



UNTL
Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa'e

Human Security of Border Communities
in Covalima, Bobonaro and RAEOA, Timor-Leste

POLICY BRIEF



United Nations Trust Fund
for Human Security



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Lorosa'e

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Policy context

Timor-Leste's border communities were at the frontlines of COVID-19 but are under-protected and under-studied. It is therefore crucial to understand their specific vulnerabilities, needs and security gaps, to help the government to respond, prepare for and prevent future health threats. The International Organization of Migration (IOM) and the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) commissioned the Institute for Peace, Conflict and Social Studies at the National University of Timor-Lorosa'e (IPACSS-UNTL) to fill this gap by assessing vulnerabilities and resilience in border communities in Timor-Leste in the context of COVID-19.

This assessment mapped the vulnerabilities and resilience of border communities in three municipalities: Bobonaro, Covalima and the Special Administrative Region of Oe-Cusse-Ambeno (RAEOA) using a human security approach in order to identify strategies to improve their lives and livelihoods.

The human security approach

The human security approach is a comprehensive methodology that allows for a broad perspective on the challenges faced by people and their governments. This assessment was conducted to assess issues, concerns and solutions in the seven core pillars of human security – community, economic, environmental, food, health, personal, and political security – and an eighth pillar identified in collaboration with communities: education security.

The study followed the five fundamental principles of the human security approach: being people-centred, comprehensive, context-specific, prevention-oriented, and protection and empowerment-focused.

Border communities

Timor-Leste's border with Indonesia is approximately 250 km long, extending from the north of Mota-Ain/Batugade, to the southern area of Salele/Mota Masin. The enclave of RAEOA in the west also borders Indonesia. Data from the 2022 census show that 79,892 people live in the 23 border villages across three municipalities, making up 6 per cent of the country's population.

Figure 1 : Map of Timor-Leste, with border municipalities highlighted



Data collection

The research team conducted a detailed mapping of service providers and local stakeholders through key informant interviews, focus group discussions, desk review site visits and observations, in 23 identified border villages in Bobonaro, Covalima, and RAEOA municipalities. Overall, 23 focus group discussions were conducted, with more than 300 participants. Additionally, 75 local stakeholders and 65 service providers were interviewed.

Table 2: Focus group discussions and their composition

Municipality	Focus group discussions held	Participants			Composition
		Total	Female	Male	
Covalima	5	68	32	36	Government authorities,* school teachers, health professionals, church groups, media, women and youth groups
Bobonaro	7	95	51	44	Government authorities, the Timor-Leste Defence Force† and BPU‡ members, service providers, church, people with disabilities, school teachers, health professionals, women and youth groups, elders, agriculture groups
RAEOA	11	176	63	113	Government authorities, youth, teachers, health professionals, local stakeholders (such as cooperatives), BPUs and Village Police Officers,** elders, farmers and community representatives
Total	23	339	146	193	

* Including chiefs of villages or sub-villages and government officials at administrative posts and at village level.

† Tetum: *Forças de Defesa de Timor Leste* or *Falintil-FDTL*

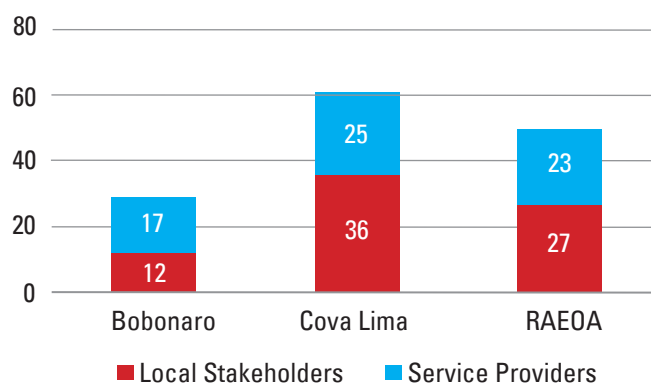
‡ Tetum: *Unidade Patrullamentu Fronteira*

** Tetum: *Ofisiál Polisia Suco*

Stakeholder mapping

Figure 1 shows the number of local stakeholders and service providers in Bobonaro, Covalima and RAEOA. Local stakeholders in RAEOA are mostly concerned about economic security, while those in Covalima are mainly focused on food and agriculture.

Figure 1: Numbers of local stakeholders and service providers in border areas



As anticipated, a significant proportion of local stakeholders are adults, however, with members typically being aged 20-24 years or above 25 years. This suggests that young people aged 15-19 years and their interests are under-represented in these stakeholder groups (see Figure 2).

