World Justice Project

KONRAD ADENAUER STIFTUNG

A series of

ASEAN best practices

on Advancing the Rule of Law

By The World Justice Project

Timor-Leste:

Social Reintegration & Rehabilitation Program

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About the ASEAN Best Practices on Advancing the Rule of Law

The ASEAN Best Practices Initiative is a knowledge-sharing platform that seeks to identify, document, and share successful stories of government-led efforts to advance the rule of law across the ASEAN region. Many effective initiatives have achieved meaningful results but remain little known beyond their national contexts. By bringing these successful stories to a wider audience, the initiative aims to promote peer learning, encourage innovation, and strengthen collaboration among those committed to advancing the rule of law and rules-based regional integration. In this initiative, "best practices" refers to successful and promising approaches that have demonstrated positive results and offer practical lessons for others. Rather than promoting a single model, the initiative seeks to foster the exchange of experience, encourage adaptation to different national contexts, and support continuous learning and improvement across the region.

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Executive Summary

Timor-Leste's criminal justice system faces the dual challenge of maintaining safe, functional correctional facilities and preparing incarcerated individuals for successful reintegration. Limited resources must cover basic operational needs as well as interventions that address economic insecurity, social stigma, weakened relationships, and limited support after release. The central policy challenge is therefore not only to manage imprisonment, but to use the period of incarceration to support behavioral change, practical skills, relationship repair, and preparation for community life.

As of June 2026, the country's prisons housed 679 individuals. Available facility-level information indicates overcrowding at Becora and Gleno prisons, alongside other infrastructure pressures. The composition of the prison population also creates a distinctive rehabilitation challenge: unlike many Southeast Asian systems where drug-related offenses constitute a large share of imprisonment, a majority of Timor-Leste's prison population is composed of individuals convicted of crimes against personal liberty, including sexual violence, as well as homicide and offenses involving physical integrity.

Timor-Leste's experience provides a useful case of how a resource-constrained system is attempting to make rehabilitation a core correctional function.

As part of the ASEAN Best Practices Initiative, this report examines Timor-Leste's Social Reintegration and Rehabilitation Program (SRRP) as a case for rehabilitation-oriented correctional reform.

Implemented by Timor-Leste's Ministry of Justice through the National Directorate of Prison Services and Social Reintegration (DNSPRS), the program seeks to prepare incarcerated individuals for successful return to society through personal development, education, vocational training, and family and community reintegration. The assessment finds that the program has established a positive and holistic foundation for rehabilitation, with promising evidence of behavioral and personal change among its participants. However, its reach, consistency, and ability to demonstrate long-term positive outcomes remain constrained by limited resources and monitoring capacity.

The SRRP is particularly relevant to Timor-Leste's criminal justice system because it operates within a correctional system facing significant institutional constraints. The SRRP therefore combines livelihood-oriented interventions with behavioral and character-development support intended to foster accountability, improve emotional regulation, and enable incarcerated individuals to build more constructive relationships with others.

The assessment identifies several promising outcomes. Interviews with incarcerated individuals, formerly incarcerated individuals, prison officers, and social reintegration officials consistently point to improvements in discipline, emotional regulation, personal responsibility, conflict management, and interpersonal relationships. The program's combination of counseling, anger-management and violence-prevention activities, religious and educational programming, and vocational training provides multiple pathways for personal development. Its emphasis on respectful relationships between prison staff and incarcerated individuals, as well as family and community engagement, further supports a prison environment geared toward rehabilitation rather than punishment alone.

At the same time, the program faces challenges that constrain its ability to illustrate longer-term results. Access to vocational training remains limited relative to the overall prison population, and employment and long-term reintegration outcomes lack systematic tracking for all individuals post-release. Post-release support is also constrained by limited staffing, transportation, and geographic access. These limitations make it difficult to determine whether changes observed during imprisonment translate to effective reintegration after individuals return to their communities.

The strongest available quantitative indicator is the Ministry of Justice's record of 53 repeat offenders among 1,091 admissions between 2021 and 2025, equivalent to approximately 4.85 percent of admissions. This is not a conventional recidivism rate because the denominator is admissions rather than a defined cohort of released individuals observed over a specified follow-up period. Officials also noted that some returns to prison may relate to previously unresolved cases rather than new offenses. The figure therefore cannot establish whether the SRRP reduces recidivism; it should be treated as an administrative indicator that underscores the need for standardized definitions and post-release tracking.

The SRRP also demonstrates how partnerships can extend rehabilitation capacity in a resource-constrained environment. Government agencies, civil-society organizations, religious groups, and international partners provide specialized services and expertise that would be costly to develop entirely within the prison system. The priority for sustainability is consequently to strengthen external partnerships, and to ensure sufficient internal capacity to coordinate them, maintain continuity, identify gaps, and monitor results.

The key lesson for ASEAN states is that the principles of the SRRP are more transferable than its institutional form. Timor-Leste demonstrates the value of combining dignity and constructive staff-inmate relationships with behavioral development, livelihood preparation, family engagement, and community support. Other correctional systems can draw on these principles while adapting their implementation to local institutional capacity, security requirements, labor markets, and social structures. The experience ultimately shows that even resource-constrained correctional systems can establish the foundations for rehabilitation, while also demonstrating that sustained impact requires targeted investment in program quality, access, and post-release support.

