega! Ba Ita

Since 2010, ACbit has been campaigning for the implementation of the findings and recommendations of Timor-Leste's truth commission report, *Chega!* (2005), by creating spaces for public dialogue and acknowledgement of past violations of women's rights, and advocating with relevant government and non-government bodies to implement essential policies and services to support survivors and victims of violence.

Introduction

This paper draws on three years of implementation of the Bukae project (2023–2026), a program developed jointly with survivors of conflict-related sexual violence, AJAR, ACbit and civil society partners, in partnership with the Global Survivor Fund. It is based on evidence gathered through program implementation, quarterly project reports, interviews conducted for the Bukae documentary, and evaluation and reflection workshops held in January and May 2026.

This paper highlights the project’s achievements, including what worked well, as well as key lessons on how to build a transformative reparations program in a country marked by poverty and entrenched inequality and injustice.

2005 Recommendations on Sexual Violence from the Chega! Report: A Promise Deferred

Timor-Leste has been widely recognised for taking early and ambitious steps towards truth and justice following the 1975 to 1999 conflict, particularly through the UN-supported Serious Crimes Unit, which investigated and prosecuted cases relating to crimes against humanity¹, and the establishment of the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (or CAVR) in 2002.

The CAVR documented 8,000 testimonies, provided urgent reparations to 200 vulnerable survivors and implemented a community reconciliation process aimed at reintegrating low-level perpetrators, while acknowledging victims’ experiences. The CAVR reported key findings on war crimes and crimes against humanity committed by Indonesian military forces in its landmark Chega! report. In parallel, Timor-Leste engaged in bilateral efforts with Indonesia, including establishing the Commission



A Bukae facilitator listens as a survivor shares her story during an outreach visit.

¹ By May 2005, the Serious Crimes Unit had filed 95 indictments, but only six included sexual violence charges. Just one case (Lolotoe) resulted in a conviction for rape as a crime against humanity, while other cases had only limited outcomes. Sexual slavery was never charged, and command responsibility for sexual violence by senior Indonesian officials was not pursued.

of Truth and Friendship, that reflected a political commitment to reconciliation at the state level.

During the life of the CAVR, women survivors participated in many of its activities, from statement-taking, research, workshops and sub-district hearings, to significant national public hearings at the Comarca in April 2003. This latter event shattered the silence on sexual violence, when 14 women survivors spoke out about their experiences between 1975 and 1999, defying stigma and shame. A survivor from Oecussi said at the time, “I wanted to speak out, but it was as if my lips had been stitched together. I asked myself why I had to carry this burden in my life?”

Of a total of 7,669 statements received by the CAVR, 21.4% were from women who were either victims of, or witnesses to, human rights violations. From their statements, the CAVR documented 853 counts of sexual violence, which later proved to be only the tip of the iceberg. 92.7% of incidents of sexual violence were committed either by Indonesian security forces or by Timorese militia under their control (791 cases), while 3.3% were committed by members of the resistance movement (28 cases). Of all reported incidents, 16.7% occurred during the violence surrounding the referendum in 1999 (142 cases). In 2005, the CAVR made comprehensive recommendations, which included reparations for victims of sexual violence (see Annex 1). However, many promises made to these survivors have still been unfulfilled.

After years of advocacy by both civil society and victims’ organizations, the Centro Nacional Chega (or CNC) was finally established in 2017 as a national institution by the prime minister, with a mandate to serve as “a place of research and learning about the history of Timor-Leste and the preservation of memory, promoting solidarity towards those most vulnerable survivors of past human rights violations”. CNC’s mandate is to ensure that the lessons of the past inform the nation’s journey towards justice and reconciliation. Among its key initiatives, CNC established a Reparations Working Group tasked with developing policies and frameworks to address the needs of victims. At the same time, CNC provided urgent housing support and other assistance to victims, working closely with victims’ groups and civil society organizations.



At the foot of Mount Kablaki, women survivors from Mau-Chiga village gather together. More than 20 years earlier, women from this same community participated in the CAVR's truth-seeking process.

Laying the Groundwork

ACbit and AJAR have worked for over a decade alongside Timorese survivors of human rights violations, with a particular focus on women survivors of sexual violence and children born of war. Asia Justice and Rights (or AJAR) is a regional organisation working across Asia to advance truth, justice and reparations, through survivor-centred approaches. Associação Chega ba Ita (or ACbit), based in Timor-Leste, builds on the legacy of the Comissão de Acolhimento, Verdade e Reconciliação, and works closely with survivor communities to promote recognition, memory and accountability. Together, AJAR and ACbit combine a deep knowledge of the Timorese context, with long-term action research, documentation, community-based engagement and policy advocacy, including work with women survivors and children born of war, to advocate for meaningful reparations and structural change in the country.

In preparation for the *Bukae* program, ACbit and AJAR conducted a contextual study through discussions and participatory workshops with survivors of sexual violence, to shape a joint vision of reparations. The final workshop, held in July 2022, concluded with the CNC Director, Hugo Fernandes, hearing directly from women participants.

Although the conflict ended in 1999, most survivors continue to suffer from its impact, facing daily discrimination by society at large. Many have been abandoned and forgotten, despite their courageous participation in CAVR's truth-seeking processes. Two decades on, many are still unable to access meaningful assistance, while the children of women who gave birth following rape are subjected to ongoing discrimination, and their families face the threat of losing their rights to land.

"Ami moris iha trauma nia laran ... Hela ho ami nia fitar husi tortura. Tur mesak deit, sei tanis be-beik."
(“We live inside our trauma ... left with scars from torture. Sitting by ourselves, crying all the time.”)

Many survivors are living in poverty, with little or no security, unable to obtain adequate shelter or to meet their basic needs. Some survivors spoke of how family members still beat them and speak badly of them, blaming them for the violence they see as having brought shame on the family. One survivor spoke about their feeling of anger and disappointment towards Timorese perpetrators who have returned to their neighbourhood.

"Ami la bele assesu justisa."
(“We cannot access justice.”)

