

# Migration and Rural–Urban Inequalities in Timor-Leste



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Inequalities between urban and rural Timor-Leste have been a persistent feature of the landscape from colonial times. They reflect the political and economic dynamics between urban centres of power and financial influence, especially in Dili, and the scattered, impoverished hinterland where near subsistence agriculture and limited state services prevail.

These inequalities can be measured in statistical terms. In 2012, the population of Timor-Leste stood at 1,154,625, and 70.4 per cent of citizens were classed as rural dwellers. They include a majority of the vulnerable 50 per cent of the population living on less than US\$2 per day. By contrast, 92.2 per cent of urbanites in Dili occupy the highest wealth quintiles.<sup>1</sup> Similarly, some 91 per cent of urbanites enjoy safe drinking water, while just 57 per cent or rural dwellers receive a similar level of service. Rural areas have high rates of child mortality (136/1000 by 5 years) and lower literacy levels (58.7 per cent >15 years). Children in urban areas are almost four times more likely to be enrolled at secondary school than their peers in rural areas.<sup>2</sup>

In recent years, funding efforts by the national government to improve living standards beyond the urban concentrations have had positive impacts. New schools and well-stocked village health clinics, the expansion of social payments to pensioners and veterans, and village labour projects have made substantial contributions to improving rural household wellbeing. But inequalities persist, and one visible response to endemic rural poverty has been a sustained rural–urban drift from the remote hinterlands to the buzz and bright lights of the city, especially to Dili, and especially by young people. Some move in search of better education. Others respond to the lack of rural employment opportunities<sup>3</sup> and the drudgery of subsistence agriculture, embracing their youthful desires to engage and consume modernity. The migratory trend can be seen in the 33 per cent increase in the Dili population (58,296) since 2004 — a figure that

represents 40 per cent of the overall population increase of Timor-Leste over that period.

Once resident however, youthful aspirants face endemic high youth unemployment and strong competition for limited jobs. The resulting disaffection and under-employment breeds political discontent and a looming challenge for government and the nation as a whole.

## International Migration

Since independence, however, a growing cadre of young Timorese have found new pathways to comparative prosperity and opportunity through international labour migration. Over the last decade, thousands of young hopefuls have left Timor-Leste for shiftwork and low-skilled factory jobs in the United Kingdom. Key to this surprising development has been the ability of East Timorese to secure Portuguese passports and thus eligibility to work in the European Union. The origins of what is now a thriving chain migration lies in the pioneering travel of student activists of the 1990s who gained political asylum through Jakarta to escape persecution. With independence and the decision by the government of Portugal to recognise all East Timorese born before 20 May 2002 as Portuguese citizens with associated entitlements, the path was open to international travel and access to employment in Europe.

These days, thousands of East Timorese labour migrants are dispersed around the UK, employed in a variety of low-skilled jobs — shiftworkers in packing factories, meat processing, cleaning, security services, car detailing, and restaurant work. Most live in group houses, sharing expenses and experiences, and keeping in touch with distant relatives and friends through Skype and social media including Facebook. While men make up the majority of travellers, young women are well represented, many joining their brothers or cousins along well-versed networks of familiarity and sponsorship.

## Changing Livelihoods and Cultural Legacies

Deirdre McKay has referred to remittances as 'monetarised expressions of care and obligations to family'.<sup>4</sup> And for most young Timorese migrants, the goal of overseas work is to generate savings to support their families in Timor-Leste and to secure their own futures. While not all are disciplined savers, the flow of remittances through, for example, Western Union wire transfers, are making significant contributions to source community livelihoods. Funds are regularly directed to support everyday expenses and contributions to life cycle rituals of kin and affines. Savings and capital are also directed to house construction, support for siblings' education expenses and, where possible, a financial stake for trading capital or to establish a micro-enterprises on return.

In a 2008 report on a survey of remittance flows into Timor-Leste, Shuaib<sup>5</sup> observed that:

- 'Households with members working overseas are better off financially by many multiples than households pursuing local employment.'
- Western Union electronic transfers remitted some US\$370,000 per month into Timor-Leste (2008), predominantly from the UK. This amounted to an estimated US\$5million per annum in 2008 (now likely to be significantly higher).
- The value of inward remittances to Timor-Leste makes labour the country's second largest export after coffee.

These observations point to a growing livelihood option for many young East Timorese now disillusioned with unemployment and limited incomes in their hamlets of origin or the dusty urban centres. Labour migration to the distant UK is providing a bounteous and unexpected source of income and remittance flows to thousands of beneficiary households whose members' lives have been materially enriched through the practice. Despite the impact of the Global Financial Crisis, especially in Western Europe, the lure of adventure and higher wage opportunities in the UK continues

to attract large numbers of recruits. And if the macro-economic impact of these remittances remains small in an economy so heavily dependent on oil revenues,<sup>6</sup> the revenue flow is only likely to grow, and, over time, contribute a sustained source of economic support for multiple Timorese households with members overseas. Like its regional neighbours in the Pacific and Southeast Asia, labour migration is likely to provide an important supplementary source of export income for many years to come. Its broadly democratic nature also contributes to breaking down the historical class inequalities that have long shaped relations between rural and urban residents.

## Endnotes

- 1 Timor-Leste National Statistics Directorate (NSD) and Ministry of Finance, and ICF Macro 2010. *Demographic and Health Survey 2009–10*. Dili: NSD and ICF Macro.
- 2 Timor-Leste NSD, Ministry of Finance and United Nations Population Fund 2010. *Highlights of the 2010 Census Main Results in Timor-Leste*. Dili: NSD.
- 3 The 2014 national budget allocates just 2.2 per cent (US\$34 million) to agricultural development.
- 4 McKay, D. 2007. Sending Dollars Shows Feelings: Emotions and Economies in Filipino Migration. *Mobilities* 2(2):175–94.
- 5 Shuaib, F. 2008. *East Timor Country Report*. Canberra: Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. <[http://aid.dfat.gov.au/Publications/Documents/etimor\\_study.pdf](http://aid.dfat.gov.au/Publications/Documents/etimor_study.pdf)>, viewed 15/12/2013.
- 6 Scheiner, C. and L. Hamutuk 2013. Rights and Sustainability in Timor-Leste's Development. Paper presented at State, Society and Governance in Melanesia seminar, Canberra, 27 November.

## Notes on Author

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