About This Report

How the Report is Organized

This report assesses Timor-Leste's SRRP model and its potential contribution to the rehabilitation and social reintegration of incarcerated individuals in the country. The report is organized into five main sections:

1. **Background and Project Overview** outlines the broader correctional and social reintegration environment in Timor-Leste and the challenges facing the country's prison system, followed by a description of the SRRP's objectives, institutional arrangements, rehabilitation approach, principal activities, and partnerships.

2. **Key Findings** assesses the program across five dimensions: relevance, outcomes and effectiveness, efficiency and resource use, sustainability, and replicability**.** Together, these sections examine what the program is achieving, the factors that appear to contribute to its results, and the conditions that may affect its future development and application elsewhere.

3. **Lessons Learned** presents insights from the assessment, focusing on combining behavioral development with livelihood preparation, linking vocational training to employment opportunities, expanding external partnerships and building robust post-release monitoring systems.

4. **Recommendations** identify practical actions for SRRP to identify areas where it can strengthen monitoring and evaluation, program implementation, and strategic partnerships, followed by recommendations for ASEAN governments and justice-sector institutions seeking to strengthen rehabilitation and reintegration systems.

5. **Conclusion** synthesizes the principal findings and considers the greater significance of Timor-Leste's SRRP model as a promising approach to rehabilitation-oriented correctional reform.

Methodology and Evidence Base

This report utilizes the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Program Evaluation Framework to assess best practices and areas for improvement for Timor-Leste's SRRP model. Best practice here does not mean perfect practice. Rather, it reflects a government initiative that has been developed with a clear aim and strategic direction to improve and address a rule of law issue. WJP has adapted the OECD Program Evaluation Framework to assess the SRRP model through the following dimensions:

- **Relevance**: how well the initiative addresses a rule of law gap
- **Effectiveness**: to what extent are desired outcomes achieved
- **Efficiency**: resource use in achieving results
- **Sustainability**: whether the initiative can be maintained and expanded
- **Replicability**: potential for adaptation in other ASEAN countries

The assessment draws on program documentation and administrative data provided by the Ministry of Justice and the DNSPRS alongside semi-structured interviews conducted with prison officials, social reintegration officers, correctional staff, vocational trainers, incarcerated individuals, and formerly incarcerated individuals. These sources provide evidence on implementation arrangements, partnerships, vocational and educational activities, participation, admissions and releases, and repeat offending. Because the report does not present a comparison group or a standardized longitudinal follow-up of released individuals, it assesses contribution and perceived change rather than attributing outcomes directly to the SRRP.

The report employs both quantitative and qualitative evidence in conducting the assessment. Quantitative data provide an overview of the scale and reach of rehabilitation activities, in addition to data on incarcerated individuals, while interviews and program documentation provide insight into how the program operates in practice and the participants' and staff's perceptions regarding its outcomes. The analysis also considers the broader institutional and social context in which the program is implemented, including staffing and infrastructural capacity, post-release employment opportunities, family and community relationships, and the role of external partners.

The available evidence has several limitations. In particular, post-release outcomes are not systematically tracked and documented for all individuals released from prison, and available information on recidivism lacks a consistent and standardized denominator or follow-up period. Estimates provided through interviews also vary from the administrative figures provided by the Ministry of Justice. The assessment therefore does not treat available recidivism figures as a definitive measure of program effectiveness or attribute observed changes directly to the SRRP. Similarly, participation figures indicate engagement with rehabilitation activities but do not, by themselves, establish a longer-term impact or causal relationship between the in-prison program and successful social reintegration. These limitations are considered throughout the assessment, particularly when analyzing outcomes and effectiveness, and basis for sustainability and replicability of the program.

Background and Project Overview

Context

Timor-Leste is one of the smallest countries in the world by population size, registering 1.4 million people in 2025.[1] According to data from the Ministry of Justice, the country's prison population stood at 679 incarcerated individuals in June 2026, including 113 pre-trial detainees and 566 sentenced individuals. Women and juveniles accounted for 25 and 52 incarcerated individuals, respectively. Unlike other jurisdictions in the ASEAN region, where a majority of crimes are narcotics related, Timor-Leste's prisons are overwhelmed with individuals guilty of committing crimes against personal liberty, including sexual violence (57%), homicide (32%) and crimes against physical integrity (6%).

With a country-wide total capacity of roughly 450 inmates,[2] Timor-Leste's prisons are currently running at a 151% occupancy level. The country operates three main prisons, with conditions varying across facilities. Government data in 2026 shows that Becora Prison, the country's largest correctional facility, houses 452 incarcerated individuals and has been reported as grossly overcrowded, while Gleno Prison, with 104 incarcerated individuals, has also experienced overcrowding and seasonal water shortages.[3] Suai Prison, which houses 123 incarcerated individuals, is vulnerable to flooding because of its low-lying location. Over time, chronic overcrowding, dangerous conditions, and resource constraints have limited the prison system's ability to provide safe and sanitary, dignified, and effective environments that support rehabilitation and prepare individuals for successful reintegration into their communities.

Timor-Leste's criminal justice system faces a critical challenge in ensuring that imprisonment contributes to rehabilitation and successful reintegration.

