



## Between Borders of Indonesia-East Timor: Social, Economic, and Security Dynamics during the Covid-19 Pandemic

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### ABSTRACT

Western border area between Indonesia and East Timor has become an important point of interaction between traditional communities who refer themselves as *Timorese*. These communities have long shared similar cultures, languages, and economic activities, thus strengthening their kinship along the border. However, the emergence of the Coronavirus (Covid-19) pandemic in 2020-2023 poses a real threat to border security of Indonesia and East Timor, particularly the traditional communities. This article aims to analyze the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic at Indonesia-East Timor's border from a social, economic, and security perspective. Border security and sociological liberalism theory emphasizing identity will be used as frameworks to assess the dynamics. This article used descriptive qualitative methods through mostly secondary data but was supported by primary data as well. This study reveals three critical findings. Firstly, despite the closure of the borders due to the pandemic, traditional communities are still permitted to visit relatives in the neighboring country for cultural purposes only. Secondly, unemployment became a primary issue for border communities during the pandemic. Thirdly, illegal smuggling and illegal border crossers added to the complexity of security dynamics during the pandemic period.

### KEYWORDS

Border security; Covid-19; Indonesia; Timor-Leste

## INTRODUCTION

After Timor-Leste gained its independence in 2002, it was no longer the province of *Timor Timur* in Indonesia, but a sovereign state bordering Indonesia. Although the traditional peoples are politically separated by the borderline, they still share the same culture and connect through traditional practices for economic and cultural purposes. Geographically, borderland between Indonesia and the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste is located at the Western part of East Nusa Tenggara for approximately 268,8 kilometers covering Kupang, Timor Tengah Utara, and Belu Regencies ([Kementerian Pertahanan, 2012](#)). There are four border post established in the border area of Indonesia-Timor-Leste: Mota'ain Border Post, Motamasin Border Post, Wini Border Post, and Napan Border Post. This research has a particular focus on the traditional communities who resides in the western border area which separated through Mota'ain border post in Belu Regency, Province of East Nusa Tenggara with East Timorese from Bobonaro district.

Collective ties between these traditional peoples could be seen from social interaction of locals who reside near Mota'ain border post area, especially Silawan and Atambua areas. It is believed that they came from the same ancestor and tighten through Tetun language which spread along the West timor to Timor-Leste; thus, they often visit each other to conduct such interaction ([Rachmawati & Fauzan, 2017](#)). Historically, the border between Indonesia and Timor-Leste is a product of colonial separation between Dutch and Portuguese in the island of Timor during the post-World War II decolonization. Portuguese claimed the East Timor territory in 1701 while Dutch had asserted control of Kupang in West Timor in 1653. In 1859, Netherlands and Portugal established colonial boundary treaty aimed to settling border conflicts. The result of this treaty is the separation of areas claimed by each party but left enclaves, including Portuguese Oecussi in West Timor and Maucatar in Timor-Leste. Fifty-five years later, in 1914, this border dispute then solved by the Permanent Court of Arbitration with final settlement in 1916 separated Portuguese (East) Timor from West Timor under international law ([Strating, 2014](#)).

Due to Portuguese occupation in Timor-Leste, locals begin to conduct series of operation to take over Timor-Leste from colonial. The fall of Estado Novo (new state) regime in Portugal on April 25, 1974, influence the separation of Portugal's colonial including Africa and East Timor ([Oliveira, 2017](#)). Francisco Xavier Do Amaral responded this regime fall by establishing Political party ASDT (Asosiasi Sosial Demokrat Timor) which later re-named as Fretilin with a mission to liberate Portuguese from colonialism. Fretilin succeeded in controlling most of the strategic positions in Timor-Leste. However, their rivals Uni Democrat Timur (UDT) and Popular Democratic Association of Timor (APODETI) advocate the integration of Timor-Leste into Indonesia. With this ideological difference and purposes, it leads to civil war between Falintil (military of Fretilin) versus UDT in 1975. At the same time, Portugal governor in Timor-Leste withdrew its troops from Timor-Leste in 1975. Filling this opportunity, Xavier do Amoral, Timor-Leste freedom fighter, declared the

independence of Timor-Leste in 1975 with Nicolau dose Reis Lobato as the vice president. Just two days after the declaration from Fretilin, UDT, KOTA, and APODETI also declared their integration to Indonesia. This historical event was known as *Balibo declaration*. For Indonesia, this declaration provides a legitimation for new order government to invade the Timor-Leste through Seroja Operation to take over Timor-Leste from the communist ideology ([Lawless, 1976](#)). This invasion resulted to the death of 100.000 peoples, including those who resides in the border area ([Robinson, 2011](#)).

