



Fundasaun Mahein (FM), 08 August 2022

Press Release

COVID-19 & Human Security in Timor-Leste

Fundasaun Mahein (FM) has produced this report on COVID-19 and Human Security in Timor-Leste based on research carried out during 2021 and 2022 on experiences of insecurity during the COVID-19 pandemic in Timor-Leste. The report builds on FM's previous research, analysis and publications during the COVID-19 crisis, and documents original primary research conducted by FM. It examines both direct testimonies gathered via interviews and group discussions, and some of the broader implications of the COVID-19 crisis for Timor-Leste's socio-economic development, security, democracy and human rights. Negative secondary effects resulting from the measures implemented to contain the pandemic include intensified economic hardship, food insecurity, reduced access to essential services, educational disruption, psychological stress, gender-based violence and human rights violations at the hands of state security actors.

Beginning in March 2020, the Government of Timor-Leste (GoTL) implemented a series of extraordinary measures in response to the public health threat posed by COVID-19. At the time, FM agreed that this was necessary given uncertainties about the disease and Timor-Leste's limited health capacities, while also raising concerns about the economic and security impacts of containment policies. Many observers have since praised GoTL's response as timely and effective, and credited it with averting a human catastrophe.

As the crisis progressed, FM became increasingly concerned that GoTL's response was also creating widespread hardship among Timor-Leste's population by directly threatening many people's economic security, physical and psychological wellbeing, while also undermining public trust in authorities and provoking social conflict. GoTL, civil society and international agencies have since acknowledged some of the indirect harms which have resulted from COVID-19 containment measures. However, FM is concerned that there has been insufficient recognition of these impacts in public discussions around COVID-19. Moreover, while international debates are ongoing about the precise effects of containment policies and the role played by factors other than government policies and individual behaviour in shaping the pandemic, there has been little discussion about these complexities in relation to Timor-Leste's context.

FM recognises GoTL's efforts and achievements during a difficult and chaotic situation, and we are deeply grateful that Timor-Leste has suffered a minimal number of direct casualties from COVID-19. Nonetheless, despite warnings from numerous experts and organisations around the world, it seems that decision makers in charge of the COVID-19 response did not adequately consider all the impacts of drastic containment policies, especially for many Timorese people who live in or close to poverty. By applying a human security lens to the observations and findings collected through our primary and secondary research during COVID-19, FM hopes that this report can contribute to the ongoing debate surrounding this important issue, while helping to ensure that public policies are more adequately adapted to Timor-Leste's needs and context.

To assist policy makers, civil society and international partners to make decisions which better promote economic security, overall health and wellbeing, and fundamental rights, FM offers the following recommendations:

- Timor-Leste suffers from various structural health problems which produce the bulk of mortality and morbidity in Timor-Leste, and stem primarily from endemic poverty, malnutrition and lack of access to clean water, adequate sanitation, decent housing, education, livelihoods and basic healthcare. Adding to these long-term problems, many Timorese people have experienced loss of income, food insecurity, reduced access to services and heightened psychological stress during COVID-19. Resolving these complex problems requires long-term planning and investments to promote equitable socio-economic development and improve basic infrastructure and services. Raising the general living standard of the population and greatly increasing the quality of infrastructure and essential services will help to address the social determinants of (poor) health in Timor-Leste.
- FM and many others have often warned about the dangers of "copy-pasting" policies, laws and practices from other countries with vastly different socio-economic contexts and state capacities. In March 2020, GoTL adopted emergency measures without adequate consideration of their practical implementation or their likely impact on Timor-Leste's poor and informally employed population. FM hopes that policy makers will ensure that all policies are properly adapted to Timor-Leste's context, especially in the case of policies which can heavily disrupt lives and livelihoods.
- As FM noted in a previous article, and as many experts critical of the global response to COVID-19 have pointed out, protecting public health involves more than managing a single disease. All policies inevitably involve trade-offs, and the risks of incorrect policy decisions are higher in countries with large vulnerable populations

and severe capacity limitations. Real public health requires adopting a holistic view of individual and societal health, which includes understanding how health interventions interact with socio-economic factors, overall physical and psychological wellbeing and fundamental human rights.

- Continuing to force unvaccinated individuals to quarantine for 14 days on arrival in Timor-Leste makes little sense from a public health perspective, particularly when COVID-19 has already circulated widely in the population and data from many countries show that vaccinated individuals are just as likely to carry and transmit SARS-CoV-2 as unvaccinated individuals. Many countries have ended mandatory quarantine policies for all travellers, while most countries which continue to enforce quarantine have reduced the quarantine period to around five days. As most countries around the world return to pre-pandemic normality, FM hopes that Timor-Leste's policy makers will end such policies which are both discriminatory and not in line with available evidence or international practices.
- As FM warned in 2021, giving security forces a broad licence to intervene in citizens' essential daily activities was likely to provoke human rights violations, social conflict and distrust of state authorities. This is especially dangerous in Timor-Leste's context where there is a history of communal violence and serious problems with capacity, discipline and rule of law within the security sector. Over the last few years, dissatisfaction with government has been growing due to continuing socio-economic problems, political impasses and widespread corruption. In this volatile situation, FM sees that it is extremely dangerous to implement policies which provoke additional conflict between communities and the state.
- FM sees that the securitisation of the global pandemic response – whereby the police and military were mobilised to enforce public health measures in many countries – has generated significant debate about the implications for fundamental rights and citizen-state relations. Many analysts have expressed concern about the precedent COVID-19 has set for future public health crises with regards to human rights and state authoritarianism. FM therefore calls for further discussion about how Timor-Leste can ensure that emergency responses do not unnecessarily curtail fundamental rights and freedoms, disrupt livelihoods and national economies, and involve militarised responses which provoke human rights violations.
- There are indications that GoTL, public health officials and security actors have not fully understood, communicated or applied the principle of voluntary informed consent in the COVID-19 vaccination program, including the need to avoid coercion

and provide full information about comparative risks and benefits. Many people were threatened with loss of income and education if they declined to vaccinated, while a large proportion of the population accepted vaccination simply to be able to conduct essential economic activities which require travel between municipalities. FM therefore asks the Government to take concrete steps to ensure that people's rights and dignity are not infringed during health programs, and that all health treatments are provided based on informed voluntary consent, not applied through coercion, pressure and threats.

For more detailed information, please see the full report, or contact Fundasaun Mahein with the below details:

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