Using action research methods, we asked survivors to create a mosaic made up of broken pieces of tiles (which they had painted with beautiful pictures). Through a process of reflection, the survivors came up with key elements for reparations, being recognition, apology, reconciliation and justice. When survivors spoke about justice, it was not only about punishing

perpetrators, but also about being able to repair their lives destroyed by the violence they experienced and the stigma they have endured. Many survivors of sexual violence felt that their struggles and sacrifices for independence have been ignored or overlooked. They are still waiting for recognition, and feel that they have a right to a better future for themselves and their children. They cannot achieve a better life without recognition and support from the state.

While survivors are largely aware of existing government programs for vulnerable people, they are often unable to access this support. Also, these programs are not specifically designed to support issues faced by survivors of sexual violence and, therefore, cannot meet their specific needs.

“We just hear [about the programs] but don’t feel [any benefit]. We need a special program that focuses on women survivors of sexual violence during the conflict. We survivors have been brave to speak out. We can become matadalan (or guides) for others, for the young generation. We have a role to play to share our experiences and envision a future for all, free from violence.”

Using the mosaics they created, survivors spoke of their vision for crafting a reparations program that included:

1. State recognition and reparations for their struggle and sacrifice. They queried why they had not been consulted by government on the kinds of support they need;
2. A specific law or policy recognizing victims of sexual violence and their children, and providing them with the support they need;
3. Security in their homes, especially when their children are not recognized as having rights to inheritance. Although there is currently a government program for providing some victims with housing, it requires that recipients have the right to land – something many women survivors do not have.
4. Citizenship papers often cannot be accessed by many children (now young adults), because officials cannot accept that they do not know the name of their fathers. In some cases, ‘pseudonyms’ or other male relatives names are written in, rather than leaving it blank.
5. Physical and social infrastructure needs to be improved to cater for survivors’ economic activities and/or their children’s livelihoods.
6. Healthcare is needed for both ongoing and new health issues, especially as some survivors are growing old. Some spoke of difficulties speaking about health problems that related to past violence. Most medical workers have little sensitivity or knowledge of this.



Participatory workshop activities help survivors identify and prioritise their own needs.

7. Educational scholarships for their children and grandchildren, as many children can neither access or complete higher education.
8. Justice and legal aid for survivors who want perpetrators to apologise and brought to justice

In conclusion, women survivors felt they were becoming even more invisible in recent years, as many live in remote rural areas and receive little information about relevant programs. Some spoke of how veteran pensions (from deceased husbands or brothers) have gone to other members of their families, while their suffering remains unacknowledged. The stigma they carry means that sometimes village officials block access to support from existing programs. Thus, women survivors felt they needed a space or network to share information for mutual support and assistance. By the end of the workshop, the women had established a forum for survivors, which they called *Pirilampu, Klibur Feto Sobribibente* (1975-1999). Their hope is to be involved in developing and designing a reparations and assistance program for survivors of sexual violence.



Survivors take part in a *Stone and Flower* reflection, exploring their experiences and aspirations for truth, justice, reparations, and lives free from violence.

Developing and Implementing an Interim Reparations Program

The *Bukae* program was developed over three years as a survivor-led interim reparations initiative, working with seven local partners and four service providers.¹ Building on years of work in the community, ACbit and AJAR already had strong relationships with some 242 survivors of sexual violence. By the end of the program, 455 survivors, including children born of rape, had been identified in 104 villages. The program began with a process of outreach, identification and verification of survivors across 13 municipalities, led by a team of 31 *dinamizadora*². This process was supported by participatory action research and the establishment of a survivor registry, with strong involvement from the *Pirilampu* network and a survivor Steering Committee, to ensure decisions remained grounded in survivors' priorities and realities. The partnership with the GSF brought important principles that affirmed and strengthened this approach, particularly around the idea of co-creating interim reparations with survivors, the formalisation of a Steering Committee composed mainly of survivors and a clear focus on survivor-defined reparations.

Through conversations with survivors, we found the term “interim reparative measures” (or IRM) did not resonate or translate easily. Instead, survivors themselves framed the concept through the idea of *bukae* (a small basket of provisions packed for a long journey). This became

a practical and culturally-grounded way to explain IRM as essential support to help survivors continue their path towards recognition, recovery and justice. Calling the program “*bukae*” allowed for the communication of complex ideas in a way that was accessible, meaningful and, importantly, owned by the survivors themselves and their communities.

Building on this notion, the program used participatory tools to co-create individual and collective reparations measures with survivors.



A *dinamizadora* and project staff member visit a newly constructed house supported through the BUKAE interim reparations programme.

1 SHP, A-UFD, F-Hadeer, CCC, HDI, LbF, KHC, PRADET, SABEH, Alfela and BDS Smart

2 *Dinamizadora* were made up of survivors, adult children of survivors or persons identified by survivors as allies. They received on-going training, a small monthly travel stipend and were supervised by ACbit and a local coordinator appointed by our partner NGO at the municipality-level.

These included funds for the rehabilitation of homes and to support livelihood projects, as well as to access education, healthcare and psychosocial and legal services. In addition, funding was made available to develop a memory book of survivor stories and establish a drop-in centre. Significant resources brought in through the partnership with the Global Survivors Fund (or GSF) were game changing in this regard. For many years, the availability of flexible funds to directly support survivor-designed individual and collective reparations – something long advocated for, but rarely realised – marked a critical shift. At the same time, the program invested in advocacy efforts to promote a national reparations framework and law, with survivors at the forefront. The program concluded with a joint evaluation process and a focus on sustaining survivor-led structures, particularly the *Pirilampu* network, beyond the life of the project.



A survivor holds her Memory Book and a portrait created through the BUKAE project, preserving her story and recognising her lived experience.

Bukae was implemented in close coordination with the Centro Nacional Chega! (or CNC), the statutory body established to carry forward the recommendations of Timor-Leste's truth commissions. This alignment was important, as CNC served as the official umbrella for the *Bukae* program, with its Director and senior staff participating directly on the Steering Committee. At the same time, senior personnel from AJAR and ACbit were engaged in CNC's reparations working group and its international advisory panel. This created space for ongoing exchanges between policy and practice, allowing lessons from *Bukae* to inform national discussions on reparations, while also grounding the program within an emerging official institutional framework.

