

The background of the entire page is a high-angle, aerial photograph of a tropical coastline. The image shows a long, narrow strip of land with a mix of green vegetation and rocky terrain, bordering a clear, turquoise ocean. Several small boats are visible in the water. The sky is bright blue with scattered white clouds. The overall scene is serene and scenic.

“THIS IS OUR RIGHT”: SOCIAL PROTECTION AND FAIRNESS IN TIMOR-LESTE

**KATE PRUCE, DAVID HUDSON,
CLAIRE MCLOUGHLIN, MARIA DO CÉU
J.O. GUSMÃO, LETICIA BRANCHER,
CAROLINA CARVOEIRAS DO
NASCIMENTO PIRES, RUI NORONHA,
DAVID NOANO XIMENES, AND LEVILITO
DA RESSUREIÇÃO DAS NEVES BAPTISTA**

JUNE 2023



The **Developmental Leadership Program** (DLP) is an international research collaboration supported by the Australian Government.

DLP investigates the crucial role that leaders, networks and coalitions play in achieving development outcomes.

dlprog.org

dlp@contacts.bham.ac.uk

@DLProg

Developmental Leadership Program
International Development Department
College of Social Sciences
University of Birmingham
Birmingham, B15 2TT
United Kingdom

Cover photo:
Tanushree Rao / unsplash



This publication has been funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views expressed in this publication are the authors' alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government, the Developmental Leadership Program or partner organisations.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This research brief is a collaboration between Kate Pruce, David Hudson and Claire Mcloughlin, with research assistance provided by Maria do Céu J.O. Gusmão, Leticia Brancher, Carolina Carvoeiras do Nascimento Pires, Rui Noronha, David Noano Ximenes and Levilito Da Ressureição Das Neves Baptista.

The research project '[Social protection and perceptions of state legitimacy in Timor-Leste](#)' is part of the Developmental Leadership Program, led by the University of Birmingham and La Trobe University and funded by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT), Government of Australia. This is independent research and does not reflect the views of DFAT.

Ethical approval is from the University of Birmingham's Humanities and Social Sciences Ethical Review Committee (ERN_22-0706).

Thank you to the reviewers for providing valuable feedback during the peer review process, and a wide range of stakeholders in Timor-Leste for their insightful inputs during a series of presentations and discussions held in Dili in May 2023.

CONTENTS

Introduction	4
Background	6
Timor-Leste’s social protection system	6
Social assistance and nation-building	7
Excluded voices	8
The study	10
Research findings	12
Rights and duties	12
‘Something in return...?’	14
The deserving poor?	16
Allocation preferences	18
Fairness and equity	20
Where could change come from?	21
Implications	23
Opportunities for dialogue and contestation	24
References	25
Appendix 1: Pre-test questionnaire	28
Appendix 2: Field experiment instrument	31

INTRODUCTION

Following a long-standing independence campaign against Indonesia's violent occupation of the country lasting more than 20 years, Timor-Leste became a sovereign state in 2002. Nation-building has encompassed transitional justice, national identity and state legitimacy, with social protection being an important tool in shaping relations between citizens and the state. The Government of Timor-Leste cites the country's social assistance schemes as a significant step in the "construction of citizenship, combining duties to social rights" (Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, 2021, p. 14), contributing to social peace and economic development.

KEY FINDINGS

- There is a significant level of social motivation for assisting others, which resonates with local norms and practices in Timor-Leste
- Contribution to society is perceived as social and collective, rather than narrowly economic.
- Veterans' contributions to Timor-Leste are understood to have been made in the past, during the independence struggle, while other recipients of government transfers are expected to contribute to the future development of the country
- Ability to work is not the main determinant of deservingness, although an individual's level of income plays a role
- Young people aged 30 and under (the definition of youth in Timor-Leste's National Youth Policy) gave significantly less to the veteran categories when required to prioritise than people over 30, suggesting a shift in attitudes among the younger generation
- There are some equity concerns about the disparity in government payments, due to the differences in the transfer amounts provided by the different social assistance schemes

Social transfers to a variety of groups – including veterans, mothers and pregnant women, the elderly and people with disabilities – have been made possible through Timor-Leste’s oil wealth. In 2019, up to 64% of the social protection budget was allocated to the Veterans’ Pension (World Bank, 2022), a trend that has led to concerns about intergenerational inequity (Doraisami, 2018). The sustainability of these government payments is also being called into question as oil revenues dry up and the country’s Petroleum Fund declines (World Bank, 2022).

This is a crucial moment to open up discussions about social assistance allocations to avoid a cliff edge scenario whereby payments abruptly cease due to lack of funds, which may pose a threat to political stability. Against this backdrop, this paper considers the possibilities for policy adjustments in light of the following research question:

How do government narratives and citizen perceptions of social assistance allocation in Timor-Leste interact, and what are the implications for state legitimacy in fragile and post-conflict settings?

Drawing on mixed-methods data, the paper considers how perceptions of fairness and deservingness may shape the prospects for social protection in a context where support for veterans is politically charged and difficult to change or remove. Deeply embedded ideas mean that any policy changes will need to be framed in alignment with existing values and moral criteria, rather than challenging them completely. The paper also considers the implications for state legitimacy in a country caught between a longstanding crisis of stability rooted in the independence struggles and a looming fiscal crisis.

© UN / Flickr



BACKGROUND

TIMOR-LESTE'S SOCIAL PROTECTION SYSTEM

Timor-Leste's National Strategy for Social Protection 2021-2030 defines social protection as "a set of public policies with the primary objective of protecting people, including the poorest and most vulnerable, and to ensure minimum standards of well-being" (Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste, 2021: 23), and to

date the country has 26 social protection programs and measures in place. Since 2008 the government in Timor-Leste has delivered high levels of social assistance to its citizens and in 2017 introduced the General Contributory Social Security Scheme, providing protection to workers in the public and private sectors.

BOX 1

Allowance for the Support of the Elderly and People with Disabilities: A non-contributory transfer of USD50 per month targeting two populations: (i) citizens aged 60 or older and (ii) citizens aged 18 or older who are unable to work due to disabilities. The program aims to ensure a minimum income for citizens not covered by other old-age or disability payments.

Bolsa de Mãe and Bolsa de Mãe-Jerasaun Foun ('new generation'): Originally a conditional cash transfer for poor and vulnerable families with children, Bolsa de Mãe has been redesigned to reach pregnant women and young children. The Jerasaun Foun scheme has two components: (i) a maternity benefit of USD15 per month (during pregnancy) and (ii) a child benefit (0-6 years), with caregivers receiving USD20 per month for each eligible child. If health authorities assess a child as having a disability, an additional USD10 per month is provided.

Veterans' pension: Veterans' payments range from USD230 and USD750 per month, depending on length of service. There are four categories of benefits: (i) one-off payment for four to seven years exclusive dedicated service to the resistance; (ii) life-time pension for descendants of those killed while fighting; (iii) life-time pension for eight to 14 years of service; (iv) life-time pension for 15 to 24 years of service plus higher amounts to 'prominent figures'.

Government spending on social protection is high in Timor-Leste compared to other countries across the Asia-Pacific region, and by international standards. However, expenditure has decreased in recent years from 15% of non-oil GDP in 2009 to 7% in 2019, and up to 64% of the social protection budget was allocated to the Veteran's Pension program in 2019 (World Bank, 2022).

Timor-Leste's main social assistance schemes (see box 1) were introduced following a bout of civil unrest in 2006 that caused high levels of internal displacement and humanitarian crises. This suggests that the government aimed to provide visible assistance to citizens to promote stability in the country (DFAT, 2015).

