Overview of Internal Migration in Timor Leste
Timor-Leste Context

- Timor-Leste’s total population, as recorded by UNESCAP in 2016, stands at over 1.3 million.
- Timor-Leste benefits from a “demographic bonus”, as 44% of its population is aged in the range of 0-14. It has the highest population growth rate (2.2% annual growth) and total fertility rate (5.5) of Southeast Asia (UNESCAP 2016).
- Timor-Leste is a highly rural and agrarian society. Over 69% of the Timorese live in rural areas (UNESCAP 2016) and the agricultural sector provides subsistence to an estimated four-fifths of the country’s total population (FAO 2011).
- After independence in 2002, the Timorese government adopted the National Development Plan (NDP), which aimed to promote more balanced regional development by focusing on rural development. Nevertheless, important disparities between urban and rural Timor-Leste persisted, as nearly 71% of Dili dwellers occupied the highest wealth quintiles compared to just 9% in rural areas (National Statistics Directorate 2010). The more recent Strategic Development Plan 2011-2030, which supersedes the 2002 NDP, does not address internal migration as part of a development strategy (Timor-Leste 2010).
Internal migrants in Timor-Leste constitute a significant population. According to the 2015 Timor-Leste Population and Housing Census nearly 17.7% of Timorese have left their place of birth to settle in another district (National Statistics Directorate 2016). This significantly outstrips international migration in the country, as number of Timorese international migrants only stood at 23,190 in 2017 (UNDESA 2017).

Dili district is the only Timorese district experiencing net in-migration. Internal migrants represent 37.3% of Dili’s total population. The primary migrant-sending districts are Dili itself, Baucau, Bobonaro, Ermera, and Viqueque, though migrants move to Dili from all districts (National Statistics Directorate 2016).

Timor-Leste is highly susceptible to the effects of climate change; it is predicted to become about 1.5°C warmer and about 10% wetter by 2050, with significant harms to agricultural productivity that might spur greater rural-urban migration (Molyneux et al. 2012).

Migrants’ Characteristics

- 51.6% of internal migrants are female (National Statistics Directorate 2016).
- The majority of migrants (40.8%) in Timor-Leste are aged 15-29 years, with age distribution very much alike between males and females. The age category 20-24 is the peak age group (National Statistics Directorate 2012).
- Migrants tend to be single (48.4%), especially those moving to Dili (64.2%) (ibid.).
- Catholics are the main migratory religious group, representing 95.7% of Timor-Leste’ migrants (ibid.).
- Migrants have higher educational attainments than non-migrants. Over 40% have secondary level education compared to nearly 12% for non-migrants. Male migrants are better educated than female migrants, and migrants with better education tend to move to Dili (ibid.).
- Internal migrants in Timor-Leste consider marriage their primary reason for migration (27.5%), followed by following family (23.3%), education (21.9%), employment-related purposes (13.3%), and conflict (3.5%). Among women the primary reason for migration was marriage (38.2%), and among men it was education (24.5%) (ibid.).

1 The 2015 Timor-Leste Population and Housing Census defines internal migrants as persons whose place of residence at the time of census differs from their place of last residence. The district and sub-district of birth was recorded, not the town or village.
Migrants to urban areas are more likely to move for education or employment-related purposes. In the 2015 Population and Housing Census 80.5% and 77.5% of migrants who moved for education and employment respectively moved to urban areas. Migrants to rural areas, on the other hand, are more likely to move for marriage (National Statistics Directorate 2016; 2012). Almost the same proportion of urban and rural migrants move to follow family (National Statistics Directorate 2012).

According to the 2015 Population and Housing Census, 71.8% of those moving for marriage were women, and 72.9% of those moving for employment were men (National Statistics Directorate, 2016). A less representative ACP Observatory on Migration study \(^2\) (2014) also suggested that males mainly move for economic reasons, and females for or marriage or education. (The 2015 Census indicates that despite this, a slim majority of those moving for education are males.)

**Working and Living Conditions in the New Setting**

- The labour force participation rate for migrants is at 45%. However, job scarcity means that 14% of the migrants engaged in the labour force are unemployed (National Statistics Directorate 2012).

- Migrant workers are mainly involved in non-agricultural activities. Only 23.4% work in the primary sector, compared to over 75% of non-migrants. They tend to work as service and sales workers (26.8%), clerks and clerical support workers (12.3%), craft and related trades workers (8%), plant and machine operators, assemblers (6.8%), or in elementary occupations (8.1%) (ibid.).

- A significant proportion of migrant workers are managers (5.2%) or senior officials, legislators and professionals (4.8%), compared to only 1.7% and 1.3% for non-migrants, respectively (ibid.).

- In professional, administrative and management-related employment categories and in production-related categories, the proportion of men is higher than women. The sex ratio is 104-106 men per 100 women (ibid.).

- Migration is expected to have a positive impact on migrants’ living standards. The ACP Observatory on Migration (2014) found that the majority of the interviewees considered their economic and employment conditions (79%) and their access to health services (85.5%), public transport (83%) and education (81%) as having improved after migrating. However, a smaller proportion responded positively regarding social insertion (68%), housing conditions (71%) and access to basic essentials (69%).

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\(^2\) The ACP Observatory on Migration study counted a total of 400 respondents and was conducted in 68 of Timor-Leste’s 442 districts, covering 41 of the 65 sub-districts of the country. It used a snowball strategy (each interviewee indicating a potential interviewee to follow) and the statistical findings related to this research should be viewed as non-representative of the entire population.
The Impact of Internal Migration on Those Who Stay Behind

- Despite the high rate of internal migration in Timor-Leste, there is little official data on the economic impacts of internal migration on the migrant-sending households and communities.

- The ACP Observatory on Migration study (2014) suggests that around half of internal migrants send remittances in cash or in kind, although most of them do so sporadically.

- Most migrants (91%) maintain contact with their left-behind family, and 74% visit them from time to time (ACP Observatory on Migration, 2014).

References


This brief is part of a series of Policy Briefs on Internal Migration in Southeast Asia jointly produced by UNESCO, UNDP, IOM, and UN-Habitat. These briefs are part of an initiative aimed at researching and responding to internal migration in the region. The full set of briefs can be found at http://bangkok.unesco.org/content/policy-briefs-internal-migration-southeast-asia