The Bukae program in numbers

Survivor identification and verification: identified and verified a total of 455 survivors for the *Bukae* program (354 women, 14 men, 55 female children and 30 male children born of war and one queer survivor.) Verification was conducted by the *Bukae* steering committee.

Individual reparations:

- Financial support: provided financial IRM to all 455 survivors by the end of December 2025 (USD 1250 per survivor). This included survivor-led plans for house rehabilitation (the most common choice at 45%), small businesses (35%), education (7%) and provision of urgent needs for the vulnerable (11%).
- Medical and psychological services: reached hundreds of survivors with specialized care. The health NGO, SABEH, conducted 274 medical consultations by July 2025, while PRADET provided psychosocial support and counselling for 46 survivors by March 2026.
- Legal support: assisted survivors to obtain civil documentation, and provided paralegal aid for active cases through our partner, ALFELA.

Collective reparations:

- Memory books: completed publication and dissemination of 454 survivor stories for the memory book series and two video documentaries about the program.

- Pirilampu Survivor Network: supported the establishment and formal legal registration of the *Pirilampu Women Survivors' Association*.
- Transit house: established “*Centro Pirilampu*” in Dili, to serve as a transit house, counselling space and meeting hub for survivors.
- Advocacy: a campaign for a National Reparations Law, delivering a petition with over 700 signatures to political leaders and holding high-profile public advocacy events.

Munisipiu	Education	Education & Livelihood	Education, Livelihood & Urgent Needs	Education & Housing	Livelihood	Livelihood & Urgent needs	Livelihood & Housing	Urgent needs	Urgent needs & Housing	Housing	Grand Total
Aileu					5			2		3	10
Ainaro	2			1	6			13		54	76
Baucau	2	1			19	4		17	2	43	88
Bobonaro	2		1		5					8	16
Covalima	11				14			13		23	61
Dili	2	1	1		13	3		12		12	44
Ermera	2				16			9		22	49
Lautem	2				7			1		8	18
Liquica					4			1		2	7
Manatuto					7		2			9	18
Manufahi	4				4			1		11	20
RAEOA					4	1					5
Viqueque	2				8	1		2	1	29	43
Grand Total	29	2	2	1	112	9	2	71	3	224	455



Survivors celebrate the launch of one of ten memory books documenting stories from across Timor-Leste's 13 municipalities.

Key Findings from the *Bukae* Program

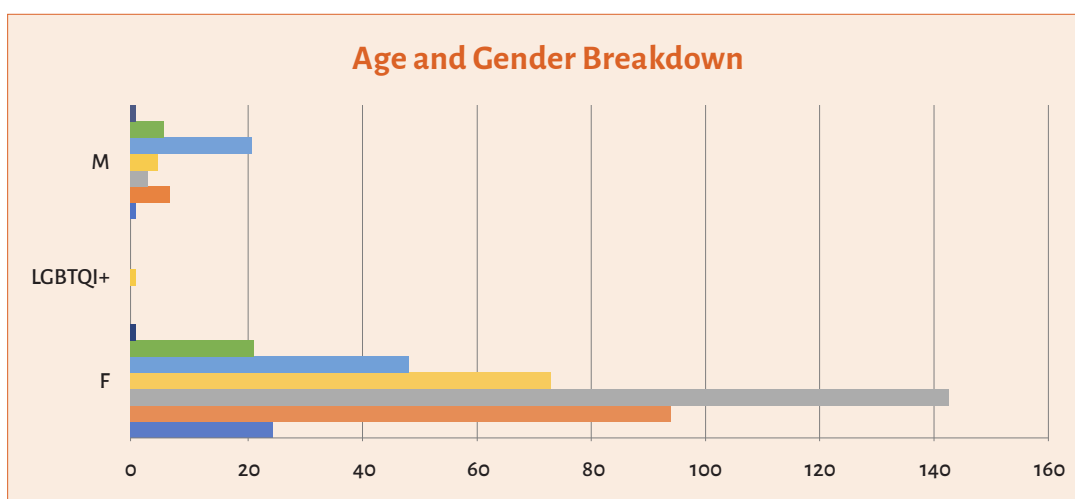
The following findings draw on three years of implementation of the *Bukae* program across 13 municipalities, working with 455 survivors of conflict-related sexual violence and their families. They are based on evidence gathered through participatory action research, program monitoring, reflection workshops and, most importantly, the lived experiences and voices of survivors themselves. Rather than presenting an ideal model, these findings reflect what was learned in practice – what worked, what did not and what it takes to deliver reparations in complex, resource-constrained and socially-sensitive contexts. Taken together, they offer grounded lessons for developing survivor-centred, inter-generational and transformative approaches to reparations, rooted in the realities of survivors' lives.

1. Reaching survivors who were invisible: across 104 villages in 13 municipalities, the *Bukae* program was able to reach survivors, deliver support and build relationships that had not existed before. At a national level, providing support to 455 survivors stands as a significant achievement in itself, but this number only tells part of the story. What made this possible was not only the inter-generational approach of the program, but the way teams worked across geographical challenges—from national to municipal—often under difficult conditions, and with a strong sense of responsibility to fulfil commitments made to survivors. Importantly, many of the most vulnerable survivors, especially those now in their 60s and 70s who have lived for decades with poor nutrition, poverty and limited access to healthcare, have also been the most invisible. As time passes since the work of the truth commission and earlier post-conflict programs, this invisibility has only deepened.

At the beginning of the Bukae project, I was a dinamizadora. After a while, I was trusted by ACbit and AJAR to join the steering committee. Since then, I have been able to reach other survivors, many of whom I would not have been able to reach otherwise. I was also able to listen to the stories of children born of war. I feel happy to know that we are seen and cannot be silenced anymore.

— Maria Carvalho Amaral

At the same time, the intergenerational nature of the program has been critical. Children born of war, now in their productive years, and younger survivors, many in their 40s and 50s, represent a different kind of potential for recovery and transformation. Working across these generations has highlighted both the urgency of reaching those in their final years, and the importance of supporting those who continue to carry the long-term social and economic impacts of the conflict into the present.