In 1976, East Timor became the 27<sup>th</sup> Province in Indonesia. Over the next 23 years, Timor-Timur Province became a heavily militarized region which resulted to several tragedies that leads to their independence. One of the worst tragedies is Santa Cruz massacre in November 1991. Around 3000 persons unfurled pro-independence banners with Xanana Gusmao's image with messages such as 'Indonesia, Why You Shoot Our Church?' and 'Independent Is What We Inspire'. Responding to this crowd, without warning, the troops opened fire on the crowd and drove them to the walled cemetery. The troops began shooting to the crowd resulted in 271 deaths, 382 wounded, and 250 were missing afterwards ([Braithwaite et al., 2012](#)). This tragedy became a turning point in the Timorese struggle for independence. All of the struggle for independence meets its desire after the fall of Soeharto's regime. Soon after Habibie took power replacing Soeharto, his administration was forced to consider Timor-Leste's independence.

Habibie engaged in series of meetings with Portugal on the future of East Timor. Eventually, negotiations between Indonesia and Portugal resulted in Agreement dated 5 May 1999 which stated a different view of both Indonesia and Portugal on East Timor's and most importantly, both agreed to further the peace process of East Timor to the United Nations. The UN Specific Task Force UNAMET (United Nations Mission in East Timor) responsible for conducting voting for East Timorese. From total 200 registrations centers in East Timor, 78 percent of East Timor voters reject autonomy and opting for independence ([Smith, 1999](#)). Nonetheless, during the voting process, series of intimidation were reported in the border area, especially in the Western Border Districts. One of that is the Bobonaro district of East Timor near Atambua. This district was rated as the district with the highest political violence incidents during the UNAMET-Run popular consultation. The Indonesian National Army (TNI) and Indonesian Police (Polri) including East Timorese became responsible for all the intimidation and violence in this border district ([Bartu, 2000](#)). In contrast, the Eastern district such as Oecussi were relatively calm from insecurity ([Robinson, 2001](#)).

After all this administrative process that overshadowed with security issue, Timor-Leste finally obtained its independence in May 2002. This independence, however, has another consequence on social issue between East Timor and West Timor (now East Nusa Tenggara of Indonesia). More than a quarter million people left the East Timor after the 1999 tragedy. Many of them were forced out by the authority's Indonesian security and militia.

They lived in the concentration camps in Belu Regency and Kupang ([International Crisis Group, 2011](#)). Some of them decided to be repatriated back to Timor-Leste and the others remain in East Nusa Tenggara Province up until now.

Despite of this upheaval, locals at the border of Indonesia and Timor-Leste, especially those who resides in the Western border districts keep maintaining their kinship and cultural affairs. Traditional practices and customs or known as *adat* are still practiced among the locals. For instance, the practice of *Kore Metan* or the removal of black clothes/sarong that had been worn for twelve months as a sign of mourning ([Uskono et al., 2023](#)). However, the emergence of Covid-19 pandemic poses a new challenge to this traditional community. Three main aspects impacted by the pandemic are social and economic, security relations which caused dynamics between traditional communities. In early 2020, both governments decided to close the border post to avoid the widespread of Covid-19 virus. Border posts of Timor-Leste were closed on April 13<sup>th</sup>, 2020. Three days after, the Indonesian government also closed its border post to prevent the spread of Covid-19 pandemic but still providing limited access for traditional communities at the border area ([Bere & Belarminus, 2020](#)). Due to this closure, it has a significant impact on the livelihoods of traditional peoples in the border area. They are unable to meet their relatives in the neighboring village and to practice cultural tradition.