SOCIAL ASSISTANCE AND NATION-BUILDING

State legitimacy – defined here as public acceptance of the underlying system of rules and expectations from which the actions of the government derive (Migdal, 2001) – is a core component of state-building. While the delivery of public services has been widely identified as a source of state legitimacy, particularly in fragile and conflict-affected situations (Carpenter, Slater, and Mallet 2012; OECD, 2011), the relationship between service delivery and legitimacy is nonlinear (McLoughlin, 2015a). Service delivery can undermine as well as support state legitimacy, depending on local perceptions of fairness (McLoughlin, 2015b) such as van Oorschot's (2000) five criteria of deservingness for receiving government assistance through welfare or social protection. However, there is currently limited empirical evidence regarding the effects of social protection on social cohesion and state-citizen relations more broadly (Burchi et al., 2021; Idris, 2017).

A central aspect of the nation's state-building efforts has been a process of transitional justice and social repair led by the Commission for Reception, Truth and Reconciliation (CAVR) – with a mandate to investigate human rights violations committed during the occupation. The narrative of the past that emerged during this process has tended to valorise veterans as a "symbol of strength, bravery and

masculinity" (Rothschild, 2017, p. 459). This approach overlooks women's participation in the liberation struggle and rebuilding peace, as well as the (predominantly female) victims of the conflict (Christalis and Scott, 2005; Rothschild, 2017).

Kent and Kinsella (2014) have argued that the veterans' scheme "has become a core nation-building pillar... determining social, political and economic status in present day Timor-Leste" (p. 476). In advance of Veterans Day 2023, the Minister for National Liberation Fighter Affairs called on the Timorese people, especially the younger generation, to "honor and respect our veterans who put their lives at risk for fighting for [sic] the independence of the nation".¹ Veterans retain elevated status based on their contributions to the country's independence struggle; however their ongoing preferential treatment is creating intergenerational advantages for their descendants, at the expense of intergenerational equity across the wider population (Doraisami, 2018). For example, the government's Strategic Plan 2011-2030 promises "a system of allocation of scholarships to children of Martyrs and Combatants of the National Liberation covering all levels of education, from basic schooling to university" (República Democrática de Timor-Leste, 2011: 50).

1 [Timor-Leste's veterans deserve honor and respect - TATOLI Agência Noticiosa de Timor-Leste](#)

The definition of veteran is closely tied into national identity and is part of a narrative that valorises veterans as heroes, while little attention is paid to the ‘victims’ of the violence – for example, “Timor’s state has not built any memorials specifically for victims, as it is currently doing for veterans in all 65 subdistricts” (Rothschild, 2017, p. 451). However, the legal definition of veteran and some street-level bureaucrats’ reinterpretation of the eligibility criteria have led to an incomplete view of the resistance movement.

The period of full-time service within a resistance organisation determines the eligibility and level of benefits for veterans. As Roll (2018) explains, “only those recognised with more than seven years of exclusive

dedication are eligible for monthly payments, and only those with more than four years of exclusive dedication are eligible for a one-off payment – a high bar” (p. 268). The result is that a small minority of high-ranking, long-serving male combatants with close links to the ruling politicians are the priority for state assistance. Other groups who contributed to the independence struggle – including women and the Clandestine Front – are left out. By not recognising women’s vital roles in the independence struggle, the veterans’ scheme is missing an opportunity to improve women’s status in Timorese society (Kent and Kinsella, 2014) and, as a result, is exacerbating gender and intergenerational inequality.

EXCLUDED VOICES

Parallels can be drawn between the excluded status of women and young people in Timor-Leste, recognising that these may be overlapping categories of identity – as their voices are often not heard in decision-making. Even when these groups have formal representation within institutions, including quotas for women in the national parliament and mandated positions for youth on local councils, in practice their views are often not considered (Niner et al., 2021; ten Brinke, 2018). Conservative Catholic values combined with a culture of militarized masculinity, as well as customary laws that place elders and men in positions of power and respect, all serve to perpetuate patriarchal and hierarchical structures (Niner, 2016). Identity is extremely salient in shaping leadership opportunities in the Timorese context.

Young people in Timor-Leste face an additional disadvantage – the narrative that youth are a threat to stability and development in Timor-Leste, an idea

stemming in particular from the 2006 crisis (Distler, 2017). Youth involvement in the clandestine movement focused their agency into military means (Bexley and Tchailoro, 2013) – a perception which continues today. While a large number of Timor-Leste’s young people are members of established youth groups, including the martial arts group that were central to the street fighting, it is estimated that a minority – between 10-25% – were involved in the violence during this crisis period (Arnold, 2009). Nonetheless, these stereotypes have limited opportunities for youth to have positive influence.

According to the 2015 Population and Housing Census, approximately 74% of the population is below 35 years of age (General Directorate of Statistics, 2015), so young people are an extremely important demographic and the high level of youth unemployment remains a salient issue in the 2023 election campaign.² Despite representing the biggest group of voters in Timor-Leste, customary law

2 [Timor-Leste’s once-in-a-generation election • Inside Story](#)

defines their respective rights and duties in relation to elders who are in a position of power and respect. Ten Brinke (2018) has described Timorese youth as “citizens by waiting” (p. 892), navigating the conflicting expectations of compliance and participation, and preparing for later rather than challenging the current positions of authority that older generations protect.

The introduction of the cash transfer schemes aimed to promote stability in the wake of the 2006 crisis, but Wallis (2013) has argued that these payments may also exacerbate social divisions through competition over the ownership of Timorese national identity. By targeting certain groups, these schemes provide some citizens with access to both symbolic and financial capital while excluding others.

In addition to the veteran’s scheme, other social assistance programs include support payments for elderly and disabled people, as well as the Bolsa da Mãe for children in vulnerable households. However, these program budgets remain much lower than the veterans’ payments. For example, in 2015 the total budget for Bolsa da Mãe was USD35 million compared to the veteran’s budget of USD120 million, even though veterans are only 2.6% of the total population of Timor-Leste and Bolsa da Mãe covers 25% of the child population in the country (Lann, 2020).

There also remains a large coverage gap for the poorest households, and the poverty reduction effects of these schemes are negligible. Timor-Leste is one of three countries in the Indo-Pacific rated as ‘severely off-track’ to meet the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs),³ raising the question of whether the supply of social protection is meeting the demands and needs among citizens.

Timor-Leste is a positive outlier in the region in terms of expenditure levels on transfer payments to citizens. The country spends 6.5% of GDP on social safety nets, while the average in the East Asia and Pacific region is 1% of GDP (World Bank, 2018). However, the availability of funds is under threat in the face of the decline of the Petroleum Fund. While there are income prospects from the Greater Sunrise oil and gas fields, the implications for the Petroleum Fund are far from clear. This potential ‘fiscal cliff’ may prove to be a source of future instability. This paper contributes to understanding the perceptions of fairness in targeting and transfer amounts among citizens, aiming to provide an entry point to address the sustainability of these payments.

Timor-Leste is a positive outlier in the region in terms of expenditure levels on transfer payments to citizens

3 [Timor-Leste country brief | Australian Government Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade \(dfat.gov.au\)](#)

THE STUDY

The study uses an innovative mixed methods approach. It combines a 'lab-in-the-field' (Harrison and List, 2004) experiment to reveal allocation preferences with focus group discussions (FGDs) to gain qualitative insights into the beliefs and mechanisms underlying these preferences, as well as identifying any prospects for policy change.