	F	LGBTQI+	M
2000	1		1
1990	21		6
1980	49		22
1970	74	1	5
1960	144		3
1950	95		7
1940	25		1

2. Material support and immediate impact: material support, though relatively modest, had immediate and visible effects. Across municipalities, survivors prioritised housing, small businesses, education and urgent needs.
 - In Bobonaro, house improvements provided a level of safety and dignity that had been absent for years. In some cases, family members provided additional resources and labour to build more substantial renovations, or sometimes even a new house.
 - In Covalima and Aileu, support for kiosks and small businesses improved household incomes and reduced daily insecurity.
 - In Manatuto, access to education support enabled children to continue to university. These outcomes reflect a broader lesson – small, targeted support, when aligned with survivors’ priorities, can make a tangible difference in daily life.

Many survivors, including children born during war, struggle to meet their daily needs as they were excluded from gaining the knowledge and opportunity to secure a decent living. Being victims of sexual violence made them face discrimination from their families and communities. Their attempts to earn a living through small businesses were of no help.

Bukae negosiu, or support for small businesses, has had a direct impact on their economy. Initially, the Municipal Coordinator facilitated training to improve small businesses by partnering with civil society groups focused on the issue. They learned to develop better business strategies, conduct market surveys to attract buyers, carry out price research and identify market needs. Later, they received training in financial management and business development, teaching them to manage their income to meet their daily needs and increase

their business capacity. Survivors involved in the support were able to raise their income to USD1000 per month, and managed to cover their daily needs and plan for their futures, including education for their children and expanding their business.

“A little money will help improve my daily life.”

—Juliana dos Santos from Covalima

“I am happy with the Bukae. Bukae helps support my business and allows me to continue providing for my children.”

—Micaela do Carmo from Dili

“With the Bukae that I received, my granddaughter is finally able to go to university. She is now in her fourth semester at Universidade da Paz. Her father graduated from high school, but never went to university. So she will be the first in the family to graduate from university.”

—Olimpea from Manatuto

“Timorese people like to hold events to celebrate personal milestones, like graduations or weddings. My business was to rent tents for such celebrations. With the Bukae, I grew my business to also provide chair and table rentals.”

—Maria Antonia dos Santos de Sousa from Manatuto

3. Confidence, healing and local leadership: many survivors approached the program with caution, influenced by years of stigma and neglect. Over time, and with regular engagement through home visits, discussions and accompaniment, survivors felt more comfortable to come forward.

A key element of *Bukae* has been the identification and support of local women, often survivors themselves, children of survivors or those closely connected to them, to take on the role of *dinamizadoras*. This approach has also allowed for a new generation of local advocates to emerge from this work. Their strength lies not in formal qualifications, but in lived experience, trust and empathy that they have developed over time. This has proved critical in reaching survivors who are isolated or hesitant to engage. As one *dinamizadora*, a daughter of a survivor, described it, her role is to act as a bridge and pathway for voiceless mothers at the grassroots level, ensuring that survivors' experiences are heard beyond their immediate communities.

Dinamizadoras were supported by local NGOs who played a key role in coordinating support, often going beyond technical implementation to act as listeners and advocates. The strengthening of relationships was also visible within teams themselves. Across municipalities, such as Liquisa, Ermera and Bobonaro, strong communication and coordination were identified as central to the program's functioning, with a shared sense



Pirilampu signs an operational agreement with Centro Nacional Chega! (CNC), building on capacity developed through BUKAE to strengthen survivor-led advocacy and support.

that working together was a source of strength. In Ainaro and Manufahi, teams reported that survivors began to regain confidence, heal emotionally and feel recognised. In several municipalities, survivors who had previously been silent, began to share their experiences and engage more actively.

“The Bukae project has been a journey for me to learn to be more confident. Before receiving training as a dinamizadora, it felt like I was still in the dark, weak and not heard by anyone. In 2022, I received some training on leadership and gender justice. I learned how to do advocacy in a way that was gender sensitive. As a result, I became less ashamed and more confident talking about my issues.... Now, I feel trusted by other women and by the head of the village, as well as by the local government. I feel much happier and more energized. I think there is still more that needs to be done. For example, we need to be officially recognized as survivors.”

—Carlota da Silva Nunes from Ainaro

At the same time, *Bukae* engaged with a new cohort of village heads (*xefe suco*) elected in 2023, many of whom brought a degree of openness to new ideas and community initiatives. This created an opportunity to build relationships with local leadership at a moment of transition. In several areas, village heads became important allies, supporting outreach, facilitating community acceptance and providing an official layer of recognition and protection for the *Bukae* process. While engagement was uneven, this alignment with the new leadership helped create space for the program to operate and connect more effectively at the local level.

Engaging with local village heads was an important part of the *Bukae* process, helping to anchor the program within existing community structures. Their involvement provided an official layer of recognition and, in many cases, a degree of protection for survivors and for the implementation process itself, particularly in contexts where stigma and misunderstanding remained strong. In several municipalities, village heads supported outreach, helped verify survivors and facilitated community acceptance of *Bukae* activities. One village head noted in the *Bukae* film: “we must learn about what our mother survivors experienced, in order to make sure it never happens again,” which reflected a shift, however small, in local leadership attitudes. This engagement did not remove all challenges, but it did create space for the program to operate more openly, and with greater legitimacy, at the community level.

“Before... they were very closed, they were not strong ... and were very sensitive to talk about their lives, the lives they are hiding ... But after Bukae ... they spilt many words ... While some are still ashamed, some are now strong and willing to speak.”

—Gracilda dos Santos, a dinamizadora

“Bukae is helping survivors, putting something in their baskets so they can be strong in advocating for their rights to the state.”

—Benny, a municipal-level coordinator

“Mothers don’t be afraid, speak out, that is your right ...”