Figure 1. Border of Indonesia and Timor-Leste separated through small bridge according to flag's color (Indonesia: Red and White; Timor-Leste: Red, Yellow, and Black). *Source:* taken by the authors (2022)



Previous studies regarding the Indonesia – Timor-Leste border mostly focused on security approaches, economic development, local communities, and food security. [Kennedy et al. \(2022\)](#) explained the role of the TNI in community empowerment program aside from their task on providing security. The TNI through Korem 161 in Belu regency conducted program which focuses on education, health, and entrepreneurship. [Kamsi & Julianto \(2022\)](#) assessed the existence of ex-refugees of Timor-Leste in Indonesia's border area in East Nusa Tenggara. The result shows that on a scale of 1 to 6, most of participants are in the second or third levels of happiness. Several main factors determine happiness include economic condition, appreciation and recognition from government, family, security, and access to education.

[Paulus et al. \(2020\)](#) assessed how sustainable development goals on inclusive and sustainable economic growth could be realized through implementing Local Economic Development (LED) strategy in the border area of Indonesia – Timor-Leste. However, LED then must be supported with technological innovation, cooperative institutional capacity, knowledge of product diversification, marketing capabilities, and rural business incubators. [Muni \(2023\)](#) examined state border governance from the perspective of participatory of local communities in the border of Indonesia - Timor-Leste. Most of local communities on the border between Indonesia and Timor-Leste faces a variety of legitimate identity structure, as well as domination of political and security approaches that entails a constant and strict control by state apparatus. This then further limits participation from local community groups. From the perspective of participatory of local communities, it shows that state's engagement on local communities remains low. The security approach becomes a barrier to authentic interaction between local communities and the government. [Kennedy \(2023\)](#) examined food security in the border of Indonesia-East Timor. Problems such as low performance of farming influence food vulnerability at the border area. Additionally, farmers also lack support on innovation and technological equipment ([Kennedy, 2023](#)).

From the previous studies mentioned above, it shows that research about Covid-19 pandemic remains scarce. Therefore, this research aims to analyze the impact of Covid-19 towards this traditional people in the western border district. The research on the impact of Covid-19 pandemic shows that the government approach to the pandemic increased existing social tensions in the border areas, and the research therefore offers an interesting window into highlighting these tensions. The article proceeds as follows. First, Timor-Leste referendum and its impact on refugee flux is explored in the introduction, highlighting one of the long-standing social issues in the border areas. Next, we discuss how Covid-19 pandemic influences social and economic dynamics by using sociological liberalism as a theory to assess these dynamics. Eventually, we discuss the security dynamics by reflecting to border security (national security and sociological liberalism), and the final section forms the conclusion.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Border studies has become part of international relations focus ever since the world war period. At that time, border studies merely focused on state's perspective under the realist point of view. However, since the end of the cold war and the emergence of non-traditional security concepts, borders are seen as an important point of connection between states and non-states actor. Thus, it places individual and community as a new and significant referent object. In essence, border security includes traditional security or state security and non-traditional security or non-state security ([Collins, 2010](#)). These two conceptions are used to analyze the extent to which the Covid-19 pandemic has had an impact on border security: traditional security and non-traditional security.

Referring to Kenneth Waltz, traditional security/national security is a condition in which the state is the only rational actor and can provide a sense of security through military force. This conception emphasizes that the integrity of a country depends solely on the role of the state ([Collins, 2010](#)). Nonetheless, several experts later gave rise to the development of this concept with the emphasis that other aspects such as the economy is important in national security ([Brown, 1983](#)). In line with Brown, Laswell & Ulman also explained that traditional/national security is not limited to the conception of statism, but also the balance of foreign policy instruments, diplomacy, economics, and domestic policy of a country ([Room, 1993](#)). Furthermore, Ulman conceptualizes traditional/national security as a series of events that can have a negative impact on the quality of life of people (individuals and groups) that are significantly influenced by the policies of a state and the policies of non-state actors ([Brown, 1983](#)). Therefore, the concept of traditional/national security itself is developing and is not only limited to a military approach.