Three research sites were selected to capture potential variation based on regional and geographical characteristics (See Figure 1):

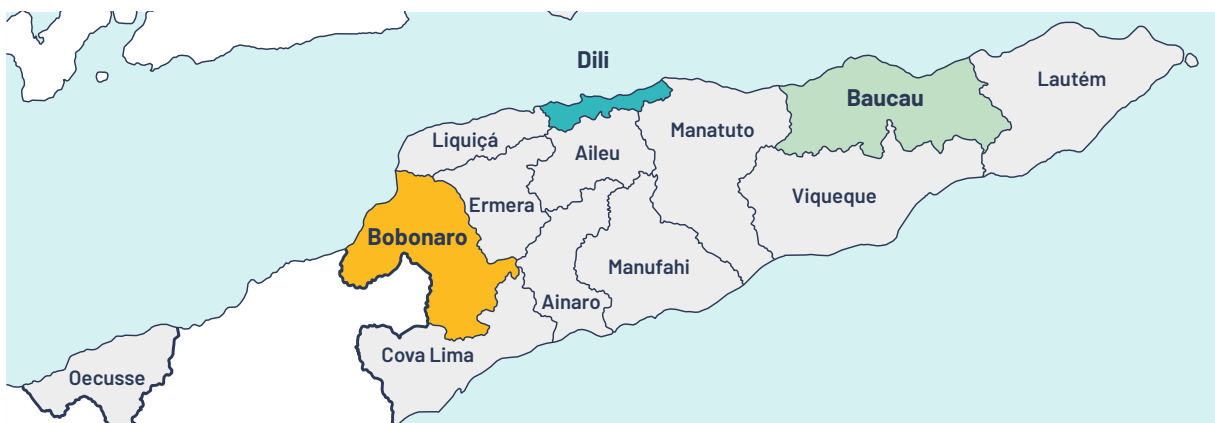
- Dili – urban, central
- Bobonaro (Maliana) – peri-urban, west
- Baucau (Laga) – rural, east

14 workshops were conducted across these three sites, with group sizes ranging from 11 to 40 participants. When a group was larger than 25, we separated them into two groups for the FGDs. While the initial plan was to limit groups sizes to a maximum of 10-15 people, this was not possible in many cases due to heavy rain

storms every afternoon. Therefore, rather than holding one workshop in the morning and one in the afternoon as planned, we conducted a single larger workshop in the morning, allowing participants to travel home safely before the rainstorms started.

A pre-test questionnaire was administered to gather demographic data, as well as participant responses to a series of values and attitudes statements (see Appendix 1). The sample size is N = 284, see Figure 1 for age distribution which ranged from 18-89 with a median age of 42.6 years. 31.9% of the sample are 30 years of age or under which is the definition of youth in Timor-Leste's National Youth Policy. 58.5% of the sample are female, while 41.5% are male. 14.5% of the sample are veterans, while 34% identify as belonging to the veteran generation – defined as any relative of a veteran, particularly their direct descendants i.e. children and grandchildren. 33% of the sample report having difficulties with seeing, hearing, communicating or mobility.

FIGURE 1: MAP OF RESEARCH SITES IN TIMOR-LESTE



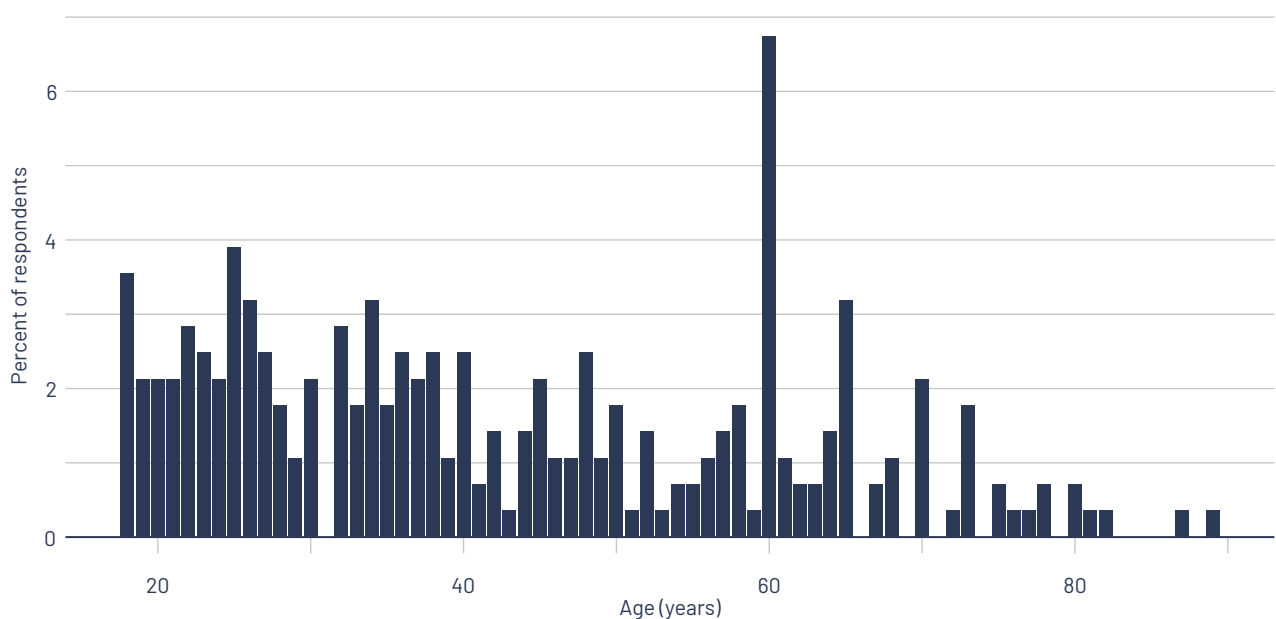
Selection of participants did not aim to be nationally representative, but rather to ensure that a variety of voices were captured. This includes men and women; older and younger age groups; veterans and non-veterans; veteran generation; and people living with disabilities. The relatively high proportion of people living with disabilities in the sample (33%) compared to the national average (6.5% according to the 2015 Population and Housing Census) is due to purposive selection. Disability was self-reported in the pre-test questionnaire rather than measured using the Washington Group questions.

The ‘lab-in-the-field’ or artefactual field experiment (Harrison and List, 2004) consisted of four allocation rounds, in which respondents were provided with different combinations of tokens representing money and asked to allocate them across a range of recipient groups (see Appendix 2). The possible recipient groups remained the same across all four rounds, but the token amounts and instructions varied for each round. This paper focuses on the results for rounds 1 and 2:

- **Round 1:** Allocate 20 tokens – each worth the same amount of USD20 each (USD400 in total) based on the amount of government assistance (if any) you think each household should receive per month, if all households have the same level of poverty.
- **Round 2:** Allocate 5 tokens worth different amounts, between USD200 and USD20 (still USD400 in total) based on the amount of government assistance (if any) you think each household should receive per month, if all households have the same level of poverty. This required respondents to prioritise more as they had fewer tokens.

Following the two allocation rounds, the same group of respondents participated in a focus group discussion that aimed to elicit qualitative responses on themes such as the fairness of the existing social assistance schemes, any changes respondents would like to see – particularly relating to target groups and transfer amounts, as well as the use of the money and whether recipients have a duty to do something in return for social assistance.

FIGURE 2: AGE DISTRIBUTION OF SAMPLE



Fieldwork: Timor-Leste (Dili, Bobonaro (Maliana), Baucau (Laga)), October–November 2022 | Sample n=282

RESEARCH FINDINGS

RIGHTS AND DUTIES

Timor-Leste's National Strategy for Social Protection 2021-2030 emphasises the role of social protection in constructing citizenship and engages with both the rights and duties of citizens.

This study found some rights-based challenges to the existing social protection system coming particularly from marginalised and excluded groups. Several respondents living with disabilities agreed that all citizens should be able to access their rights, while also highlighting that this is not currently the case:

"This program has to change... so that everyone can get their rights, because with a system like this it cannot serve all people in all of Timor, only some people have access to their rights."

(FGD 2, Dili, November 2022)

"civil society also has an important role to advocate in many ways so that all of part could get equal rights, because at the moment the government is unfair to its people."

(FGD 2, Dili, November 2022)

The status of veterans and their right to receive government assistance is clearly an embedded idea in Timorese society. Many respondents – particularly older people in rural areas – accept the prioritisation of rights for veterans and the veteran generation, although they did not fight:

"people who fight for this country have rights given to them by the government."

(FGD 6, Maliana, November 2022)

"they are fighting for independence and their children have the right to receive their father's money... so that their school and life are guaranteed."

(FGD 4, Maliana, November 2022)

"I think if the veteran is already passing away their generation has to continue receive the support because they have rights according to the law."