Timor-Leste's criminal justice system faces a critical challenge in ensuring that imprisonment contributes to rehabilitation and successful reintegration rather than simply separating individuals from society for the duration of their sentence. The need for effective rehabilitation is particularly relevant given the number of individuals cycling through the correctional system: between 2021 and 2025, Timor-Leste's three civilian prisons admitted 1,091 incarcerated individuals and released 1,153. At the same time, the Ministry of Justice reports 53 repeat offenders during this period.[4]

[1] United Nations Population Fund, *World Population Dashboard – Timor Leste* (New York, United States). Accessed on August 17, 2026. Retrieved from: https://www.unfpa.org/data/world-population/TL

[2] World Prison Brief, *Timor-Leste Prison Population Data.* Retrieved from: https://www.prisonstudies.org/country/timor-leste-formerly-east-timor?language_content_entity=en-gb

[3] Ministry of Justice Timor-Leste, Social Reintegration and Rehabilitation Program (Factsheet document), (Dili, Timor-Leste, 2026), 3.

[4] Ministry of Justice Timor-Leste, National Directorate of Prison Services and Social Reintegration Prisoner Release Data, (2021-2025).





About the Program

Part of Timor-Leste's approach to reducing resource constraints within its prison system centers on the Social Reintegration and Rehabilitation Program (SRRP), implemented by the Ministry of Justice through the National Directorate of Prison Services and Social Reintegration (DNSPRS). The key principle guiding this program is the understanding that imprisonment should not only serve as punishment; rather, it should act as a catalyst for personal development and successful reintegration into society.

The relationship between incarcerated individuals and correctional staff is guided by a "father and mother" approach, in which prison guards are regarded as parental authority figures.

This philosophy is captured in the program's motto, "Nakukun ba Naroman" ("Darkness to Light"), reflecting the aim of helping and guiding incarcerated individuals toward positive personal change and a productive return to their communities while resisting the behaviors and conditions that may contribute to reoffending. A key feature of the program is its emphasis on creating a supportive and respectful prison environment as a foundation for rehabilitation. The relationship between incarcerated individuals and correctional staff is guided by a "father and mother" approach, in which prison guards are regarded as parental authority figures.[5]

As the majority of individuals in Timor-Leste's inmate population are serving sentences for crimes that are violent in nature, the SRRP faces a unique challenge to enable such individuals to improve their personality, behavior, and responsibility towards society. The program therefore adopts a rehabilitation-first approach that begins from the point of incarceration and continues through preparation for release and reintegration. The process starts with an assessment of each incarcerated individual's educational, vocational, behavioral, and social needs, which informs the development of an individual rehabilitation plan. Rehabilitation is then delivered through two complementary components:[6]

[5] Interview with Prison Guard at Becora Prison. Interview conducted in July 2026.

[6] Ministry of Justice Timor-Leste, Social Reintegration and Rehabilitation Program Overview Document, (Dili, Timor-Leste, 2026), 2.

- The first component, **personal and character development**, focuses on fostering positive behavioral change, personal responsibility, and the skills needed to participate constructively in family and community life. The program encourages religious and spiritual development through worship services, Bible study, retreats, and engagement with religious leaders; civic and national education through activities focused on teaching Timor-Leste's history and struggle for independence; and legal awareness through sessions that explain laws and government regulations.[7] Incarcerated individuals can also access literacy and educational opportunities, including courses in English, Portuguese, and computer literacy.
- The second component, **independence training**, seeks to equip incarcerated individuals with practical and vocational skills that can contribute to economic self-sufficiency following release. Where possible, training opportunities are tailored to each incarcerated individual's interests and abilities, with options in the areas of agriculture, carpentry and furniture making, welding, sewing, brick and concrete block manufacturing, and handicrafts. Incarcerated individuals may also develop skills through activities such as painting, sculpting, producing home decorations and traditional houses, making aquariums, and creating products from recycled materials.[8] By providing marketable and self-employment-oriented skills, the program seeks to strengthen incarcerated individuals' economic independence and reduce some of the vulnerabilities that can make successful reintegration more difficult.

Together, these components seek to address both the individual capabilities and the social and economic barriers that incarcerated individuals may face after release.

The program is delivered through partnerships between the Ministry of Justice, other government institutions, civil-society organizations, and international partners. Organizations and institutions including the Ministry of Education, Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion, the State Secretariat for Equality and Inclusion, United Nations Children's Fund, United Nations Asia and Far East Institute for the Prevention of Crime and Treatment of Offenders, United Nations Office on Drug and Crimes, Haktanek Direitus Sidadaun, Shares Haburas Comunidade, and other civil society organizations have supported different aspects of the rehabilitation program.[9]

International cooperation has also contributed to strengthening the capacity of prison staff, including offender assessment and treatment programming. Through its combined focus on skills development, behavioral and personal change, economic independence, family and community support, and pre-release planning, the SRRP seeks to prepare incarcerated individuals for a successful return to society while reducing stigma, strengthening social connections, and lowering the risk of reoffending.

[7] Interview with Inmate 1 at Pecora Prison. Interview conducted in July 2026.
[8] Ministry of Justice Timor-Leste, Social Reintegration and Rehabilitation Program Overview Document, (Dili, Timor-Leste, 2026), 2.
[9] Ministry of Justice Timor-Leste, Social Reintegration and Rehabilitation Program Overview Document, (Dili, Timor-Leste, 2026), 4.