Meanwhile, the non-traditional security concepts applied in this research are two of the seven human security aspects from United Nations Development Program. Two non-traditional security aspects highlighted in this research are economic security and community security. In the economic sector, threats can come from poverty, unemployment, lack of access to economic opportunity ([United Nations Development Programme, 1994](#)). Although there is a specific categorization of threats to one aspect of security, one aspect can also be threatened from other aspects. Another security element is community security which focuses on the ability of people to maintain their identity amidst changing conditions and even existential threats. According to UNDP (1994), threats to community security are religious and other identity-based tensions, crime, inter-ethnic, and terrorism. The essential focus of community security is all things that threaten identity; if society loses its identity, then there will be no survival as a community. This then gave rise to a view that state security and public security are intersecting.

The core of identity is when someone categorizing themselves as an occupant of the role, and incorporates the self, meanings, and expectations associated with that role and its performance. Individuals view themselves in terms of meaning imparted by a structured

society. In a broader sense, identity can be related to social interaction between individuals. This might lead to the creation of social identity where individuals acknowledge themselves belong to a social category or group or a member of social category ([Stets & Burke, 2000](#)). In contrast, while social cohesion could be a trigger to conflict, it could also promote peace. Social cohesion is about reducing horizontal inequalities, an important driver of conflict. However, it requires effective state institutions ([Brown & Zahar, 2015](#)). One of the international relations theories that pay great attention to social cohesion is sociological liberalism. Relations between individuals is highly likely strengthening peace among communities even for states. This is the basic premise of sociological liberalism, which emphasizes the pluralistic nature of international relations. One of the main arguments of sociological liberalism is that the relationships that exist between individuals or groups of people tend to be more peaceful and are more likely to lead to the strengthening of peace compared to interactions between sovereign states. This is because the interaction between individuals is intertwined through a natural process where conditions of interdependence then create important elements such as mutual trust and unity ([Jackson, 2010](#)).

For sociological liberalist, the world is more accurately described as complex interactions between diverse actors, such as groups from different countries. Those interactions are the actual patterns that occur rather than imaginary solid unitary states separated by imagined national borders. The complexity of interest and identity that intertwined a group of people combined with similar complexity in another group creates an unavoidable natural bond in society. Mutually beneficial relationships between individuals and groups will naturally become a solid foundation for peace and cohesion among interacting parties. As social beings, individuals are connected in such a way as to form more complex, interrelated patterns that create conditions of mutual need and even interdependence ([Brown & Zahar, 2015](#)).

In other words, since individuals are members of various groups, their memberships overlap and create complexity that becomes strong ties which eventually minimize conflicts between groups they are involved in. The same condition applies in the context of traditional community of the Indonesia - Timor-Leste border, interactions that occur between individuals and groups of individuals are natural processes that can be driven by various motives. The most intense interactions are those with economic motives, the activity of trading goods and services between residents at the border is a daily sight. However, as a complex society from a social and historical context, these individual citizens are part of different groups. They also interact in the context of kinship, cultural traditions, and religion ([Jackson, 2010](#)).

Referring to the above literatures, border studies then not only limited to state as the main referent object of security. Other non-state actors such as individuals and groups or communities also plays an imperative role in the context of border studies. Cross-border interactions between individuals and groups is essential in understanding motives, threats,

and how should states respond to those dynamics and vice versa. More specifically, assessing how particular event such as Covid-19 pandemic influences these interactions in the context of border studies will provide valuable insight on how should states prepare for these disruption in the future.

## METHODS

This research uses descriptive study with a thematic analysis which aims to describe systematically the facts and characteristics of a given population or area of interest. This includes assessing meaning, situation, groups, how and why something occurs, relations between objects or certain phenomenon (Naeem et al., 2023). The object in this research is traditional peoples who lives alongside the border between Indonesia and Timor-Leste in Atambua or around Mota'ain Border Post. This research analyzes how the Covid-19 pandemic impacts social, economic, and security dynamics between the traditional peoples.

The data used in this research is mostly obtained from secondary data. However, it is also supported with primary data gained from several interviews of key actors such as government officials and locals (Table 1). Field research was conducted in October 2022 in Kupang and Atambua. The subjects of this research are the communities residing in the border between Indonesia and Timor-Leste, particularly in Atambua Regency. Visual data (photographic documentation), audio recording was collected during the field research. Snowball sampling method was applied to obtain primary data from interview. All the data then processed and analysed in thematic analysis to create depiction and relations of pandemic with traditional peoples at the western border of Indonesia - Timor-Leste.