(FGD 3a, Laga, November 2022)

"We think that [the veteran] generation need to continue receive the support because their parents already struggle for the country, their children have to receive the money until their grandchildren and so on... the government cannot stop the support [for the veterans]"

(FGD 1a, Laga, November 2022)

Some asked whether “veterans have special and different rights from other people” (FGD 2, Dili, November 2022) a perception likely to be based on the extensive benefits veterans and their families receive from the government.

The youth discussion revealed nuanced insights into their perceptions of the veterans’ scheme. They argued that the veterans’ payment is:

“a sign of respect for [the veterans], but we have to agree that it’s not permissible for them to be [supported] in every government... The veterans get a lot of benefits... and [their children] also go to school abroad because they get special privileges... So, I don’t think it’s important that the money is invested in them, why not given to pregnant women, children and people with disabilities? Our politicians always say that these groups are also the next generation of the nation.”

(FGD 1, Dili, November 2022)

One village head complained that “our youth criticizes asking ‘why can’t the government only give subsidies to the elderly, people with disabilities, veterans and the elderly, why can’t we youth get subsidies too?’” (Interview, head of village, Maliana, November 2022). However, young people we spoke to in this study were considering the fairness for other groups rather than requesting assistance for themselves.

These responses show that there are important questions to ask about the redistribution of government funds across different groups in society and the basis of these allocations, given the focus on poverty reduction in Timor-Leste’s Social Protection Strategy. The next section goes on to explore the interaction between rights and duties in the Timor-Leste context.

© Yuichi Ishida / UNDP Climate / Flickr



‘SOMETHING IN RETURN...?’

To uncover perceptions about the relationship between rights and duties, we asked respondents a series of values and attitudes statements to find out their broader views about needs, assistance, and responsibilities, as well as asking directly about the government social assistance schemes.

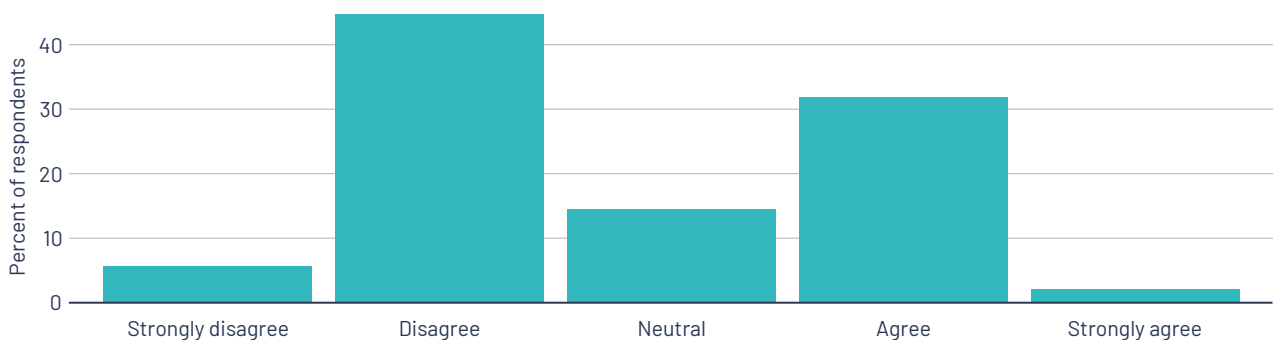
In response to the statement ‘If I do something for someone else, I want something in return’, a plurality of respondents (49%) disagree or strongly disagree, while 34.5% agree or strongly agree (Figure 2).

This finding suggests a significant level of social motivation for assisting others rather than instrumental in the sense of gaining a direct benefit. This resonates with local norms and practices of supporting others within the community and beyond if they are in need. Van Oorschot (2000) identifies reciprocity as one of the five criteria of deservingness, defined as “the degree of reciprocation by the poor; or having earned support” (p. 36). This is linked to a tendency of people to value reciprocity in social relations of giving and taking. The reciprocity norm tends to imply higher support for older people who are likely to have contributed to society during their younger years. This could also be a factor in the support for the veterans, who have already made their contributions to the country during the independence struggle.

In the FGDs, we asked ‘should people have to do something in return for receiving a government transfer?’. An expectation that recipients should use the money in certain ways emerged from the majority. For example, those receiving Bolsa da Mãe should “be responsible for the money that is given by the government to buy goods and nutritious food for children” (FGD 1, Maliana, November 2022) and “have a responsibility support our children to go the school and buy bags, shoes, books and other school supplies for them” (FGD 3, Maliana, November 2022). Although the re-designed program is unconditional, these responses suggest a de facto conditionality whereby there is an expectation that the transfer is directed towards investments in child development.

Respondents receiving the disability support payments believe “if we receive money from social assistance, we have to make some activities, not just go and lie to people, and then God can punish us” (FGD 7, Maliana, November 2022) and “my obligation is I have to help my other disabled people in the rural area” (FGD 2, Dili, November 2022). Other expectations include broader contributions to “the development of this country, especially they must show interest in and support village programs” (FGD 1, Maliana, November 2022).

FIGURE 3: RESULTS FOR STATEMENT ‘IF I DO SOMETHING FOR SOMEONE ELSE, I WANT SOMETHING IN RETURN’



Fieldwork: Timor-Leste (Dili, Bobonaro (Maliana), Baucau (Laga)), October–November 2022 | Sample n=282

The youth group – who for the most part is not eligible to receive government transfers – had similar views about the use of the money to those in rural communities who are more likely to have direct experience with receiving social assistance:

“Here it is given to pregnant women and their duties to look after their fetuses or those who already have children to buy nutritious food for their children so that they can have good health and also for people with disabilities to manage the money for their health needs and the things they need.”

(FGD 1, Dili, 22 November 2022)

On the other hand, veterans’ contributions are understood to have been made in the past, during the independence struggle, so their right to assistance tends to be unquestioned:

“Do not ask what the veterans should do for the country after they get their rights, their contribution they have already done in the past until we got our independence, we receive it because this is our right.”

(FGD 1a, Laga, November 2022)

—
Contribution to society is perceived as social and collective, rather than narrowly economic

Veterans are not necessarily expected to ‘do something in return’ for their payments, as they have already done their part. In one of the focus group discussions there was a critique of some veterans *“who only hinder the progress of our country’s development”* (FGD 3, Maliana, November 2022) and calls for veterans to *“invest their money in business rather than spending it on cars and motorbikes”* (Ibid.) However, this was not a common finding across the focus group discussions so can therefore not be generalised in this study.

These findings contribute to our understanding of the interactions between rights and duties in the context of social protection in Timor-Leste. In a general sense, the willingness to help others without expecting anything in return suggests a strong social motivation for providing assistance in Timorese society.

Contribution to society is perceived as social and collective, rather than narrowly economic, with obligations and responsibilities focused on investing in children, supporting people living with disabilities and contributing to the development of the country. People consider veterans to have made their contributions to the country in the past during the independence struggle, while the recipients of the other social assistance schemes are expected to contribute to the future of the country.

THE DESERVING POOR?

Another of van Oorschot's (2000) five criteria of deservingness is control, defined as "people's control over their neediness, or their responsibility for it" (p. 36). This criterion tends to be closely associated with work and ability to work, as a means of determining whether people can be held responsible (and in some cases blamed) for their poverty or need. In van Oorschot's study, the public in the Netherlands is very generous towards those who are not able to work (this group has an average of 7.6 on the 1 to 10 scale), and very reserved towards those who are not willing to work (an average score of only 2.3).

We included the following statement in the pre-questionnaire to explore attitudes about the relationship between work and social assistance: 'If people can work, then they do not need to be helped'. 61.6% of the sample agree or strongly agree with this statement, while one fifth of the sample (20.2%) either disagree or strongly disagree (Figure 3).