The largest number of groups have gender parity, while women-only groups are about twice the number of men-only groups (see Figure 3).

Figure 2: Age distribution of members of local stakeholder groups

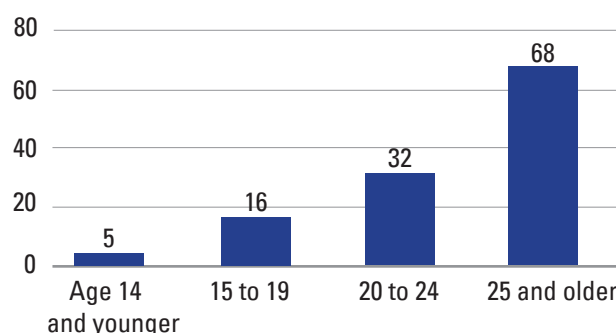
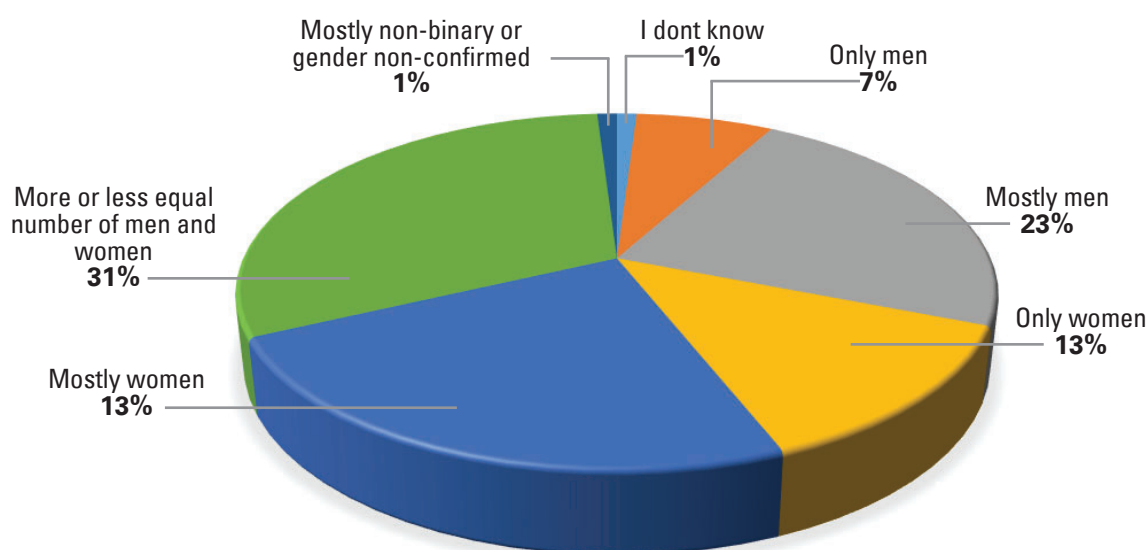


Figure 3: Gender distribution of members of local stakeholder groups



Research findings

Border communities are vulnerable to specific human security risks, and women and young girls are particularly vulnerable due to the normalization of domestic and gender-based violence and lack of access to education, financial resources and personal protection.

While service providers prioritize health and education, local stakeholders and community-based initiatives foreground economy and agriculture as key areas of human security concern. This points to inconsistencies between top-down and bottom-up initiatives and perceived needs.

Certain areas of human security are neglected, such as cultural security. For example, border-crossing for cultural purposes is a common activity among border communities, but is often suspended, for example during border closures due to COVID-19.

The eight pillars of human security are analysed in terms of vulnerability (i.e. the risks or threats to which a community is exposed), gender (i.e. taking into account the barriers or challenges that women and men experience differently) and resilience (i.e. the capacity of a system to absorb shocks and to bounce back better).

Education security:

- Vulnerability: lack of access to education at all levels, including to schools, teaching materials, trained teaching staff and library facilities is identified in all municipalities. Many existing schools lack access to water, sanitation and hygiene (WASH) facilities. Access to education through alternative approaches, such as online learning during COVID-19, is limited, as electricity and telecommunication infrastructure are inadequate in most border communities.
- Gender: girls in border communities face risks to personal security, as the need to access schooling away from their families significantly increased their vulnerability sexual violence.
- Resilience: remote communities have built schools and dormitories for their children. During COVID-19, teachers organized into small groups to teach children in their villages, as online teaching was not a viable option.