Key Findings

Relevance

Timor-Leste's overburdened criminal justice system faces a critical challenge in ensuring that imprisonment contributes to the rehabilitation and successful reintegration of incarcerated individuals, rather than simply separating inmates from society for the duration of their sentence. In this context, part of the Social Reintegration and Rehabilitation Program's relevance lies in its ability to demonstrate that a more rehabilitative model of correctional services is possible. Timor-Leste's prison service has established rehabilitation as its core mandate, and recent evidence reinforces this approach's potential: between 2021 and 2025, annual participation in personal and character development activities included between 313 to 489 incarcerated individuals, while annual participation in independence training ranged from 126 to 164 incarcerated individuals (out of approximately 1091 inmates in Timor-Leste's prison system during the same time period).[10]

Timor-Leste's prison service has established rehabilitation as its core mandate, and recent evidence reinforces this approach's potential.

Through its holistic and human-centered philosophy, the SRRP represents a multi-dimensional process that combines behavioral change, skills development, family engagement, and community reintegration. Key aspects of the program's relevance are examined in detail below:

- **Multidimensional support.** When asked about characteristics that help formerly incarcerated individuals avoid reoffending, both program participants and prison staff consistently identified personal responsibility, emotional regulation, discipline, employment opportunities, and strong family relationships as essential to the rehabilitation process. Thus, the SRRP demonstrates its relevance through its multidimensional approach: the program directly supports inmates in developing the personal, behavioral, educational, and economic capabilities required for successful reintegration. With activities centered on character development, such as counseling, anger and violence management, and religious and spiritual activities, supplementing participants' education and vocational training, the SRRP model provides incarcerated individuals with opportunities to address both the behavioral factors associated with offending and the practical challenges of maintaining financial security post-release.

- **Emphasis on behavioral change.** Criminal conviction trends in Timor-Leste indicate that the majority of incarcerated individuals are found guilty of violent crimes, particularly sexual violence and offenses involving physical harms to others. As such, it is necessary that any rehabilitation program addresses the underlying behavioral issues that are associated with violent crimes. Through its holistic program for psychosocial

[10] Note that these figures do not identify unique participants, program intensity, completion, or the proportion of eligible individuals served; consequently, these figures demonstrate activity and reach but do not establish comprehensive coverage.

support, the SRRP provides incarcerated individuals with pathways to reflect on harmful behaviors and acts, take accountability for their past actions, and develop a greater sense of responsibility and respect for others. The program's emphasis on treating incarcerated individuals with dignity and maintaining constructive relationships between prison officers and incarcerated individuals further reinforces a rehabilitative prison culture, rather than one centered exclusively on punishment and control. For instance, prison staff do not carry weapons which contributes to the familial environment inside the prison facilities.

- **Cultural relevance and family focus.** Strong family values and community networks are particularly important in Timor-Leste's culture.[11] Within this context, the SRRP model recognizes that an incarcerated individual's effective reintegration depends not only on their personal development or job readiness, but also the acceptance of their family and community. The program therefore connects in-prison rehabilitation activities with family and community reintegration, addressing social stigma by strengthening weakened family ties and promoting community acceptance through activities such as continued engagement with families and community leaders, implementing a reintegration trial period for incarcerated individuals to go back to their communities with a plan for intended activities and then conducting assessments with family and community on learnings from the trial period.

[11] Interview with Chief of Social Reintegration Program. Interview conducted in July 2026.

Outcomes and Effectiveness

Recent evidence demonstrates the SRRP's promising potential in supporting positive behavioral change, reducing reoffending, and strengthening successful reintegration, although further evaluation is needed to determine the sustainability and overall effectiveness of these outcomes. On a quantitative level, the Ministry of Justice presents a compelling case for the SRRP model in its reported recidivism rates: between 2021 and 2025, the prison system recorded just 53 repeat offenders out of the 1,091 incarcerated individuals admitted in that time, equivalent to approximately 4.85 percent of admissions.[12] However, this figure should be interpreted with due consideration, as it is calculated against admissions rather than the total number of released individuals. Some officials noted that individuals returning to prison may include cases that were unresolved rather than reoffenders. The available evidence therefore suggests positive outcomes but does not allow a definitive assessment of the program's effectiveness to reduce recidivism.

Nevertheless, qualitative data collected by the World Justice Project highlight positive findings on the SRRP's outcomes—in interviews, current and former incarcerated individuals, prison staff, and social reintegration officers identified improvements in behavior, emotional regulation, responsibility, and relationships as important outcomes of the intervention. These outcomes are further evaluated below:

- **Personal growth and self-reliance.** The program's combination of counseling and vocational training provides participants with opportunities to reflect on their behavior and develop practical mechanisms for managing conflict. These educational activities provide tangible pathways toward greater self-reliance, as interviews indicate that participants increasingly connect these skills to work and self-employment opportunities upon their release.[13] In addition to practical skill development, program participants described learning to control their anger, step away from situations when emotions escalate, communicate more respectfully, and take greater responsibility for their actions as a result of their participation in SRRP's trainings.[14] However, the relatively small number of incarcerated individuals able to access program workshops and vocational trainings indicates these outcomes may not be representative of the wider prison population. Between 2021 and 2025, between 313 and 489 of incarcerated individuals participated annually in personal and character development activities, while between 126 and 164 incarcerated individuals per year participated in independence training.[15] At Becora prison, only around 20 incarcerated individuals were participating in vocational tracks despite a population of approximately 450, with workshop capacity, staffing, and selection based on responsibility constraining participation.[16]

[12] Ministry of Justice Timor-Leste, National Directorate of Prison Services and Social Reintegration, Prisoner Release Data, (2021-2025).