—Amelia De Jesus, a survivor

4. Addressing the neglect of vulnerable and elderly survivors: working with local actors, particularly *dinamizadoras* and municipal coordinators, *Bukae* was able to reach vulnerable elderly survivors who, for decades, had received little or no attention. Many were living in

extreme poverty, isolation, poor health and fragile housing, often carrying unresolved trauma, while struggling to meet their basic needs. Some had become almost invisible within their own communities, particularly widows, survivors without close family support and those stigmatised because of sexual violence and children born of rape. In several cases, the program was the first time since the conflict ended that survivors had been visited, listened to or accompanied to health and other facilities.

For many elderly survivors, *Bukae* unfolded in the final years of their lives. A significant number were already living with chronic illness, disability, trauma, social isolation and the cumulative impacts of decades of poverty and neglect. In some cases, local teams found survivors living alone, without regular support, or struggling to access even the most basic healthcare and living conditions. These experiences reinforced an important lesson: for highly vulnerable survivors, reparations are not only about long-term justice or policy reform, but also about urgent accompaniment, care and recognition, while survivors are still alive. During the implementation of the IRM phase, 17 survivors passed away, while a further 25 died after documenting their stories for the *Bukae* process, but before receiving support. These losses underscored the urgency of a reparations law or policy, or similar programs to address this need.



A survivor outside the small shop she established through the programme.

As the *Bukae* program comes to a close, the *Bukae* team identified approximately 70 vulnerable survivors who require ongoing attention. These include survivors with chronic illness, disabilities, ongoing trauma or fragile livelihoods. While *Bukae* is coming to an end, teams across municipalities have expressed a strong commitment to continue accompanying survivors. This includes supporting access to healthcare (through referrals and accompaniment to clinics and hospitals), ongoing monitoring of small businesses, and maintaining regular contact through *dinamizadoras* and coordinators. Several team members were emphatic that support would not stop with the project, but will continue through existing networks, particularly *Pirilampu*, as well as through coordination with the CNC and local service providers. There was a recognition that

survivors have placed significant trust in the program, and that sustaining this accompaniment, especially for the most vulnerable, is both an ethical responsibility and a key lesson from the process.

“Where shall we throw our suffering...the government takes care of veterans, but not us survivors. No one is interested in us, which makes our hearts hurt because they do not care about us.”

—Amelia De Jesus, a survivor

Filomena, a *dinamizadora* from Ermera, shared a story about Ama Fransiska who was experiencing severe trauma when she was contacted by *Pirilampu*. She was withdrawn, refused to speak to anyone and was excluded from the community. When the *Bukae* team arrived, she would only speak to Manuela Pereira. But after a series of visits, she participated in *Bukae*, and was provided with psychosocial assistance from Pradet, a municipal-level service provider. After a year she began speaking up, and as of April she has been speaking on behalf of her community, promoting *Bukae* to others.

5. Discrimination against children born of war: *Bukae* has brought renewed attention to the experiences of labarik funu, or children born from conflict-related rape and sexual violence during the Indonesian occupation. Earlier participatory research by ACbit and AJAR identified persistent barriers faced by these children, now mostly adults, including difficulties obtaining birth certificates and citizenship documents, denial of inheritance and land rights, discrimination within



A survivor receives a health check during a home visit. Ongoing outreach and accompaniment helped ensure that elderly and vulnerable survivors were not left behind.

families and communities, interrupted education and ongoing poverty, that has extended into the next generation. Many continue to face stigma because they cannot identify their fathers, despite the law not requiring this for civil registration. Through the work of the *dinamizadoras* and the trust built through *Bukae*, many children born of war came forward to share experiences that had long remained hidden. Importantly, the program highlighted that these issues are not only historical, but ongoing structural problems affecting access to education, livelihoods, healthcare and social belonging until today.

“In this society, people with fathers don’t want to be friends with people without fathers ... We wanted to be independent, we experienced discrimination and our mothers too ... When we tried to apply for a certificate, they asked where is your father’s certificate. But we don’t know who our fathers are. So that’s the story of us, the children born of war. We want to do something but we can’t, because we don’t have a certificate.”

—Fernanda Guterres, a daughter born of war

6. Male survivors and male offsprings: *Bukae* was ground-breaking in that it revealed that male survivors were also tortured and experienced sexual violence, an issue traditionally difficult for men to speak about. Out of 366 survivors of sexual violence, only 14 or 4% were men and 1 queer survivor. Out of a total of 85 persons born of rape, 30 are men (around 35%). While small in number, their participation is significant. In many cases, these men, now elderly, are at a stage in their lives that may offer a degree of distance from the social expectations

that once silenced them. Similarly, male offsprings of survivors of rape may face more social barriers to speaking out about their mothers' experiences. *Bukae*, through trust-building, collective spaces and survivor-led engagement, created a rare opening for men to speak about their experiences, often considered unspeakable. Their testimonies not only challenged dominant narratives of sexual violence as affecting only women, but highlighted the need for reparations programs to recognise and respond to all survivors, regardless of gender.

"I experienced sexual violence, and they also tortured me in Dare ... then brought me to Atauro."

—Julião da Conceição, a male survivor

7. Lessons for effective reparations roll out: Several lessons emerged from these experiences, including: (i) flexibility and patience are essential, as the program required constant adaptation to changing conditions, evolving survivor priorities and unexpected challenges; (ii) relationships are at the core of implementation, as teams learned that their role was not only to deliver support, but to accompany survivors, mediate conflicts and build trust over time; and (iii) even small interventions can have significant impact, particularly when they are grounded in survivors' own priorities, for example, in Dili/RAEOA, this was reflected in the observation that small efforts can become a source of strength for survivors.