Health security:

- Vulnerability: chronic and non-chronic diseases such as tuberculosis, respiratory disease and malnutrition are prevalent, while access to health-care is uneven.
- Gender: pregnant women face barriers in accessing reproductive health services. Existing services do not have sufficient human resources or well-equipped facilities, despite prevailing high rates of maternal mortality.
- Resilience: communities have devised creative ways of transporting patients, such as on motorbikes instead of ambulances, relying on mobile clinics and home visits, and using traditional medicine.

Personal security:

- Vulnerability: domestic violence, child marriage, and early pregnancy are common, yet rarely addressed.
- Gender: domestic violence has been normalized as a private issue rather than a public crime in Timor-Leste's patriarchal culture. This is compounded in border communities, where there is a lack of services for at-risk women and girls, such as legal support and refuges or safe houses.
- Resilience: traditional or informal justice mechanisms are used to address conflicts between or within families, including domestic violence.

Environmental security:

- Vulnerability: border communities are largely subsistence farmers who are subject to climate changes or extreme weather conditions that have significant impact on lives and livelihoods. The El Niño weather phenomenon and local practices, such as wood-cutting and slash-and-burn farming, also cause deforestation, desertification and water scarcity, soil loss and landslides.
- Gender: in communities where water is rare or scarce, women and girls are mainly responsible for domestic and unpaid care work and have to walk long distances to fetch water.

- Resilience: communities draw on customary law (tara bandu), tree planting and community mobilization to build fences or preserve water resources by conserving springs. Women have created school food programmes and education, resulting in the use of sustainable permaculture food gardens for families, communities and schools.

Economic security:

- Vulnerability: border communities have limited access to markets and employment.
- Gender: it is difficult for women to access markets that are too distant from their villages, and instead they access closer markets across the border. This increases vulnerabilities for women around border police controls.
- Resilience: to reduce economic risks, communities engage in cross-border trading, as well as borrowing money and forming cooperatives.

Food security:

- Vulnerability: food security is compromised when access to and availability of food becomes limited due to climate and crop disease. It was also compromised during the COVID pandemic lockdown, but COVID-19 response policies tended to disregard the agricultural sector.
- Gender: women and children experience malnutrition due to reduced quality and quantity of food. This, in turn, increases risks of maternal mortality and stunting and wasting in children.
- Resilience: communities engage heavily in subsistence agriculture or adopt coping strategies such as reducing the quantity and quality of food consumed.

Community security:

- Vulnerability: conflict within and between communities arises due to disputes over water, land and livestock.
- Gender: women have limited or no access to land and other resources and property, perpetuating or intensifying their disadvantaged status.
- Resilience: strong cultural and clan relations limit community conflict, such as between martial arts and ritual arts groups. They also consolidate communal identities through collective work and projects, such as building houses or public facilities together (observed in Saburai village). However, this does not apply to outsiders.

Political security:

- Vulnerability: weak rule of law, access to legal services and regulation of the security sector limit communities' ability to exercise their political and civil rights and subject them to risk of abuses of power and violence. Political pressure during the elections were reported by border communities.
- Gender: risks of exploitation, physical or sexual violence and abuse, and human trafficking increase when power is centralized in the police and military in border areas without strong checks and balances. Those without legal identities may be unable to access social and legal protections and security.
- Resilience: tara bandu is used when there is conflict between communities and the security sector.

Recommendations

In line with the Sustainable Development Goals and the Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011–2030, human security-based approaches should:

- be equitable and efficient
- address the needs and access to all sectors for all age groups of the population
- address the special needs of women and young girls
- strengthen the partnership between community, government and development partners to deliver essential services

With these goals in mind, policy reforms should aim to improve political, personal, community and environmental security, while integrating a focus on gender into the policy reform process. Clear coordination and good communication between line ministries and national and local stakeholders is essential for effective response. Communities must be sensitized through with life-saving information on the COVID-19 pandemic and other hazards to avoid misinformation and ensure fast and effective local response.

Education security:

Key policymakers: Secretary of State for Social Communication; Ministry of Education; Secretary of State for Equality.

- Increase the number of preschools, primary, pre-secondary, secondary, vocational schools and learning groups, and provide the necessary teaching materials, facilities and human resources.
- Invest in skills development for adolescents to improve employability.
- Subsidize and provide safe, secure dormitories for girls and youth homes in municipal centres that provide secondary education facilities, so that students can continue their education beyond primary school.
- Strengthen the information and communication technology infrastructure and facilities at schools to create the conditions for online learning.

Health security:

Key policymakers: Ministry of Health; Secretary of State for Equality.