Tabel 1. Characteristics of interview participants

Informant	Background	Gender	Age range
GD	Farmer	Male	50-60
J	Student	Female	20-30
GAM	Local community	Male	30-40
NN	Local community	Male	40-50
WM	Government Official	Male	50-60
A	Government Official	Male	40-50
L	Trader	Female	40-50

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Social and Economic Dynamics of Traditional Community during the Pandemic

Border areas between Indonesia and Timor-Leste has experienced various dynamics and turmoil since 1998. Especially after Timor-Leste separation in 2002, it has resulted to various traditions and rituals of peoples who lives in Silawan village at the Belu Regency and the people in Bobonaro District of East Timor. Considering this cultural similarity and intense



interaction, both government of Indonesia and Timor-Leste signed a special agreement on traditional peoples in 2003 entitled "Border arrangement between the Government of the Republic of Indonesia and the Government of Democratic Republic of Timor Leste on Traditional Border Crossings and Regulated Market". The main purpose of this arrangement is to provide *Pas Lintas Batas*/Traditional Border Card for traditional peoples at the Indonesia and Timor-Leste border. This card is a travel document that functions as a passport (and at the same time a Visa) with maximum 1 year validation time for people who live permanently in the border area. Additionally, traditional peoples can also stay in the neighboring country for 10 (ten) to 30 (thirty) maximum days ([KBRI Dili, 2018](#)).

In the beginning of 2002-2005, conditions at the border heated up due to differences in the political situation soon after Timor-Leste gained its independence in 2002. During this period, Timor-Leste marked with heavy riots caused some Timorese crossing the border to East Nusa Tenggara. Furthermore, the inability of the newly elected government to manage resources and create conducive environment exacerbated the situation in East Timor even in the border area. However, since 2006 until now, conditions at the border have improved due to the politics of reconciliation carried out by the two countries in 2006 involving government of both countries, NGOs, church, and local society. This also strengthened with the establishment of The Committee of Truth and Friendship of Indonesia and Timor-Leste (GAM, Interview, October 2022). Intercultural interaction contributes to a more stable security at the border thus minimizing conflict within the community. Common cultural background among individuals at the border greatly facilitates the accommodation of messages in various ways. According to [Wan & Chew \(2013\)](#), "cultural identity is a part of an individual's self-definition that signals the individual's psychological connection with a culture and development of this identity is tied to the individual's experience with a culture". Therefore, individuals who are at the border are psychologically connected to a culture that they are part of and ultimately, they are tied (close ties) in their social relationships, both as a family and friendships that they had before the separation (segregation) and this is what forms a social network among individuals who are in the border area. These culturally common bonds give rise to a common identity, a binding identity between individuals, and a cultural identity regardless of class and profession or the role they play ([Wan & Chew, 2013](#)). Similarly, [Mercuri \(2012\)](#) argues that culture reflects the totality of our being, our values, and our beliefs. When it comes to individuals who are on the border, it can be said that aspects of their lives, such as how they dress, the food they eat, the rituals they perform, the customs that exist, the language used, they can be said to be the same so that the communication that is built only builds a better quality of life between them ([Mercuri, 2012](#)).

The similarities in language, culture, customs, and genetics (physically) form an identity as 'Timorese' for the people living on the border. The Timorese refer to the people

living on the island of Timor who speak the Tetun language. Identity is an awareness and feeling that belongs to the same part in a particular network or group (Heller, 2011).

We feel that we are both Timorese, so we already understand each other's character. So that if we want to speak words, even act, we already understand each other. Our characters are the same, there is no difference because we are both from Timor. (GD, Personal Communication, October, 2022)

Identity as Timorese is an important factor in maintaining security stability at the border, especially in relation to the experience of conflict resulting from disintegration in 1998. Conflict between communities at the border areas tends to be rare, despite quite significant in the Oecussi District, the enclaved area of Timor-Leste ([Raharjo, 2014](#)).