[13] Focus group interview with former incarcerated individuals. Five incarcerated individuals were interviewed in a group setting to learn about their experience with the prison rehabilitation program. Three of these former incarcerated individuals are women. The group included people who are now running their own businesses, engaged in freelance work and other private employment.

[14] Interview with Inmate 2 at Pecora Prison. Interview conducted in July 2026.

[15] Ministry of Justice Timor-Leste, National Directorate of Prison Services and Social Reintegration, Prisoner Training Data, (2021-2025)

[16] Interview with Chief of Administration at Becora Prison. Interview conducted in July 2026.

Prison staff assume parental roles and seek to establish trust and mutual respect with inmates.

- **Improvements in inmate behavior management.** The program appears to have strengthened the prison environment and reduced reliance on punitive approaches to managing inmate behavior. Staff and formerly incarcerated individuals consistently described a culture in which conflicts are addressed through communication, counseling, and reflection rather than physical punishment or intimidation.[17] Despite the limitations on program resources/training opportunities, the program is still very effective in fomenting a culture of dignity and respect through humane approach. The "father and mother" approach, in which prison staff assume parental roles and seek to establish trust and mutual respect with inmates, was identified by both incarcerated individuals and staff as a central component of the program's positive and supportive environment. However, there is not enough data over time, or detailed information on individual incidents, to determine whether violence within prisons has actually declined. The available evidence therefore supports an improvement in prison relationships and conflict-management practices, rather than a demonstrated reduction in prison violence.

Formerly incarcerated individuals emphasized that family relationships, particularly responsibility toward children and parents, were among the strongest motivations to live a crime-free life.

- **Reintegration support systems.** The program's effectiveness is strengthened by its emphasis on the role of family and community in the reintegration process. Formerly incarcerated individuals emphasized that family relationships, particularly responsibility toward children and parents, were among the strongest motivations to live a crime-free life. This is consistent with the program's broader emphasis on reconnecting incarcerated individuals with their families and communities and reducing stigma after release. Through trial reintegration activities and inviting families and community members to in-prison activities, the program seeks to humanize incarcerated individuals and create a culture of acceptance. However, the program does not yet systematically track employment, behavior, or longer-term outcomes for all released individuals, particularly those who are released without parole. This makes it difficult to assess the program's overall effectiveness and to determine how consistently the positive changes observed within the prison are sustained after release.

The program should therefore be viewed as a rehabilitation model with strong potential that has demonstrated some success, but whose longer-term impact would be easier to demonstrate with stronger outcome measurement, better follow-up after release, and broader access to rehabilitation services.

[17] Interview with Inmate 3 at Pecora Prison. Interview conducted in July 2026.

Efficiency and Resource Use

Timor-Leste's Social Reintegration and Rehabilitation Program makes relatively efficient use of its limited institutional resources by integrating rehabilitation components into the existing prison system and drawing on a broad network of government, civil-society, religious, and international partners. This enables the prison service to provide a broad range of rehabilitation activities without maintaining a large, specialized workforce. However, the same resource model also creates limitations, particularly because access to rehabilitation programming and post-release support is constrained by limited internal capacity and heavy dependence on external actors.

- **Integrated staffing.** The program appears to make effective use of existing prison staff by combining custodial, mentoring, training, and reintegration functions. Prison officers are not solely responsible for security and supervision but also play an active role in supporting rehabilitation through daily interaction, counseling, vocational instruction, and personal guidance. The "father and mother" and broader "heart-to-heart" approaches effectively embed rehabilitative objectives into routine staff-inmate relationships without requiring a separate cadre of caseworkers or counselors for every inmate. Staff also receive periodic training on human rights, correctional management, and the balance between security and rehabilitation.[18] This integrated use of personnel is an efficient feature of the program because it allows rehabilitation principles to be incorporated into the daily operation of correctional facilities. However, despite indications of this approach producing positive benefits, it remains unclear as to how consistently the approach is implemented across the prison system. Lack of clarity on formal training and clear guidelines for staff to apply the approach in practice means that it is likely that implementation varies depending on individual staff members' understanding and interpretation of the approach.

- **Resource constraints.** Although the SRRP's integrated staffing approach improves the program's efficacy, limited personnel and infrastructural support constrains the efficiency of social reintegration programming and post-release support. The program's funding limitations mean that a relatively small proportion of the prison population is able to participate in rehabilitation activities. An even smaller share of inmates has access to the more resource-intensive vocational programs, as participant capacity is restricted by workshop space, equipment, and staffing availability.[19] Similar constraints affect the program's post-release support. Timor-Leste's prison system has only 11 social reintegration officers to manage all parole assessments, reporting, family and community engagement, post-release monitoring, and institutional coordination. Additionally, geographic considerations and transportation constraints mean that legally mandated follow-up appointments are often conducted by telephone rather

[18] Interview with Chief of Social Reintegration Program. Interview conducted in July 2026.