In the Timorese context the relationship between social assistance and work is quite nuanced, and we explored this further in the FGDs. The percentage of respondents disagreeing with the statement suggests there is a level of recognition that a household

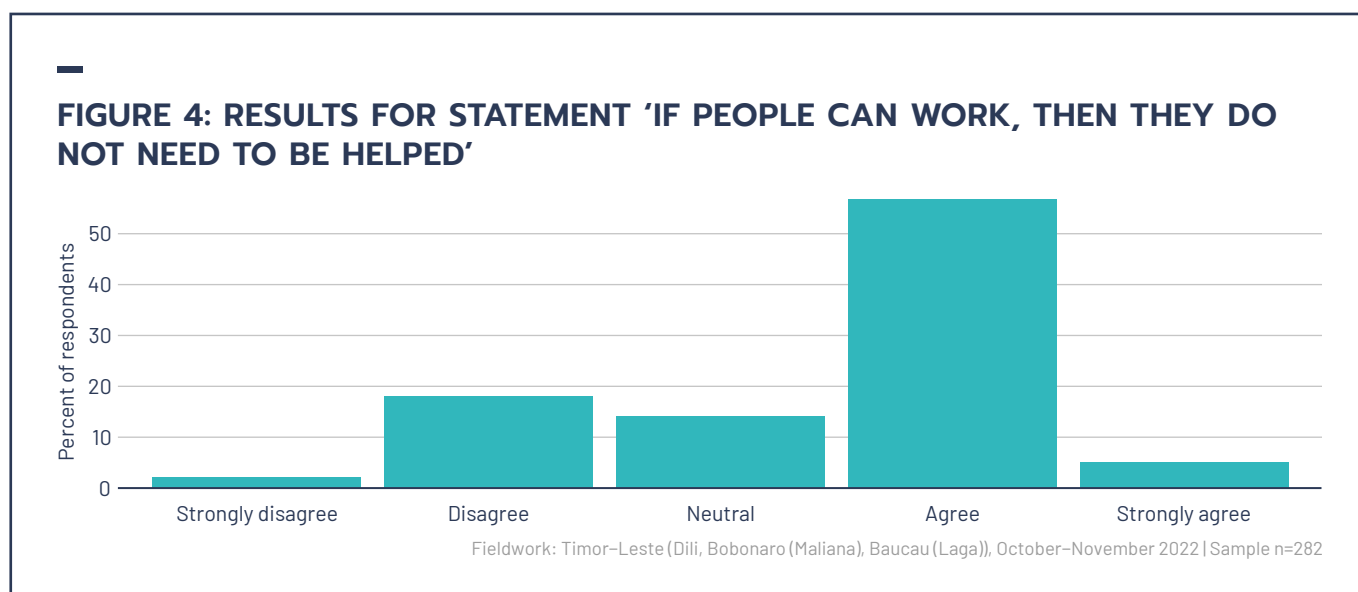
can still be in need even if some members can work, especially if there is a high number of dependents in the household.

Views on whether a universal approach to programs, such as Bolsa da Mãe, is fair are particularly insightful. Some felt that assistance should be given regardless of status: "we think that's fair because those rights don't belong to the village head's wife or not but pregnant women and if she's pregnant it means she has rights to receive it" (FGD 2, Maliana, November 2022), while others argued that "we have to identify the person or family who is less fortunate, not just give it in general" (FGD 1, Maliana, November 2022).

Many respondents mentioned a salary benchmark of USD500 as the cut off point for receiving assistance or not, for example:

"people whose salary is more than USD500 cannot get this subsidy and in contrast to people whose salary are below USD500 or have no job, you can say that unemployed they totally have the right to get it."

(FGD 3, Maliana, November 2022)



This benchmark is likely to be based on the criteria used during Covid-19 for the Uma Kain household payment of USD200, which all households earning USD500 or less received.⁴ This policy was not mentioned as part of our study, but it clearly had an ongoing influence – suggesting that policy design can shape perceptions among a population. However, the youth group challenged this benchmark, arguing that:

“If we look at people based on the salary table the treatment is unfair because they are also citizens, the matter of a USD500 salary is not their will but their level of education that makes them get that salary”, recognising that a salary of USD500 per month may not be enough for a large family and asking whether people who do not accept the government assistance are citizens of this country?”

(FGD 1, Dili, November 2022)

The participants in this youth group discussion in Dili asserted that citizens should have equal access to government funds on the basis of their citizenship, rather than their income.

The recognition that people can be working and still be poor suggests that in Timor-Leste ability to work is not the main determinant of deservingness, although income level does play a role. This differs from other country contexts where those who are able to work are considered to be the ‘undeserving poor’ and are either not eligible for government social assistance schemes, for example in Zambia, or receive conditional transfers with sanctions applied, like in the Philippines (van Oorschot, 2000; Pruce, 2022; Kidd et al., 2020).



4 [Government initiates payment of monetary support to households in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic « Government of Timor-Leste](#)

ALLOCATION PREFERENCES

Based on the allocation exercise conducted with 14 communities across Bobonaro, Baucau and Dili, the allocation preferences of respondents generally align closely with Timor-Leste’s existing social assistance schemes. Respondents allocated the highest amounts to single pregnant women, single people with disabilities and elders across rounds 1 and 2 (see Figure 4). Respondents’ allocation amounts are similar to or higher than the actual amounts they receive through respective government programs.

This indicates broad support among respondents for the government’s approach to

social protection, up to a point. The exception is the veteran categories (single veteran, veteran with family and family of deceased veteran) which received much lower allocations than the actual scheme across the three research sites, although we need to treat this finding with caution for several reasons.

These allocations could indicate a revealed preference among respondents that they consider veterans to be less deserving or in need of government assistance compared to the other household categories. However, the qualitative data from the focus group discussions illustrates the complexity of the veteran question.

FIGURE 5: EXPERIMENTAL RESULTS FOR ALLOCATION PREFERENCES, ROUNDS 1 & 2



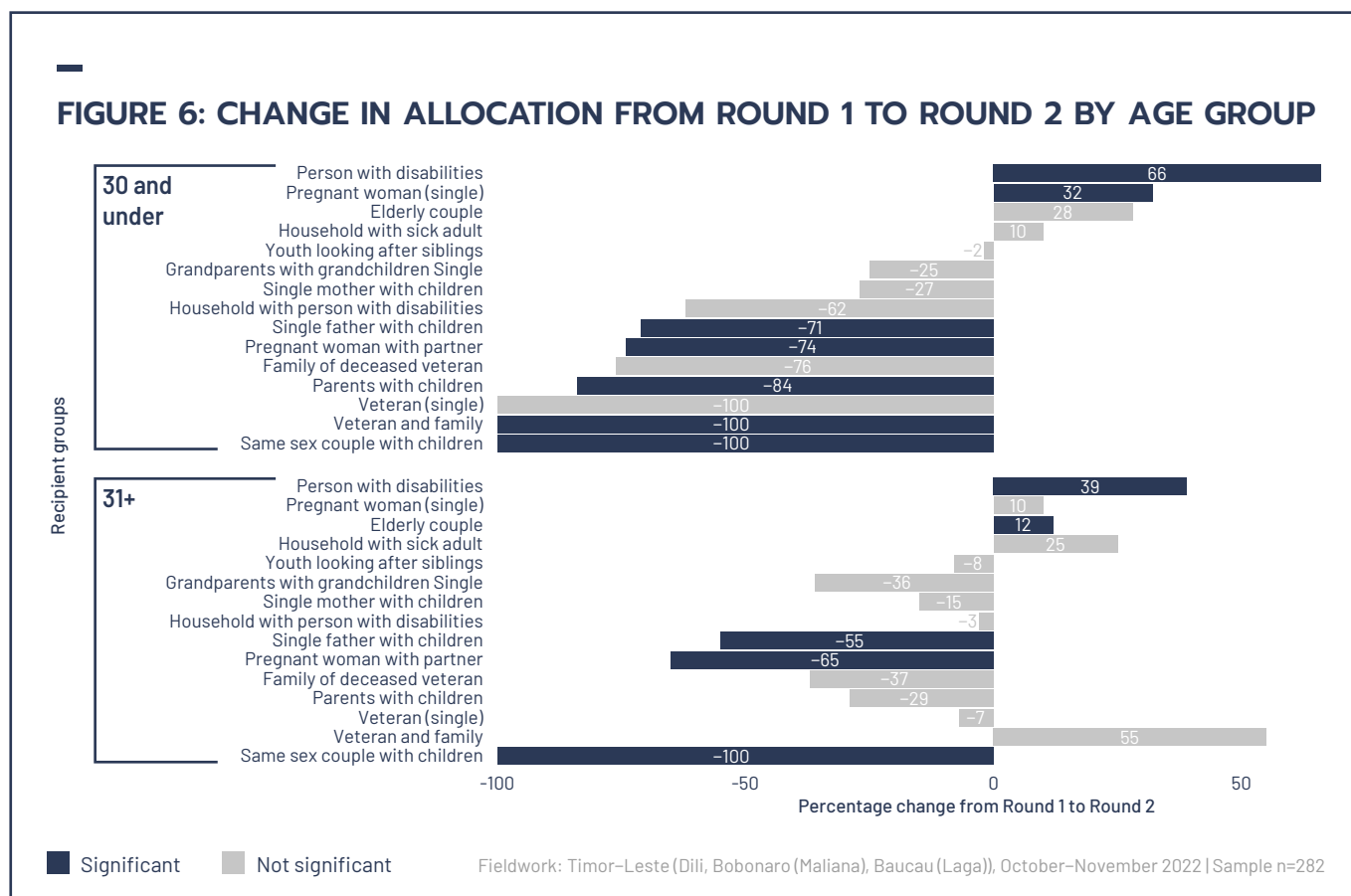
Several participants explained that they had not allocated tokens to the veterans because they receive money every month (FGD 2, Maliana, November 2022; FGD 3, Maliana, November 2022), although we explained clearly in the experiment framing that none of the households were receiving government support and they all had the same level of poverty. Another respondent explained that *“even though they don’t receive money, I think they are still strong and have many connections with many people and one day they will receive money too”* (FGD 5, Maliana, November 2022). These responses demonstrate the deeply embedded idea of veterans’ payment and an underlying assumption that veterans will receive support – either from the government or through their own networks.