Other important considerations included:

- Climate and operational challenges: implementation was shaped by a range of recurring challenges. Geography and climate were constant constraints. In municipalities, like Aileu, Covalima and Manatuto, heavy rains, flooding, long distances and poor road conditions delayed activities and made it difficult to transport materials or conduct regular monitoring. These are not minor logistical issues, but structural realities that directly affect access and equity.
- Managing expectations and sustaining engagement: Managing expectations was an ongoing challenge. Delays, often caused by weather, logistics or changes to plans, led to frustration among some survivors. In Baucau and Manufahi, teams reported instances where survivors expressed anger or dissatisfaction, and in some cases directed their frustration at coordinators and facilitators. At the same time, some municipalities, including Lautem and Manatuto, experienced a drop in participation after survivors received their *Bukae* support. This raises important questions about how to sustain engagement beyond the point of delivery, and how to link individual support to longer-term collective processes.
- Adapting to changing priorities: A major challenge was the fluidity of survivor decisions. In most municipalities, including Aileu, Bobonaro, Covalima, Liquisa and Viqueque, survivors changed their plans during implementation, particularly in relation to housing or livelihood activities. While this created delays and required adjustments, it reflects the reality that survivor priorities evolve over time, and cannot be determined at the outset.
- Family and community dynamics played a significant role. In some areas, families provided strong support, helping survivors implement their plans and reinforcing positive outcomes. In others, families intervened in ways that complicated or undermined the process. In Dili/RAEOA and Liquisa, for example, family members sometimes influenced decisions during implementation, even when they had not been involved in earlier

planning. In Ainaro, internal conflicts within families created additional challenges. These experiences highlighted the fact that reparations cannot be approached as purely individual interventions, but are embedded in social relationships that must be understood and navigated.

“As victims, we continue to carry the scars of what happened to us. Until now, the nation has not looked at us.”

—Micaela do Carmo

Sela, a municipal coordinator from Lautem, shared a story of a survivor who was not supported by her family. The survivor was very happy and eager to participate in the program to renovate her house, but her family did not support her or help with the renovation. Because of their unwillingness, she experienced health problems and had difficulty getting proper care. Her family forbade her from participating in any *Bukae* events, including a PAR session in Dili and a book launch in Lautem.

8. From individual support to collective strength: *Bukae* reinforces the importance of collective approaches. While the program delivered individual support, its deeper impact has been in strengthening relationships and building a sense of shared purpose among survivors. Across municipalities, teams emphasised the value of working together—with teams, with survivors and with communities—often under challenging conditions. This collective approach reduced isolation, rebuilt trust and created space for survivors to support one another. At a broader level, this is reflected in the emergence and consolidation of survivor networks, like *Pirilampu*, which provided an ongoing platform for mutual support, information-sharing and collective advocacy. In several areas, these networks have begun to take on roles that extend beyond the project itself, including outreach to other survivors and engagement with local authorities.

“[Because of the Bukae project], I feel united and together with other survivors. Before, we were far apart and it was difficult to reach each other. ... Now, even if we cannot meet because of the rainy season, we can call each other and continue to provide support to other survivors.”

—Mana Iza from Aileu

The program highlighted the importance of continuous learning and adaptation. In places like Ermera, teams explicitly reflected on learning from mistakes, while across all municipalities, regular exchanges between coordinators, *dinamizadoras* and partners allowed lessons to be shared and applied in real time. This iterative approach, combining reflection, adjustment and peer learning, strengthened implementation and helped teams respond to emerging challenges. Taken together, these experiences suggest that reparations processes are most effective when they move beyond one-off support, and invest in building collective structures and capacities that can sustain impact over time.

“So together we can strengthen each other, and then we can fight together.”

—Maria de Fatima, a survivor and steering committee member

9. Political advocacy and legislative action: *Bukae* has helped bring survivors together as a collective voice, strengthening their ability to advocate for recognition and justice at the national level. Through the *Pirilampu* network and the Steering Committee, survivors have moved from individual experiences of harm, to coordinated demands for a state-led reparations program. Central to this has been the renewed call for a reparations law, reviving earlier efforts that had stalled in parliament, and grounding them in current, survivor-led evidence and mobilisation.

Engagement with policy-makers has been an important part of this process. Meetings with members of parliament, government officials and other stakeholders, have created space for survivors to speak directly about their experiences and ongoing needs. In some cases, this has led to visible empathy and emotional responses from political leaders, helping to humanise issues that are often treated in abstract terms. At the same time, these engagements highlighted the gap between recognition and action.



Pirilampu representatives submitted a petition with more than 700 signatures to Timor-Leste's National Parliament, calling for recognition and reparations for women survivors.

While there are signs of increased awareness and openness, translating this into concrete legislative progress remains a key challenge, reinforcing the need for sustained, collective advocacy beyond the life of the project.

"The Bukae program has made us capable of urging the municipal president to support and recognize the survivors' condition. Initially they did not recognize what survivors had experienced. However, they gradually opened their support and are now willing to provide services to survivors in need. And, through Pirilampu, although the Bukae program has come to the end, we can keep supporting survivors."

—Agusto Pinto, a municipal coordinator from Viqueque

"I want to speak with them because we are demanding justice. For so many years, nobody has recognised us. The state has never acknowledged us....now we feel good because we've been able to express our struggles to them. They, too, cried with us. They understand and empathise, and that makes me feel better."

—Maria de Fatima, a survivor and steering committee member

"Our work with Bukae does not end here. That is why Pirilampu stands with survivors to demand a law, a reparations law."

—Maria Carvalho Amaral, a steering committee member and facilitator

Draft National Policy on Reparations for Victims of Human Rights Violations (1974–1999)

Centro Nacional Chega!, February 2026

A draft National Reparations Policy represents an important step by the Government of Timor-Leste and the Centro Nacional Chega! (CNC) to address the long-standing suffering of victims of serious human rights violations committed during the Indonesian occupation between 1974 and 1999. The draft law is grounded in the findings and recommendations of the Chega! report, and recognises that lasting peace and reconciliation requires truth, justice, recognition and reparations. Advocacy on reparations has been going on for more than two decades.¹

The draft law acknowledges that civilian victims, including survivors of sexual violence, torture, forced displacement, disappearances, arbitrary detention and children separated from their families, carried an enormous burden during the conflict, yet many remain unrecognised and continue to live in poverty, trauma, stigma, and exclusion. The Government affirms that reparations are both a legal and moral responsibility of the Timorese state, and an essential part of building social cohesion and national dignity.

The draft law proposes a comprehensive reparations framework combining:

- Symbolic reparations – including certificates of recognition, memorialisation, commemorations, dignified burial processes, family reunification for disappeared children, museums, artistic expression, and preservation of historical archives; and
- Material reparations – including access to healthcare, psychosocial support, housing assistance, education, livelihood support, legal assistance, and community support centres.