[19] Interview with Social Reintegration Officer of the National Directorate of Prison Services and Social Reintegration. Interview conducted online in August 2026.

than through in-person visits.[20] Post-release support is further limited by the system's focus on parolees—while social rehabilitation officers are required to perform regular check-ins with individuals on parole, the absence of follow-up requirements for individuals who have completed their full sentences limits the system's ability to effectively track and monitor successful reintegration.

- **Multi-stakeholder model.** Partnerships are an important mechanism for extending the program's reach and making efficient use of resources that the prison service does not possess internally. The SRRP relies on other government agencies, NGOs, religious organizations, and international partners to deliver education, counseling, anger management, violence prevention, health awareness, vocational training, and other specialized services. This allows the prison service to access technical expertise that would otherwise require additional permanent staff and financial resources. The program's multi-stakeholder model is therefore an efficient means of expanding the range of services within a resource-constrained environment. However, heavy dependence on external partners creates an important efficiency and capacity risk. The shortage of in-house psychologists is particularly significant, with counseling services relying heavily on external organizations and visiting facilitators. Similarly, vocational and educational opportunities depend substantially on the availability of partner organizations, trainers, equipment, and funding. This can result in programming that is uneven in frequency and availability and may limit the prison service's ability to expand participation to the entire prison population.

While certain components of the program suggest efficient use of limited resources, this should be distinguished from the program's adequacy. The ability to operate with limited resources has encouraged adaptation and collaboration, but it has also resulted in a small social reintegration workforce, restricted access to specialized services, uneven vocational participation, and limited capacity to monitor incarcerated individuals after release.

[20] Interview with Social Reintegration Officer. Interview conducted in August 2026.

Sustainability

Timor-Leste's Social Reintegration and Rehabilitation Program has a reasonable foundation for long-term continuation because rehabilitation and reintegration are embedded within the mandate of the Ministry of Justice and DNSPRS rather than operating as a standalone, time-bound initiative. However, the ability to run a sustainable operation will ultimately depend on gradually building sufficient internal capacity and maintaining long-tern partnerships with external stakeholders. The primary factors contributing to the SRRP's long-term outlook are examined below:

- **Institutional ownership**. DNSPRS is responsible for prison management, rehabilitation, vocational and educational programming, and maintaining links with families and communities. Because the SRRP is part of DNSPRS's mandate, rehabilitation is incorporated into the core functions of the prison system rather than dependent on a separate project structure.

- **Critical partner support**. The program's extensive network of government, civil society, religious, and international partners both strengthens and constrains its sustainability. External organizations currently provide a substantial share of the SRRP's character-development programming, including anger management, violence prevention, counseling, life skills, education, and religious and vocational activities. This network of support allows the government to extend a broad range of services towards incarcerated individuals' rehabilitation, which is particularly valuable in Timor-Leste's resource-constrained context: maintaining permanent in-house expertise across various programmatic areas (such as psychosocial support, financial management and skills development) requires a significant investment relative to the size of prison population. Nevertheless, dependence on such partnerships exposes the SRRP to structural vulnerabilities, as sustainable operations require sufficient internal capacity to manage and coordinate partner-led programming, identify gaps in program delivery and ensure continuity should there be changes in personnel and shifts in partners' programmatic priorities. Sustainable continuity and expansion are therefore dependent on developing greater technical and operational capacity within the prison system itself to take full advantage of its strategic partnerships while also ensuring consistent programming.

  Inadequate resources. Across WJP's interviews with program participants and staff, resource constraints were regularly cited as one of the SRRP's primary weak points. Interviewees noted that the program lacks sufficient staffing, functional equipment, transportation, and workshop capacity, each of which restricts the reach of both in-prison programming and post-release support. These challenges are particularly grave given the prison system's inability to cater to all the incarcerated individuals moving through the system: between 2021 and 2025, prisons admitted 1,091 incarcerated

Sustaining meaningful rehabilitation of incarcerated individuals for future reintegration requires investment in staff.

individuals and released 1,153.[21] While a resource-starved environment can prove to be an incubator for innovation, sustaining meaningful rehabilitation of incarcerated individuals for future reintegration requires investment in staff, expanding technical and administrative infrastructure and strengthening post-release monitoring system to improve program quality and effectiveness.

- **Long-term benefits**. The program has several promising foundations for longer-term resilience, but sustainability will require stronger systems around them. Its focus on family and community engagement provides a coherent model for successful reintegration; the DNSPRS itself identifies this as a key contributing factor for positive long-term outcomes, but the current model is still resource-constrained and partner-dependent, which adds to the vulnerability of sustained continuation of rehabilitative services provided to incarcerated individuals.[22]

Replicability

Timor-Leste's Social Reintegration and Rehabilitation Program offers a number of valuable principles that could be adapted to other ASEAN correctional systems, although the program would need to be tailored to different national contexts rather than replicated in full. The model is shaped by Timor-Leste's relatively small correctional system, cultural importance of family and community relationships, and unique emphasis on respectful, relational prison management. The key question for replication is not whether other jurisdictions can reproduce the program in its entirety, but which elements constitute replicable principles, which require adaptation, and which depend on conditions that may not exist elsewhere.