When we compare the change in allocation from Round 1 to Round 2, where participants had less flexibility in allocating their money so had to prioritise more, interesting findings emerge. In Round 1 respondents were given 20 tokens worth USD20 each (USD400 in total) to allocate across 15 different household categories (see

Appendix 2). In Round 2 respondents were given the same total of USD400 to allocate but this time divided into 5 tokens worth different amounts (USD200, USD100, USD50, USD30, USD20). This required respondents to prioritise more as they had fewer tokens.

In Round 2, young people (aged 30 and under) gave significantly less to the veteran categories (between 76–100% less), particularly the veteran with family group (Figure 5). This is very different to people over 30 – who actually increased payments to families with a veteran.

This finding suggests that youth are more resistant to the idea of veterans’ payments, including the intergenerational aspect whereby the children of veterans continue to receive the payments. The youth participants also mentioned that it *“doesn’t motivate young people at the academic level”* (FGD 1, Dili, November 2022) to see veterans and their children receiving high monthly payments. Youth voices may provide an opportunity to revisit this embedded idea, particularly as the generational dynamic continues to shift.



FAIRNESS AND EQUITY

In addition to the challenges from youth and people with disabilities, there is also discontent among some veterans who do not think the veterans' scheme is fair. Particularly in rural areas, some veterans are still awaiting registration validation and have not yet received payments. A respondent in Laga described how she *"thought that every veteran is already getting their right to receive the money but unfortunately there are a lot of veterans that do not access to this program"* (FGD 3a, Laga, November 2022), while a veteran in Maliana told us that *"it's unfair, because we only receive medals and don't receive the money"* (FGD 4, Maliana, November 2022).

The differential benefits based on length of service also create tensions between veterans, with some veterans feeling excluded: *"For the veterans it is also not fair because people with [a shorter length of service] only get the support or the money from the Government once but veterans with [longer service] they get the money every month"* (FGD 3b, Laga, November 2022). The veterans themselves could be a potential source of challenge to the current allocation of funds.

Older male and female respondents in rural districts highlighted that the discrepancy between the transfer amounts for the different groups is unfair:

"For me the payment for this program is unfair because the elderly people get USD50, Bolsa da Mãe USD5⁵, for me government has to make every program the same and fair, every program has to be the same in amount."

(FGD 4b, Laga, November 2022)

"We think it's unfair because veterans have an increased salary and the elderly as well as Bolsa da Mãe have a low salary and it's not enough to meet family needs"

(FGD 1b, Laga, November 2022)

"We think that the budget for Elderly and Bolsa da Mãe we need to increase but for the veterans who already get highest payment have to decrease"

(FGD 2a, Laga, November 2022)

This combination of findings indicates that there are questions being raised about the veterans' pension, among older people in rural areas as well as among younger people. The recognition of veterans' contributions to the country in the past suggests that veterans are widely considered deserving of assistance, however there are equity concerns regarding the relative amounts allocated to the different groups. While the government increased the amount for Bolsa da Mãe and the allowance for the elderly and people with disabilities in 2022, the amounts are still perceived to be too low – particularly in comparison to the veterans' payments.

5 USD5 per child per month was the original amount for Bolsa da Mãe, this has been increased to USD20 per child per month under Bolsa da Mãe-Jerasaun Foun but the revised program has not yet been rolled out to all municipalities

WHERE COULD CHANGE COME FROM?

Providing financial support for veterans continues to be a powerful and legitimate idea in Timorese society. This is based on people's honour and respect for the veterans, as well as the belief that veterans have already earned this support and therefore their rights cannot be challenged. However, the responses emerging from this study – particularly from young people – suggests that this idea may be loosening its hold among citizens, providing a potential opportunity to shift the debate. Nonetheless, any policy changes will need to be framed in alignment with existing values and moral criteria, rather than challenging them completely.

Challenges from excluded groups could provide a space for contestation and an entry point for debate, particularly as some veterans are feeling excluded due to both the design and implementation of the current veterans' scheme. The differential treatment of different 'categories' of veteran is highlighted in existing literature (e.g. Kent and Wallis, 2014), and borne out by the findings from this study. Women are targeted as mothers, overlooking their role in the independence struggle and subsequent peace-building and leading to a gendered social welfare system (Niner, 2016). If maintaining peace and stability is a core aim of the veterans' payment and other social assistance schemes, then it is vital to take citizen concerns seriously.

The findings from this study also indicate that young people have some differing views from older people. This difference could be a potential source of change. Young people are certainly a key demographic in Timor-Leste – in Timor-Leste's recent parliamentary election more than 60% of the voters were young people aged 30 and under. The sidelining of young people in society has so far been a barrier to participation, particularly as many have decided to 'wait until their time comes' (ten Brinke, 2018) for leadership. However, commentators are suggesting that a generational transition in political leadership is likely to occur within the current five-year parliamentary term.⁶ This may provide scope for youth voices to gain greater political salience in the near future.