Among all border areas, Western border areas of Belu Regency-Bobonaro District has great social cohesion due to intense interaction between communities, both between traditional communities of Indonesia and Timor-Leste, and communities in Belu with the former refugees from Timor-Leste. Communities at the border villages (Silawan-Bobonaro, Koa, Batu Gede and Balibo) considered that boundaries do not exist in cultural affairs. It is only applied in international law and politics. National boundaries are merely a border line and not being a cultural separator of locals who reside along the border areas ([DARI, 2023](#)). Furthermore, Balibo communities noted that after Timor-Leste independence, the connection between them and their extended family in Indonesia remained strong. These relations were primarily linguistic and family (rather than political) connections ([Kingsbury, 2010](#)).

The average community occupations are seasonal farmers and project workers. Usually there are several people who farm salt and work on building projects. The community chooses to become seasonal farmers because the border areas lack of clean water sources. The characteristics of the land on the border are very dry (J, Personal Communication, October 2022). There are several schools around Mota'ain border post, namely SD Naiklot, SD I Mota'ain, SMP 1, and SMK (J, Atambua, October 2022). At the Mota'ain Border Post Area, people who cross the border from Indonesia to Timor Leste come from various parts of the region, both from East Nusa Tenggara and from outside East Nusa Tenggara (WM, Personal Communication, October, 2022). The purpose of the cross-border is for family visits, marriage, shopping, and for treatment. Locals from Belu usually visit Timor-Leste for family and marriage matters. Meanwhile, for those who come from Timor-Leste, they usually go to Indonesia for shopping and treatment in the Province of NTT and even outside the Province of NTT such as the islands of Java and Bali. (WM, Personal Communication, October, 2022).

In the context of language, both are using "Tetun Language". They share the same language but different dialects. However, it still has the same meaning. For instance, the use

of “Tetun” terik in Southeast Timor is still similar with language used in Suai and Bobonaro. However, in Bobonaro, it has a different dialeg (GAM, Personal Communication, Oktober 2022). Tetun language spoken by approximately 300.000 peoples (many from West Timor). While three languages (Atoni, Bunak, and Tetun) are spoken in Both West and East Timor ([Hajek, 2002](#)).

We cannot be distinguished between the people of Indonesia and Timor Leste, because we are indeed one continent. In terms of language, we are also the same, namely Tetum. It’s just that the dialect is different, but the meaning remains the same. (WM, Personal Communication, October 2022)

Cultural activities also remain practices among traditional communities at the border of Indonesia-Timor-Leste. Most of the locals have their relatives in the neighboring village around the border. After East Timor gained its independence in 2002, several East Timorese decided to move to Indonesia and stayed around the border in Atambua, Belu Regency. Thus, locals from Timor-Leste often visit their family in Indonesia for cultural purposes for instance ‘*korementan*’. In Timorese, *Kore* means to release, and *metan* means black. *Kore metan* itself means the release of black cloth. Cultural expression is practices in marriage ceremony, traditional houses, and death ceremony (A, Personal Communication, Oktober 2022). They also share similarity in marriage traditions. The only difference is that Timorese often consumed alcoholic drinks while Atambua peoples do not consume it anymore. One important highlight from the traditional community is that they are reluctant to talk about inequality between Indonesia and Timor-Leste because they have received the right to become Indonesian citizens, and it is better to try to improve their welfare according to their respective abilities.

We are afraid to talk about inequality. Every day we sit on that yellow line (border fence), we have the same skin color, nothing different between us. Therefore, there is no need for us to insult each other, otherwise, we will go back to the past. (NN, Personal Communication, October, 2022)

During normal times, the number of border crossers ranges from 350-400 people in a day (A, Personal Communication, October, 2022). However, during the Covid pandemic, the number of border crossers decreased significantly to around 30-40 people (WM, Personal Communication, October 2022). Usually, more passers come from Timor-Leste. There are also foreigners from the Philippines, Singapore, and Australia. Border crossers from Indonesia usually go to Timor-Leste for business and work (A, Personal Communication, October 2022). The purposes of cross-border activities during the pandemic are mostly for death ceremony, treatment/medical check-up, and shopping. However, locals must also be

vacinated minimum for 2 doses of vaccines to be allowed for crossing the border (WM, Personal Communication, October 2022).