- **"Heart-to-heart" approach.** The core principles of the model are broadly transferable. The program demonstrates the value of treating imprisonment as an opportunity for rehabilitation rather than solely as punishment, with emphasis on dignity, dialogue, empathy, and personal responsibility. Its "heart-to-heart" approach illustrates how rehabilitation can be reinforced through everyday interactions between prison staff and incarcerated individuals, alongside more formal rehabilitation programs. These principles could be incorporated into correctional systems with very different institutional structures and resources.

[21] Government data shows that for the past five years (2021–2025), 775 new incarcerated individuals were admitted to the Becora Prison, while 865 incarcerated individuals were released. At Gleno Prison, 96 new incarcerated individuals were admitted and 144 were released, while at Suai Prison, 220 new incarcerated individuals were admitted and 144 were released. These figures indicate that over the past five years, Timor-Leste Prisons have admitted a total of 1,091 new incarcerated individuals and released 1,153 incarcerated individuals.

[22] Interview with National Director of Department of Prison Services and Social Reintegration. Interview conducted in July 2026.

- **Adaptability to varied contexts.** The operational features of the model would need to be adapted to local institutional and social conditions. For example, Timor-Leste's "mother and father" approach can help build trust and strengthen relationships between incarcerated individuals and prison staff. However, directly replicating this approach could also create challenges. Describing correctional officers as parental figures may blur the boundaries between supportive relationships and the legitimate authority of prison staff, potentially creating risks of favoritism, dependency, manipulation, or exploitation, and making it more difficult for staff to maintain professional boundaries when enforcing rules or disciplinary measures. Other jurisdictions could therefore adopt the underlying principles of respect, empathy, and relationship-based supervision without necessarily adopting the parental framing. Similarly, family engagement, community involvement, and in-prison trainings, could be adopted elsewhere, but the specific mechanisms used would need to reflect local institutions, labor markets, family structures, and community practices.

- **Context-dependent successes.** Several conditions that support the SRRPmodel may be difficult to reproduce elsewhere. The program relies significantly on close relationships between staff, incarcerated individuals, families, and community leaders, as well as on customary forms of reconciliation and community acceptance. These features may be less applicable in jurisdictions where correctional systems are substantially larger, prisons are overcrowded, staff have less opportunity for individualized engagement, or stigma toward formerly incarcerated individuals are more pronounced. Similarly, the program's reliance on external organizations to provide training and counseling support demonstrates the value of partnerships but may be difficult to sustain in jurisdictions without comparable networks of support. Replication therefore depends not only on willingness to adopt the model but also on the availability of institutional and community-level enabling conditions.

- **Focus on principles.** The key policy lesson for ASEAN governments is to replicate the model's principles rather than its institutional form. Timor-Leste provides a useful reference model for rehabilitation-oriented correctional reform, but its experience suggests that successful replication requires adapting the approach to local institutional capacity, security requirements, labor markets, and social structures rather than reproducing its practices.

Lessons Learned

Taken together, the key findings examined in the previous section point to three priorities for strengthening the SRRP: establish a credible system for tracking participation and post-release outcomes; concentrate limited resources on interventions with demonstrated or promising value; and build the internal staffing, infrastructure, and partnership-management capacity needed to deliver those interventions consistently. These lessons are presented in greater detail below, while the following section on recommendations translate these priorities into actions for DNSPRS and into broader lessons for ASEAN justice-sector institutions.

1. Rehabilitation is strengthened by combining behavioral development with livelihood preparation.

The SRRP demonstrates the value of combining counseling, emotional regulation, and personal development with vocational training. Correctional systems should integrate behavioral and livelihood interventions to prepare incarcerated individuals for both personal and economic reintegration.

2. Vocational training should be linked to realistic employment opportunities.

While incarcerated individuals value vocational training, participation and post-release employment remain limited by capacity and labor-market constraints. Training should be aligned with local employment demand and complemented by certification, employer referrals, and post-release employment support.

3. External partnerships can expand rehabilitation services, but core capabilities should be institutionalized within the correctional system.

Partnerships have expanded the range of education, psychosocial, and vocational services available to incarcerated individuals, while international cooperation has strengthened staff capacity. Governments should use partnerships to build expertise while progressively institutionalizing core rehabilitation functions within the correctional system.

4. Post-release monitoring is essential for measuring and improving rehabilitation.

Limited transportation, staffing, and follow-up mechanisms make it difficult to determine whether behavioral changes are sustained after release and have contributed to inconsistent recidivism estimates. Correctional systems should establish practical post-release monitoring and outcome-tracking mechanisms to measure reintegration and improve program design.

Recommendations

Recommendations for the Social Reintegration and Rehabilitation Program

1. Systematically implement a post-release monitoring system that extends beyond parolees.
DNSPRS should establish a standardized post-release monitoring protocol for all released individuals, not only parolees. The protocol should define reoffending consistently, identify a released cohort, specify follow-up intervals, and record a minimum set of outcomes, including employment or livelihood activity, housing stability, family and community support, participation in services, and any return to incarceration. A phased pilot at one facility could test the process and staff workload before national implementation. These measures would provide a more credible evidence base for program management and evaluation.

