



COVID-19 & Human Security in Timor-Leste

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COVID-19 vaccination campaign in Timor-Leste, 2021

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Abbreviations

COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease 2019
F-FDTL	Defence Force of Timor-Leste
FM	Fundasaun Mahein
GBV	Gender-based Violence
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GoTL	Government of Timor-Leste
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PCR	Polymerase Chain Reaction
PNTL	National Police of Timor-Leste
SARS-CoV-2	Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus 2
SoE	State of Emergency
TB	Tuberculosis
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Program
WHO	World Health Organisation

Introduction

This report is the result of research carried out by Fundasaun Mahein (FM) 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.¹ Many observers have since praised GoTL's response as timely and effective,² and credited it with averting a human catastrophe.³

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.⁴ 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 secondary harms 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

¹ <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2020/05/13/starvation-and-covid-19/>

² <https://www.mironline.ca/timor-lestes-covid-19-response-a-global-perspective/>

³ <https://www.eastasiaforum.org/2022/01/27/timor-leste-comes-of-age-in-troubled-times/>

⁴ <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2021/03/26/arbitrary-rules-threaten-public-wellbeing-and-national-security/> <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2021/03/12/covid-19-measures-must-be-clear-balanced-and-reduce-social-panic/>

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 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.

Methodology and outline

FM conducted primary research for this report between September 2021 and February 2022. Testimonies were collected through group discussions, interviews and informal meetings with a variety of groups, including street and market vendors, disabled people, university students, women's groups, civil society organisations and government officials. The report also draws from ongoing media monitoring, government statements, reports by international agencies, academic studies and expert commentary on the public health, socio-economic, political, legal and ethical dimensions of the COVID-19 crisis. The final report was produced through a series of Security Sector Discussion (SSD) sessions and a collaborative drafting process between members of FM's research team.

This report adopts a Human Security framework for understanding the overall impacts of the COVID-19 crisis in Timor-Leste. For FM, this framework offers an alternative approach to traditional understandings of national security based on military defence. Instead, it views security primarily as the outcome of a variety of social, economic and political factors which together promote individual and societal wellbeing, such as adequate income, dignified livelihoods, quality housing, essential services and infrastructure, a clean environment, guarantees of fundamental rights and freedoms, and a life free from armed conflict and exploitation by criminal organisations. In short, Human Security is a holistic framework for analysing the conditions of life faced by individuals and entire populations, as well as the real impacts of state policies, laws and economic development programs on people's lives. In this report, the COVID-19 crisis in Timor-Leste will be analysed through the human security lens, to better understand the social, economic and political effects of the societal and political response to the pandemic.

The report also draws from research concerned with the global tendency towards the *securitization of health*, which describes how public health issues become interpreted – and responded to – as an existential security threat. The securitization process thus involves reframing health in terms of warfare and defence, significant reallocation of resources, and

directing state security institutions to enforce public health policies.⁵ Securitization has been the focus of much discussion among researchers interested in the broader political, legal, ethical and civil liberty implications of the COVID-19 crisis.⁶ With these debates in mind, this report assesses the implications of the pandemic response in Timor-Leste for fundamental rights and freedoms, democracy and citizen-state relations in Timor-Leste.

Finally, while indicators and interventions such as drugs, doctors, hospital capacity and modern equipment are essential for treating diseases and measuring health capacity, this report takes the view that the *social determinants of health* – namely socio-economic and infrastructure factors such as income, nutrition, clean water, sanitation, housing, education and environmental management – are fundamental driving factors in health outcomes at both the individual and societal levels. Therefore, any analysis of the effectiveness and overall impacts of public health policies must take into account their interaction with these factors, including whether they support or undermine these critical areas.

The main body of the report is divided into the following sections:

- Timeline of Timor-Leste's COVID-19 response from 2020-2021
- Vulnerable groups' experiences of insecurity during COVID-19, including women, children, urban youth, students and people with disabilities
- A multifactorial analysis of the human security impacts of the COVID-19 crisis in Timor-Leste, including socio-economic effects, impacts of disrupted health and education services, human rights violations, and implications for democracy and citizen-state relations
- Discussion about the importance of contextually appropriate policies and cost-benefit analysis
- Conclusion and recommendations

Timeline of COVID-19 in Timor-Leste 2020-2022

When the World Health Organisation (WHO) designated COVID-19 as a global pandemic in March 2020, GoTL, following advice from international agencies and foreign governments, implemented a series of extraordinary measures which aimed to limit transmission of the disease and prevent the health system from being overwhelmed. These included declaring a State of Emergency (SoE), postponing commercial flights, closing the land border with

⁵ <https://www.isglobal.org/en/healthisglobal/-/custom-blog-portlet/is-the-gradual-securitization-of-most-health-issues-a-positive-or-a-negative-development-for-effective-global-health-governanc-1>

⁶ <https://academic.oup.com/isagsq/article/1/3/ksab024/6374183>
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/10246029.2021.1994438?journalCode=rasr20>
<http://www.cornellpolicyreview.com/securitization-of-covid-19-and-its-implications-to-global-security/?pdf=6021>

Indonesia, restricting public gatherings and movement, implementing mandatory quarantine measures for international arrivals, and closing educational facilities and government offices. These measures apparently succeeded in halting the spread of the disease within the country during 2020.⁷

In early 2021, GoTL in collaboration with the WHO initiated a community testing program in areas around the border with West Timor in response to concerns about imported cases due to illegal border movement.⁸ The testing program detected widespread “community transmission” of COVID-19, and GoTL responded by escalating its containment measures. The population of Timor-Leste spent much of 2021 living under unprecedented restrictions on domestic movement and gatherings, including enforced quarantine, “sanitary fence” and “mandatory confinement” (lockdown) policies.⁹ These were implemented through police checkpoints preventing travel between municipalities without negative PCR test results (or, later, “yellow cards”¹⁰), regular police actions to move people off main streets and enforce mask wearing, occasional mass arrests of people deemed to be in violation of restrictions,¹¹ forced swab testing in communities and at police checkpoints in the capital city,¹² and enforced isolation and quarantine of people found to be “positive” for SARS-CoV-2 in government facilities. Beginning in mid-2021, GoTL, with assistance from the WHO and foreign governments, initiated the COVID-19 vaccination program, and restrictive measures were eased from September 2021 onwards.