A key principle of the draft law is that reparations should be survivor-centred, participatory, gender-sensitive, accessible and non-discriminatory. Victims and survivor organisations are recognised as essential partners in the design, implementation, and monitoring of reparations measures.

The draft law emphasises that reparations should not create entirely parallel systems, but instead improve victims' access to existing public services while developing specialised responses where needed. Priority for material support would focus on victims who remain socially or economically vulnerable today. Importantly, the draft law proposes:

- creation of a national register of victims;
- establishment of a steering committee with survivors;
- stronger legal recognition for disappeared persons and families;

¹ A draft law on Reparations and Memory Institute was passed by parliament in 2010 but then blocked; CNC commissioned ACbit to conduct an assessment in 2017, and later established a Working Group on Reparations that included representatives from civil society and victims groups; In 2025–2026, CNC conducted consultations on a new Reparations Draft Law with victims and other stakeholders in Dili and municipalities. At the time of writing this report, a final version has been tabled to the President of Parliament, Fernanda Lay, Vice Prime Minister Asanami, and submitted to the President Council of Ministers, Agio Pereira for approval.

- support for children born of conflict-related sexual violence;
- support for stolen children taken by force to Indonesia;
- establishment of survivor support centres; and
- foundation for reconciliation.

The CNC is proposed as the lead coordinating institution responsible for implementation, coordination, monitoring and engagement with victims and civil society. Overall, the draft law reflects a major effort to move Timor-Leste from recognition of past violations toward concrete reparative action. It frames reparations not only as assistance to victims, but as part of strengthening democracy, equality, memory and lasting peace for future generations.

10. Peace and non-recurrence: Survivors consistently articulated a future in which the next generation will not experience the violence and silence that marked their own lives. This vision is not abstract. It is grounded in the need to learn from the past, to name sexual violence as part of the history of the conflict, and to ensure that these lessons are carried forward in Timor-Leste, a country politically independent, but marked by gendered inequality and social stigma. For many survivors, peace is not only the absence of conflict, but the presence of dignity, recognition and safety in everyday life.

Through *Bukae*, this vision has begun to take shape in practical ways – through storytelling, memory work and the involvement of children born of war, as well as younger survivors now in positions to influence their families and communities. Survivors spoke about their desire for their children and grandchildren to live without shame, to access education opportunities and to grow up in communities where violence against women and girls is no longer tolerated. In this sense, reparations are not only about addressing past harm, but also about shaping future norms – linking acknowledgment of past violations with ongoing efforts to challenge discrimination, strengthen gender equality and build a more just and inclusive society.

“We have plans for survivors, including leadership training. The training is intended to make survivors capable of being involved in decision-making, in continuing the program and influencing municipalities in providing support for survivors.”

—Graciana de Araujo Cardoso, a dinamizadora from Covalima

“My dream is that the younger generation never has to experience what we did. I want them to grow up united, to love each other and to protect our peace.”

—Esmeralda dos Santos

Creating a Steering Committee – empowering survivors

In December 2023, we convened our first Steering Committee meeting. The Committee was made up of 9 members. Over the following three years, the Committee learned to design and supervise a reparations program, including learning about governance, planning, implementation and monitoring of the *Bukae* program. This included:

- Approval of documents establishing the committee itself – terms of reference, regulations and code of conduct;
- The survivor verification process and approval of survivors for the program;
- Planning and implementation of Individual *Bukae* (e.g., house rehabilitation, education, business, urgent needs) and Collective *Bukae* (e.g., Memory Book, Recognition Letter, a Transit House and *Pirilampu* Centre);
- Updates on the status of survivors, including urgent health and psychosocial support;
- Advocacy efforts related to a Reparations Law and a Recognition Letter from the state;
- Financial and logistical issues such as the transportation budget and money transfer mechanism; and
- Discussions on specific or exceptional survivor cases.

Policy and decision documents outlining key policies and criteria for the program, including:

- Selection of priority villages or *sucos*: The decision to focus the program's efforts on 104 *sucos* across 13 municipalities due to limited resources and concentration of known, active survivors;
- Eligibility criteria: defines who can receive support, including survivors of sexual violence, children born of war and successors or family members of deceased survivors;
- Verification process: outlines the rationale and two pathways for verifying a survivor's eligibility, emphasizing “do no harm” and “on the balance of probability”; and
- Closing the verification list: decisions to formally end the survivor identification process and outline sustainability plans.



Members of the Steering Committee gather after meeting with the Bukae team to review progress, share updates, and discuss priorities for the next phase.

Recommendations for Future Reparations Program Design

As Timor-Leste considers the establishment of a national reparations program, it is important to build on the lessons learned from both past truth-seeking processes and recent survivor-centred initiatives. The Bukae experience demonstrates that reparations are most effective when they respond to the diverse realities of survivors' lives, combine material and symbolic measures, strengthen community-based support systems, and place survivors at the centre of decision-making. Equally important is the active involvement of younger generations—not only as volunteers, facilitators, and future leaders, but as partners in building a broader social movement grounded in solidarity, service, and respect for the rights and dignity of the most vulnerable members of society. By creating meaningful connections between survivors and young people, reparations can contribute not only to addressing past harms, but also to strengthening social cohesion, fostering a culture of care and accountability, and helping to build a society that rejects violence, discrimination, and impunity in all its forms. Thus, from the experience of the *Bukae* program, and drawing on CAVR's 2005 recommendations, effective design for a reparations program should include the following elements:



Visitors engage with survivor portraits during a BUKAE exhibition, creating space for public recognition and dialogue.