2. Prioritize and scale program features that demonstrate potential for success.
Given limited resources, DNSPRS should use a transparent prioritization process to identify which interventions to strengthen and scale. Selection criteria should include participant demand, completion, observed behavioral or skills outcomes, delivery cost, staff and partner capacity, and alignment with post-release livelihood opportunities. Programs that meet these criteria should receive protected delivery schedules and routine monitoring, while lower-priority activities should be redesigned, combined, or paused. This approach would concentrate resources without treating untested activities as proven.

3. Reduce dependency on external partners for core correctional programming.
Investing in a long-term plan for developing internal capacity and in-house expertise will allow the program to reduce exposure to the instability of maintaining multiple stakeholder partnerships.

4. Expand and increase vocational training capacity and develop post-release employment incentives.
DNSPRS should expand vocational training selectively, prioritizing courses that reflect participant interests, facility capacity, and realistic local employment or self-employment opportunities. Expansion should be paired with competency-based certification, access to appropriate tools and materials, employer and cooperative referrals, and continuity of support after release. Any compensation or incentive arrangement should be transparent, equitable, and consistent with applicable rules. This combined approach would improve participation while strengthening the connection between prison-based training and sustainable livelihoods.

5. Address gaps in facility conditions and specialized populations.
Women and juveniles are housed in the same facilities as the general adult population, albeit in separate blocks, pending completion of the Rehabilitation Center for Children in Conflict with the Law in the Liquiçá Municipality. This development should be prioritized alongside targeted programming for women who express a desire for communication and confidence-building training. Completion of dedicated centers and programs for specialized populations ensures that SRRP's rehabilitative philosophy is implemented equitably.

6. Increase resource capacity for data systems.
DNSPRS should develop a practical case-management system that links intake assessments, individual rehabilitation plans, program participation and completion, release information, and post-release follow-up. The system should use a common individual identifier, define access responsibilities, support consistent reporting across facilities, and include safeguards for sensitive personal information. Before procuring new technology, DNSPRS should map the required data, workflows, staffing, connectivity, maintenance, and training so that the system is usable in all three prisons and does not create an unsupported administrative burden.

Recommendations for the ASEAN Governments and Justice Sector Institutions

1. Create safe and supportive prison environments that enable rehabilitation and reintegration.
Successful reintegration depends not only on the services provided to incarcerated individuals, but also on their ability to reflect on their behavior, rebuild their sense of self, and develop more constructive relationships with society. ASEAN governments and justice-sector institutions should therefore prioritize safe, respectful, and supportive prison environments in which incarcerated individuals feel accepted and are able to engage meaningfully in rehabilitation. Such environments can provide a foundation for incarcerated individuals to develop the attitudes, behaviors, and relationships needed to return as constructive members of society.

2. Create standardized definitions and systems for tracking recidivism and other post-release outcomes.
ASEAN governments and justice-sector institutions should work toward a common reporting framework for recidivism and other post-release outcomes. The framework should distinguish rearrest, reconviction, and return to custody; define the released cohort and follow-up period; and report outcomes separately by relevant program participation and release status. Common minimum standards would improve comparability while allowing member states to retain measures suited to their legal systems and data capacity.

3. Shift toward partnership models that emphasize in-house counselling and vocational skills training instead of long-term external reliance.
ASEAN member states whose correctional programs depend on external organizations should emphasize in-house counselling and vocational skills training. Likewise, partners should prioritize equipping prison staff with the technical skills needed to support incarcerated individuals. By relying on external partners more for staff training instead of delivering essential functions, correctional facilities can increase their likelihood of weathering financial hardship and stakeholder uncertainty.

4. Promote reintegration by engaging families and communities before and after release.
Timor-Leste's use of pre-release community trials, reconciliation processes, and continued engagement with families and communities illustrates how social relationships can support an individual's transition from prison back into the community. ASEAN governments should strengthen opportunities for families and communities to participate in the reintegration process and promote greater understanding of rehabilitation and the challenges faced by formerly incarcerated individuals. These efforts can help reduce stigma, strengthen support after release, and create conditions that are more conducive to successful reintegration.

5. Develop vocational training programs based on participant demand and regional labor markets.
ASEAN states should develop in-prison training programs and certification systems that match in-demand labor market opportunities. By connecting reintegration programs to national and regional labor opportunities, incarcerated individuals work towards skills that prepare them and improve their prospects for meaningful employment after release, which can support successful reintegration.



Conclusion

Timor-Leste's SRRP shows that a resource-constrained correctional system can establish a meaningful foundation for rehabilitation by combining behavioral and character development, education and vocational preparation, constructive staff relationships, and family and community engagement. The evidence indicates promising changes in behavior and reintegration readiness, but limited program coverage and the absence of systematic post-release monitoring prevent a firm assessment of long-term impact. The program's next phase should therefore focus on expanding access to priority interventions, strengthening internal delivery capacity, and tracking outcomes after release.

The SRRP also offers valuable lessons for policymakers and practitioners across the ASEAN region, not as a model to be replicated in its entirety, but as a set of underlying principles that can be adapted to different national contexts. This model highlights the value of a people-centered approach that treats rehabilitation as a process extending beyond imprisonment and one that focuses on recognizing the importance of personal responsibility, livelihoods, family support, and community acceptance as cornerstones of sustainable social reintegration. The broader lesson of the program is that resource constraints should not deter correctional systems from pursuing meaningful rehabilitation, but sustained progress requires adapting these principles to local institutional capacity, security requirements, labor markets, and social structures.