To accommodate traditional communities at the border, both governments provide a special permission to enter the border by using “*Pas Lintas Batas*” or Traditional Border Crossing-Card. Nonetheless, only those who resides along 10 kilometers from border post who are allowed to use this access (WM, Personal Communication, October 2022). For instance, only locals from Mota’ain to Silawan can get this access (A, Personal Communication, October 2022). In the health sector, local government also supports locals through distributing masks, hand sanitizers, and health assistance through the help of Border Post personnels (A, Personal Communication, October, 2022).

During the covid period, economic activity was limited. Before Covid, the border market area was usually crowded on market days, namely Tuesdays. In addition, there is also an export day, which is Wednesday. However, due to the covid pandemic, the border market is no longer operating. The border market is located at Mota’ain Border Post. Nevertheless, cross border movement of goods continues to run on a limited basis only on Wednesdays. This is an agreement between the two countries to accommodate people’s needs amid a pandemic threat. On export day (Wednesdays) there are usually quite long queues of up to 60 meters with approximately 80 trucks crossing the border for trade purpose. Usually during normal times (not a pandemic), there are around 15-16 trucks per day or equal to 90 trucks per week. At the time when this interview is conducted in October 2022, it was the first fish export from Indonesia to Timor-Leste. Meanwhile from Timor-Leste, exported goods are coffee and copra.

The border market was still closed during the pandemic because none of the sellers from Indonesia came to sell. This is due to the lack of buyers from Timor-Leste during the pandemic. Before the covid pandemic, the border market was remarkably busy with buying and selling activities even for visits. Usually, the people of Timor Leste who work on the border come to have breakfast and lunch at the border market. The most preferred food is padang food. The intensity of this interaction causes frequent dispensations for border crossers by giving identification. However, since the pandemic, this dispensation is no longer valid (WM, Personal Communication, October, 2022). We used to work as ojek drivers before the covid pandemic, but now we do not have a job anymore. We just stay at our house and cultivate our garden (NN2, Personal Communication, October, 2022).

Before covid, Mota’ain border market was filled with Indonesian traders who sell product such as vegetables, fruits, clothes, goods, weaving, and souvenirs. In 2019, The Indonesian government held the The Wonderful Indonesia Festival between Indonesia-East Timor border in Mota’ain to attract visitor to border market area. During this normal time, traders could gain around more than 3 million rupiah per day. However, since the covid (especially from 2020-2021) the border market is closed. They began re-opening the market in 2022 for traders with strict regulations (vaccines). Only a few came back to re-open their

market in 2022. One of them is a seller from Atambua, who sells *nasi padang*/padang rice. This Indonesian authentic food is famous for East Timorese and become their favorite food whenever they visit border market. Prior to covid, *nasi padang* sellers could gained more than 3 million rupiah per day. However, after the pandemic, they could only gain around 1 million rupiah per day (L, Personal Communication, October, 2022).

### **Security dynamics during the pandemic**

Aside from facing social and economic dynamics, security issues are also important to be highlighted. Referring to the concept of national security and non-traditional security especially on economic and societal security, major issue in the border area between Indonesia and Timor-Leste mainly Atambua border is regarding illegal border crossers and illegal smuggling. In 2021, at least 352 citizens from Timor Leste were deported from Indonesia to East Timor. Hundreds of these citizens previously entered Indonesia illegally through Belu Regency without having official documents ([KompasTV, 2021](#)). During the pandemic, several illegal activities were recorded in Atambua. At least there were nine (9) cases of illegal smuggling reported from Atambua especially Silawan village from 2020 to 2022. In total, 2 boxes and 28 bags of ball-press were caught by atambua customs. Used clothes smuggling was common in the border of Indonesia - Timor-Leste and even continue after Timor-Leste gained its independence ([Djong & Damayanti, 2023](#)).