1. Establish substantive and meaningful roles for survivors, their children or friends (*dinamizadora*) to build local ownership of the process;
2. Reinforce survivor ownership and understanding of reparations, by allowing them to describe the concept in their own terms, and to provide it with a locally meaningful name (such as *Bukae*).
3. Build or strengthen local networks and survivor-led organizations that promote survivors' voice and provide them with a platform to advocate on their own behalf (*Pirilampu*);
4. Establish relationships with local authorities (*xefe suco*) and local government officials to ensure sustainability;

5. Establish a Steering Committee made up of survivors themselves, NGOs and local and national authorities, to underscore ownership, provide input to the design (co-creation), and guide the implementation or roll out of the program;
6. Elicit survivors engagement and develop tools for prioritization based on their actual needs (like housing, livelihoods, health, education and psychosocial and legal services) through participatory methodologies like 'Stone and Flower' and 'Mosaic', and so on;
7. Build flexibility and patience into the design, as the program requires constant adaptation to changing conditions, evolving survivor priorities and unanticipated challenges;
8. Establish links with national institutions, like CNC, to provide survivors with the recognition they yearn for, and to help steer legislation on a reparations law through parliament. These links provided an opportunity for ongoing exchanges between policy and practice, allowing lessons from *Bukae* to inform national discussions on reparations policy;
9. Introduce an inter-generational element, by including children of survivors and children born of war, including as *dinamizadoras* or steering committee members, in order to reach not only elderly survivors, but also younger generations who will continue to carry the burden of the long-term impacts of the conflict;
10. Provide financial support in order that survivors can address their urgent and most pressing needs;
11. Provide ongoing engagement through home visits, discussions and accompaniment, in order that survivors feel they are properly valued, and that the program is not just a one off intervention; and
12. Manage expectations to minimize further disappointment and frustration among already traumatized survivors who have been repeatedly let down.

Annex 1:

CAVR's Recommendations on Reparations (2005)

The CAVR set out guiding principles for designing and delivering a reparations program for Timor-Leste, with the following elements:

- Feasible, in that the program would be “selective and focus on the most urgent needs of the most vulnerable and, where possible, provide collective responses that are cost-effective and inventive”;
- Accessible to victims who are most marginalized and living in remote areas;
- Empower victims by using, as far as possible, community-based and victim-centered methods for rehabilitation “to take control over their own lives and to free themselves from both the practical constraints and the psychological and emotional feelings of victimhood”;
- Gender-sensitive, meaning recognition of the different forms and impact of violations experienced by women and men during the conflict. In particular, the CAVR recommends that 50% of all resources be earmarked for women beneficiaries;
- Prioritize support for “those most in need” as a way to represent the obligation to provide reparations to victims as part, but not in place, of national development.

The CAVR report provided a working definition of those considered most vulnerable, and who should be prioritized as beneficiaries of a national reparations program. This included:

- victims of torture
- people partially or totally disabled as a result of violations
- victims of sexual violence including women or men raped and forced into sexual slavery or marriage
- widows and single mothers including widows and women bearing children from rape and,
- children orphaned or disabled due to conflict and children born from rape.

The CNC Decree Law 48/2016 Article 6.a an initial list of those who fall into the category of “most vulnerable survivors,” namely:

- Children separated from their families;
- Families of the disappeared;
- People with disabilities;

- Survivors of sexual violence, torture, and massacres; and
- Refugees from Timor-Leste, now living in Indonesia.

The CAVR made the following additional recommendations for specific rehabilitative measures:

- Support for single mothers and scholarships for their children – CAVR recommends provision of services for single mothers and their children, including counseling, peer support, livelihood skills training, micro-credit, and healthcare for women, and scholarships for their children;
- Similar services should be provided for disabled victims, widows, and survivors of sexual violence and torture;
- Support for severely affected communities through development projects that provide a significant acknowledgement of collective suffering. This support could be provided either by government or by NGO-led activities, including the creative arts;
- Support at both local and national levels, to preserve the memory of the conflict and its impact on victims, including through commemoration, monuments, and education; and
- Implementation of a national program against violence, recognizing the “link between past abuses and current violent behavior.”

Annex 2:

Lessons Learned Workshop, January 2026 – Summary

Municipality	Most successful	What improved	Challenges	Lessons learned
Aileu	Team fulfilled commitments; family support	Improved financial conditions through business; strong communication and teamwork	Weather, distance; survivors changed plans	Importance of patience; learning to engage survivors; closer accompaniment
Ainaro	Local authority appreciation	Emotional healing; increased trust; better community understanding	Distance; family conflicts	Role as mediator/ counsellor; importance of listening and leadership support
Baucau	Strong cooperation; 70% implementation (by January)	Reduced survivor burden; increased confidence; support for vulnerable children	Delays caused frustration; climate; weak authority cooperation	Transparency; learning from partners
Bobonaro	Outreach to local orgs; housing and education support	Collective strength (“together we are strong”)	Plans not aligned with survivor realities; business sustainability issues	Need to align plans with survivor priorities
Covalima	Data collection and support delivery; strong petition backing	Business outcomes improved; stronger links with survivors and authorities	Poor infrastructure; weather; changing plans; limited transport; security risks	Team solidarity; improved reporting; importance of motivation and support
Dili / RAEOA	Supported 49 survivors and children born of war	Business support sustained families; teamwork	Family interference; changing decisions; monitoring challenges	Small efforts can create strong impact

Ermera	100% completion; access to subsidies and legal documents	Strong communication; family support	Distance; transport cost; changing plans	Skills development; counselling approaches; learning from mistakes
Lautem	Housing improvements; medical and psychosocial recovery	Health and wellbeing improved	Weather; dissatisfaction with visits; drop in engagement after support	Improved reporting; knowledge gained through training
Liquisa	Strong communication	Coordination between team members	Family interference; poor internet; changing plans	Learning through teamwork
Manatuto	Education access; legal support for cases	Strong teamwork	Weather; reduced engagement after support	Following program principles and guidelines
Manufahi	Completed support; reduced survivor burden; strong relationships	Improved confidence and living conditions	Infrastructure; stigma; high expectations; complaints	Learning from survivor stories; importance of unity; Pirilampu as strength
Viqueque	Implemented housing, business, education support	Learning from partners	Misuse of authority; changing plans; verbal conflict	Learning through training and peer exchange
National Team	455 Bukae implemented; survivor consultations; empowerment	Increased confidence, transparency, coordination	Partner coordination; uneven staff engagement; exclusion concerns	Participatory, survivor-centred approach; collective strength