- Increase the number of medical staff, permanent clinics and hospitals, as well as mobile clinics at suco (village) and aldeia (sub-village) levels.
- Address the health security concerns around diseases commonly found in border areas, such as tuberculosis and respiratory diseases, through awareness-raising and health education.
- Integrate gender-sensitive policies in the reproductive health sector and highlight the particular needs of female health-care staff, pregnant women, lactating mothers and girls as a focus for affirmative action policy.

- Collaborate with stakeholders to disseminate clear and correct COVID-19 information to the local community, such as vaccination.
- Improve the implementation and monitoring of mechanisms and programmes addressing malnutrition.

Personal security:

Key policymakers: Ministry of Interior, Ministry of Education; Ombudsman for Human Rights and Justice.

- Provide civic education at community level to raise public awareness of human rights.
- Support key stakeholders (border police) and service providers to work with communities to devise policies that reflect local realities, and reconsider the use of terms such as “illegal trading” and “illegal crossing” in laws and policies to describe common border-crossing activities, as these criminalize communities.
- Raise awareness among communities of gender and child protection, and engage with existing mindsets and cultural traditions to reduce the particular risks of disadvantage, exploitation and violence faced by women and children in border communities.

Environmental security:

Key policymaker: Ministry of Tourism, Commerce and Industry.

- Invest in evidence-based research and policies regarding climate change and environmental protections to reduce vulnerabilities affecting multiple forms of human security.
- Put in place financial and action plans for environmental awareness-raising and education amongst communities to support them in moving away from harmful practices and addressing short- and long-term environmental risks such as water shortages and desertification.
- Work with communities to identify high-risk areas vulnerable to extreme weather impacts and establish early warning systems.

Economic security:

Key policymakers: Ministry of Interior; Ministry of Tourism, Commerce and Industry; Ministry of Agriculture; Ministry of Public Works; Secretary of State for Co-operatives; Secretary of State for Professional Training and Employment.

- Recognize that cross-border trading as an important source of local livelihoods. Reassess the criminalization of this trade and instead facilitate trade in necessary goods in cross-border markets.
- Promote cooperatives and other community-based initiatives that engage in for-profit activities.
- Improve basic infrastructure, such as electricity, roads, bridges and markets.
- Create training opportunities for qualified and paid health workers, midwives, teachers and agricultural workers.
- Ensure social protection coverage for those eligible under existing programmes, and increasing support in kind and cash for vulnerable communities, women and children, particularly during crises.

Food security:

Key policymakers: Ministry of Agriculture; Ministry of Tourism, Commerce and Industry; Ministry of Education, Youth and Sport; Secretary of State for Co-operatives; Secretary of State for Professional Training and Employment.

- Support subsistence farmers with small loans, seeds and technologies to increase food production and develop emergency response for health or climate emergencies.
- Educate communities on environmental issues, climate change, sustainable development of local food crops and sustainable management of water resources, and nutrition for pregnant and lactating women and children.
- Support school-based programmes to increase knowledge of nutrition, sustainable food production and water management.

Community security:

Key policymakers: Ministry of Interior; Ministry of Social Solidarity and Inclusion; Ministry of State Administration; Secretary of State for Equality.

- Build community resilience by combining informal and formal dispute resolution mechanisms to address conflicts over land, natural resources and property.
- Develop training on gender-based violence and domestic violence tailored to community needs and sensitive to local understanding of private issues and public crime. Build the capacity of service providers to strengthen information dissemination and implementation of laws and regulations.
- Coordinate with neighbouring Indonesia to establish boundary commissions in disputed territory to address and reduce cross-border conflicts.
- Strengthening the capacity of custom offices to detect the movement of prohibited goods and human trafficking.
- Consider use of non-security measures to respond to emergencies such as COVID-19 instead of depending on the police and military.

Political security:

Key policymakers: Ministry of Justice; Ministry of Interior; Ministry of State Administration; Ombudsman for Human Rights and Justice.

- Improve community access to legal services to engage with border security issues, such as protecting the rights and access to services of children of international and/or uneducated parents.
- Strengthen policy implementation and rule of law on human security issues.
- Integrate human-rights-sensitive approaches in security policies to address abuses of power and violence by the security sector.

Policy key

- Human security concerns in the border communities of Timor-Leste are interlinked and interdependent.
- There are varying levels of vulnerability and resilience in border villages and municipalities. Whereas some villages have limited capacity to respond to human security risks and challenges, others demonstrate greater communal resilience.
- Just, effective and efficient practices in one village may not be suitable for replication in other villages, yet may provide important lessons and insights for others.

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