Even before the pandemic, Mota'ain area has always been a place for smuggling. For instance, during 2017-2019, several cases were reported such as fuel smuggling, rattan smuggling, and rice smuggling. Some of the smugglers use sea route from Indonesia to Timor-Leste. In 2017, in total there were 11,5 tons of fuels smuggled to Timor-Leste through Silawan village. In 2018, cases reported were illegal smuggling of fuel and rice. In 2019, Indonesian customs officers return smugglers that brought illegal rattan to Timor-Leste ([Nahak et al., 2021](#)). Recently, in May 2023, Indonesian immigration officers return five illegal border crossers from Timor-Leste to Indonesia in Atambua. They cross the border illegally just to visit their relatives ([Lewokeda, 2023](#)).

Drawing from these illegal cases, cultural and economic needs are the motives behind this movement. Social cohesion between traditional peoples at the border of Indonesia – Timor-Leste in Mota'ain helps to promote peace after the separation of Timor-Leste yet became a challenge for this traditional people during the pandemic. In other words, social cohesion is beyond the notion of national cohesion for these traditional communities. In line with the community security concept, it focusses on the ability of peoples to maintain their culture and identity even under existential threats such religious and other identity-based tensions, inter-ethnic, crime and terrorism. Furthermore, threats could also come from other aspects of human security elements. In this context, the presence of Covid-19 pandemic poses real threat to the livelihood of traditional communities at the border of Indonesia – Timor-Leste.



Threats such as inter-ethnic crime, and terrorism are not significant during the pandemic. However, the issue of inequality between former refugees and locals should be considered as a critical issue. This issue is highly likely to trigger horizontal competition to emerge in the future especially between former refugees and locals if the social program or assistance is not distributed equally. From an economic aspect, traditional communities face threats such as unemployment and lack of access to economic opportunities. This may worsen the problem of poverty that has become a long-standing dilemma at the border area of Indonesia – Timor-Leste. Most of border areas, including Belu Regency-Bobonaro district are classified as poor or has a low level of welfare. Primary source of livelihood for peoples depends mainly on dryland agriculture ([Kennedy, 2022](#)).

In responding to these pandemic challenges, both government of Indonesia and Timor-Leste have helped with traditional communities at the border area. This includes direct cash assistance, distribution of sanitary kit, vaccines, and social assistance. All this assistance helps traditional communities to survive under existential threats during the Covid-19 pandemic. Aligned with human security concept, the fulfilment of human security (including economic and community security) as part of human security aspects must consider protection and empowerment strategies. Four important key elements of this strategy are people-centered, comprehensive, context-specific, and prevention oriented. From the people-centered element, decision and participation must be inclusive. Furthermore, there should be comprehensive analysis of the root cause of threats according to contextual environment in where the traditional communities' lives. All these strategies will develop a prevention-oriented framework which comes from a bottom-up approach that eventually will reduce issues such as illegal activities in the border areas, and possibility of horizontal conflicts in the future.

## CONCLUSION

The Western border of Indonesia – Timor-Leste remains an area with intense social cohesion between traditional peoples who refer themselves as 'Timorese'. Despite being separated by borderline, experiencing a crisis during the separation of Timor-Leste, and face the threat of Covid-19 Pandemic, traditional peoples keep maintaining their cultural and kinship even under this challenging condition. With a particular focus of the implication of Covid-19 pandemic, this research shows a significant finding regarding social, economic, and security dynamics of the traditional communities at the western border area of Indonesia – Timor-Leste. In the context of social and economic dynamics, Covid-19 pandemic impacted the closure of border posts, thus poses a challenge for people and goods movement at the border. However, these traditional communities are still allowed to visit their kin with special permission only for cultural purposes. Another important highlight of social dynamics is the reluctant of these traditional communities to talk about their past memories—separation of Timor-Leste. Meanwhile, other concerns come from the former

refugees about inequality of social assistance distribution during the pandemic. Economically, most of the traditional communities were also unemployed during the pandemic. Some of them shift their job from ojek driver to seasonal worker even to cultivate their own garden. In the context of security dynamics, illegal border crossers and illegal smuggling are also recorded from 2020 to 2022. Two main motives of these illegal activities are cultural and economic needs. While both governments have been working on policy and action to respond to this border challenges, further assessment is needed to provide a comprehensive program according to the needs of traditional communities. Approaches to the border areas must consider the element of human security (economic and community security) to balance state or national security at the border areas.

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