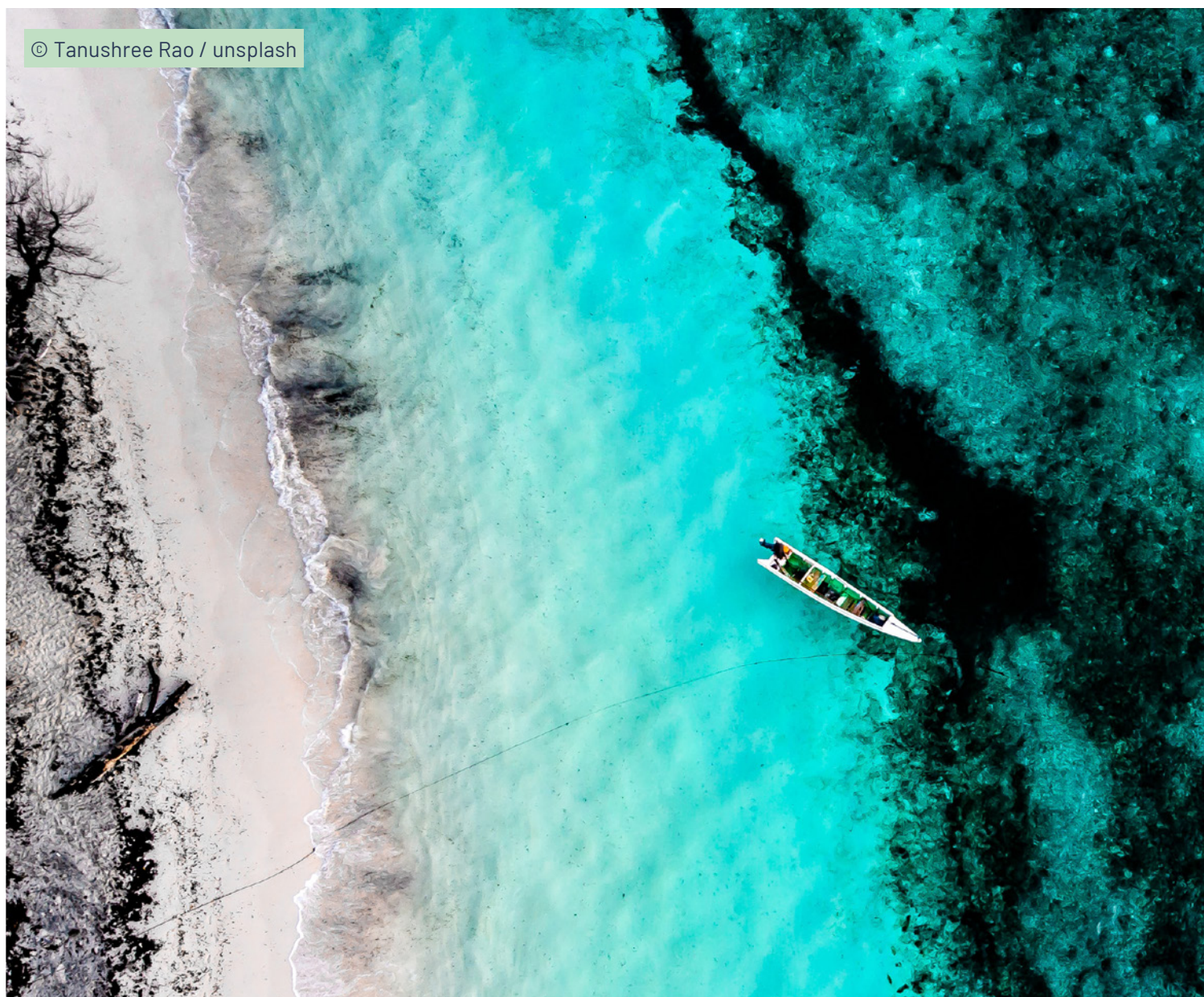
Any policy changes will need to be framed in alignment with existing values and moral criteria, rather than challenging them completely

⁶ <https://insidestory.org.au/xanana-triumph/>

The perceptions of fairness and equity identified in this study could provide a basis for the re-framing of redistribution, opening up discussions about allocations. Respondents' allocation preferences broadly align with the existing government schemes, but there is divergence in what is considered a fair allocation amount for different groups. Veterans receive high payments on a regular basis compared to the other schemes, which cannot cover all the household needs, especially for children. Adjustments to the amounts could be framed as a fairer distribution across all groups in society, with an emphasis on more citizens gaining rather

than others losing out. While this does not remove the potential risk to political stability of reducing the veterans' payments, it does draw attention to the trade-offs involved in redistributive decisions.

The need to re-think the current approach to the veterans' scheme is even more urgent in the face of declining fiscal reserves, which will necessitate adjustments to government spending in the short to medium term. If the Petroleum Fund dries up then payments might stop suddenly, creating more problems than if there is a managed shift that is communicated clearly in advance.



© Tanushree Rao / unsplash

IMPLICATIONS

This paper raises four key issues of relevance to Timor-Leste's social assistance schemes, indicating potential shifts in social norms that may provide entry points for change in the country's political context.

- **Citizen motivations underpinning support for the provision of assistance appear to be social rather than instrumental**, with a plurality of respondents disagreeing or strongly disagreeing that they would want something in return for helping others. In relation to government assistance, there is an expectation that recipients make some kind of contribution to society thereby connecting rights to duties. There is a focus on social and collective contributions to the development of the country – either investing in their children for the future, or in the case of the veterans contributing to the country's independence in the past – rather than narrow economic contributions.
- **Ability to work is not the main determinant of deservingness**, although income level plays a role. There is a nuanced understanding of this relationship, with some respondents recognising that people can work and still be poor. USD500 per month is widely considered to be the income threshold above which someone does not need government assistance, but some of the younger respondents contested this arguing that if someone has a high number of dependents then even this amount may not be enough to meet all their needs.
- **Respondents' allocation preferences align closely with Timor-Leste's existing social assistance schemes**, with a focus on single pregnant women, people with disabilities and the elderly to some extent. However, respondents allocated less to the veteran categories than the actual amounts they currently receive from the government. **Young people in particular (aged 30 and under) gave significantly less to the veteran categories than people aged over 30** when required to prioritise, suggesting some space opening up for discussions about the veterans' scheme in the (near) future.
- **Equity concerns have been raised among veterans and non-veterans. Some veterans themselves think the veterans' scheme is unfair** – either due to the different levels of benefits based on service or not yet being registered, despite being eligible. Other respondents highlight that the differences in amounts between different social assistance schemes is unfair. This provides scope to question the existing allocation – not by rejecting the veterans' scheme altogether, but by exploring how the social protection budget could be allocated more equally across the eligible groups.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR DIALOGUE AND CONTESTATION

Based on these findings, the paper proposes three potential opportunities for dialogue and contestation that could open up debates around embedded policy ideas based on perceptions of rights, duties and contributions to society that are social rather than (purely) economic:

1. **Youth voices:** the findings suggest that youth are more resistant to the unquestioned allocation of assistance to veterans and veteran generation, which may provide opportunities to revisit embedded ideas.
2. **Challenges from excluded groups:** some respondents, particularly people living with disabilities, argue that that all citizens have rights but not all are able to access these rights equally. There are also excluded veterans who think the current system is unfair.
3. **Re-framing of redistribution based on perceptions of fairness and equity:** there are clear messages that it is unfair for the veterans to receive such high payments on a regular basis, while the amounts allocated to the other schemes are not enough to cover a household's needs, providing scope to re-consider the existing allocations.



REFERENCES

Arnold, M. B. (2009). 'Who is My Friend, Who is My Enemy'? Youth and Statebuilding in Timor-Leste. *International Peacekeeping*, 16(3), 379–392. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13533310903036426>

Bexley, A. and Tchailoro, N. R., (2013). 'Consuming Youth: Timorese in the Resistance against Indonesian occupation', *The Asia-Pacific Journal of Anthropology* 14(5), 405–422

Burchi, F., Loewe, M., Malerba, D., and Leininger, J. (2021). 'Disentangling the relationship between social protection and social cohesion: introduction to the special issue', *European Journal of Development Research* 2022, 1-21.

Carpenter, S., Slater, R. and Mallet, R. (2012). *Social Protection and Basic Services in Fragile and Conflict-Affected Situations*. London: Secure Livelihoods Research Programme, Overseas Development Institute.

Christalis, I. and Scott, C. (2005). *Independent Women: The story of women's activism in East Timor*, The Catholic Institute for International Relations: London.

Dale, P., Lepuschuetz, L., & Umapathi, N. (2014). Peace, Prosperity and Safety Nets in Timor-Leste: Competing Priorities or Complementary Investments? *Asia & the Pacific Policy Studies*, 1(2), 287–296. <https://doi.org/10.1002/APP5.25>

Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (2021). *National Strategy for Social Protection 2021–2030*, Dili.

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (2015). *Strategy for Australia's aid investments in social protection*. www.itsanhonour.gov.au/coat-arms/index.cfm

Distler, W. (2017). Dangerised youth: the politics of security and development in Timor-Leste. *Third World Quarterly*, 40(4), 727–742. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01436597.2017.1401924>

Doraisami, A. (2018). The Timor Leste Petroleum Fund, veterans and white elephants: Fostering intergenerational equity? *Resources Policy*, 58, 250–256. <https://doi.org/10.1016/J.RESOURPOL.2018.05.013>

General Directorate of Statistics (2015), '2015 Population and Housing Census. DGE: Dili, Timor-Leste.

Harrison, G.W. and List, J.A. (2004). 'Field experiments'. *Journal of Economic Literature* 42(4): 1009– 1055.

Idris, I. (2017). *Conflict-sensitive cash transfers: social cohesion*. GSDRC Helpdesk Report, University of Birmingham.

Kent, L., & Kinsella, N. (2014). A Luta Continua (The Struggle Continues). *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 17(3), 473–494. <https://doi.org/10.1080/14616742.2014.913383>

Kidd S., Nycander, G.A., Tran, A. and Cretney, M. (2020). 'The social contract and the role of universal social security in building trust in government', Act Church of Sweden and Development Pathways: Uppsala, Sidcup and Nairobi.

Lann, T. (2020). Os benefícios da implementação ágil nas intervenções de desenvolvimento da proteção social: uma análise comparativa de implementações de sistemas de informações sobre proteção social no Timor-Leste, Bahamas e Indonésia. *Policy Research Brief*. <https://ideas.repec.org/p/ipc/pbport/66.html>

McLoughlin, C. (2015a). 'When Does Service Delivery Improve the Legitimacy of a Fragile or Conflict-Affected State?', *Governance*, 28(3): 341–356.

McLoughlin, C. (2015b). *Researching state legitimacy: A political approach to a political problem*. DLP Research Paper No. 36, Developmental Leadership Program: Birmingham.

Migdal, J. (2001). *State in Society: Studying how States and Societies Transform and Constitute One Another*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Niner, S. (2016). 'Effects and affects: women in the post-conflict moment in Timor-Leste: an application of V. Spike Peterson's 'Gendering Insecurities, Informalization and War', in Harcourt, W. (ed.). *The Palgrave Handbook of Gender and Development*, Palgrave MacMillan: London, New York and Shanghai.

Niner, S., Cummins, D., Sahin, S., Mulder, S., and Morrison, E. (2021). 'Women's political participation in post-conflict settings: the case of Timor-Leste', *Asian Studies Review*, 46(2), 293–311.

Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). (2011). *Supporting State-Building in Situations of Conflict and Fragility: Policy Guidance*. OECD: Paris

Pruce, K. (2022). 'The politics of who gets what and why: learning from the targeting of cash transfers', *The European Journal of Development Research*. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41287-022-00540-2>

República Democrática de Timor-Leste (2011). Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan 2011–2030. Dili.

Roll, K. (2018). 'Street Level Bureaucrats and Post-conflict Policy-making: Corruption, Correctives, and the Rise of Veterans' Pensions in Timor-Leste', *Civil Wars*, 20:2,262–285,

Rothschild, A. (2017). Victims versus Veterans: Agency, Resistance and Legacies of Timor-Leste's Truth Commission. *International Journal of Transitional Justice*, 11, 443–462. <https://doi.org/10.1093/ijtj/ijx018>

ten Brinke, S. (2018). Citizens by waiting: Timorese young adults between state politics and customary authority. *Citizenship Studies*, 22(8), 882–896. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13621025.2018.1538318>

Van Oorschot, W. (2000). 'Who should get what, and why? On deservingness criteria and the conditionality of solidarity among the public', *Policy & Politics*, 28(1), 33–48.

Wallis, J. (2013). Victors, Villains and Victims: Capitalizing on Memory in Timor-Leste. *Ethnopolitics*, 12(2), 133–160.

World Bank (2018). *The State of Social Safety Nets 2018*. Washington, DC: World Bank. doi:10.1596/978-1-4648-1254-5. License: Creative Commons Attribution CC BY 3.0 IGO

World Bank (2022). *Timor-Leste Economic Report Honoring the Past, Securing the Future*.

APPENDIX 1: PRE-TEST QUESTIONNAIRE

Please respond to the questions below. If the question has boxes, please tick the answer that is most relevant for you. For the other questions, please write your response in the space provided. If you do not feel comfortable answering any of the questions you can tick 'prefer not to say' or leave it blank.

1. Age: _____
2. Gender: Male Female Other Prefer not to say
3. Marital status: Married Separated Divorced Single Prefer not to say
4. Number of generations living in your household: _____
5. Head of household: _____
6. Number of your own children (if any):

7. Number of other dependents, for example children of relatives,
family members with disabilities or no income (if any): _____
8. Educational level: No schooling Primary Secondary Polytechnic/ diploma
University Prefer not to say
9. Occupation: _____
10. Are you a veteran? Yes No Prefer not to say

11. Are you a veteran generation? Yes No Prefer not to say

12. Do you receive a retirement pension from government? Yes No Prefer not to say

13. Do you have difficulties in the following: Seeing Hearing Communication
Mobility None Prefer not to say

14. Please select the response that most closely aligns to your view for the following statements:

a. Everyone should take care of themselves

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

b. If people can work, then they do not need to be helped

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

c. People should help their neighbours if they are in need

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

d. Government has a responsibility to citizens if they are in need

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

e. Mostly I put my own needs first, instead of the needs of others

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

f. I like to help others, if they are in need

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

g. If I do something for someone else, I want something in return

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

15. Please select the response that most closely aligns to your view for the following statements:

a. Satisfaction with current municipality leadership

Very low Low Neutral High Very high

b. Trust in current municipality leadership

Very low Low Neutral High Very high

c. Satisfaction with current national leadership

Very low Low Neutral High Very high

d. Trust in current national leadership

Very low Low Neutral High Very high

16. Please select the response that most closely aligns to your view for the following statements:

a. The government makes fair decision

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

b. Government decisions usually serve my interests

Strongly disagree Disagree Neutral Agree Strongly agree

17. If there was an election tomorrow, which party would you vote for?

Write your answer here _____ Don't know Prefer not to say

Thank you!

APPENDIX 2: FIELD EXPERIMENT INSTRUMENT

Round

ID Number:

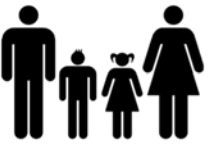





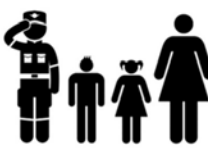








<p>Parents with children</p> 	<p>Single father with children</p> 	<p>Single mother with children</p> 	<p>Pregnant woman (single)</p> 	<p>Elderly couple</p> 
<p>Pregnant woman with partner</p> 	<p>Veteran and family</p> 	<p>Veteran (single)</p> 	<p>Household with person with disabilities</p> 	<p>Person with disabilities</p> 
<p>Same sex couple with children</p> 	<p>Grandparents with grandchildren</p> 	<p>Family of deceased veteran</p> 	<p>Household with sick adult</p> 	<p>Youth looking after siblings</p> 

Image credits: Freepik; Gan Khoon Lay; Studio Het Mes; Amandine Vandesteene; Adrien Coquet



The **Developmental Leadership Program** (DLP) is an international research collaboration supported by the Australian Government.

DLP investigates the crucial role that leaders, networks and coalitions play in achieving development outcomes.

dlprog.org

dlp@contacts.bham.ac.uk

@DLProg

Developmental Leadership Program
International Development Department
College of Social Sciences
University of Birmingham
Birmingham, B15 2TT
United Kingdom

Design | squarebeasts.net



This publication has been funded by the Australian Government through the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. The views expressed in this publication are the authors' alone and are not necessarily the views of the Australian Government, the Developmental Leadership Program or partner organisations.