While international observers and some civil society organisations praised GoTL’s response,¹³ many Timorese people have expressed their dissatisfaction with the situation through social media, especially with regards to the effects of restrictions and closures on rural livelihoods, education and income. At the same time, opposition politicians and other public figures – including former Prime Minister Xanana Gusmão and current President José Ramos Horta – voiced concerns about COVID-19 policies, including their effects on poor people and questioning the methodology underlying the definition of a COVID-19 death.

To its credit, GoTL implemented some programs which aimed to ease the economic suffering of individuals and businesses. Worried by the growing evidence of negative side-effects and abuses stemming from the response, FM was one of few civil society

⁷ <https://www.mironline.ca/timor-lestes-covid-19-response-a-global-perspective/>

⁸ https://jsmp.tl/wp-content/uploads/Governu-tenke-haforsaPreveneCOVID_19_ENGLISH.pdf

⁹ *Serca Sanitária* – sanitary fence; *Konfinamentu Obrigatóriu* – mandatory confinement

¹⁰ *Kartaun kinur* – yellow card, or proof of vaccination card

¹¹ <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2021/03/26/arbitrary-rules-threaten-public-wellbeing-and-national-security/>

¹² <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2021/05/05/mandatory-swab-testing-is-unethical-undemocratic-and-illogical/>

¹³ <https://www.newmandala.org/civic-space-in-timor-leste-during-covid-19-part-1-governance-and-civil-society/>

organisations to raise concerns about both the socio-economic impacts and practical implementation of many of the measures, as well as their implications for democratic rights and national security.¹⁴

Confirmed infections and deaths related to COVID-19 rose during July and August 2021, falling again in September. GoTL lifted the “sanitary fence” restrictions on domestic travel between September and October and ended the SoE in November. So far, no new domestic restrictions have been implemented, and daily life has returned to normal for most citizens, with increased commercial activity being clearly visible in the capital city. The number of international flights has increased, but ticket prices have not returned to pre-pandemic levels, and vaccination or quarantine requirements remain in place for international arrivals. Confirmed infections increased slightly during January-February 2022, but have since fallen, while severe cases have remained minimal.

Experiences of insecurity during COVID-19 among vulnerable groups

Children and gendered impacts

As reported in FM’s short article published in December 2021, women and children have suffered from a variety of negative human security impacts during COVID-19.¹⁵ Our discussions with civil society organisations, community groups and gender-based violence (GBV) survivors found that COVID-19 restrictions had many direct and indirect effects on women’s incomes and personal security, particularly those who work informally as market and street vendors, as well as women who rely on GBV services. For example, PNTL’s aggressive – but inconsistent – enforcement of “social distancing” at Dili’s municipal markets resulted in fewer customers and reduced income due to people’s fear of police brutality. Women street vendors reported similarly that levels of harassment and violence and the hands of security authorities increased, and therefore many women who would normally earn income this way stayed at home. Women who ran small catering businesses reported that their income drastically fell due to reduced mobility and people’s fear of going out. GoTL’s decision to ban public transport forced women to hire private transport to travel to markets, resulting in increased transportation costs. GBV and domestic violence survivors reported that economic activities which rely on support from NGOs – such as production and

¹⁴ <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2021/03/26/arbitrary-rules-threaten-public-wellbeing-and-national-security/> <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2021/03/12/covid-19-measures-must-be-clear-balanced-and-reduce-social-panic/>

¹⁵ <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2021/12/09/human-security-impacts-for-women-and-children-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

marketing of artisan products – were cancelled or reduced during COVID-19 due to travel and gathering restrictions.

Many women experienced significantly increased volumes of domestic work while schools were closed, which has had a knock-on effect for their incomes, personal development and psychological wellbeing. Several NGOs working on GBV issues reported that heightened economic insecurity during COVID-19 resulted in increased family stress and domestic violence. However, even though domestic violence cases increased, GBV services were directly and indirectly restricted during COVID-19, as some services implemented capacity limits, training and counselling activities were reduced, and women were afraid to leave home to seek assistance due to restrictions on movement. NGOs also reported that psychological pressure from economic stress and lack of support during COVID-19 has led some women to commit suicide. Some women who accessed shelters were not allowed to see their family members and forced to stay in isolation for up to two weeks due to stringent COVID-19 protocols implemented at shelters, despite having just experienced significant trauma. Furthermore, many people – including victims and government officials – erroneously believed that mandatory confinement also meant that they could not leave their homes to seek assistance for domestic abuse. Disruption to courts has also resulted in delays in processing domestic violence cases, further adding to the trauma and suffering of victims who are forced to live with their abusers for long periods.

Children's education was also heavily disrupted due to the closure of primary and secondary schools during much of 2020-2021. While some donors attempted to facilitate remote learning for schoolchildren, it is unclear whether these programs were successful due to a lack of systematic data. However, FM spoke with families who reported that their children received no education at all during periods of school closures, as they lacked the space, time or skills to effectively supervise their children to learn at home. Educators who spoke with FM also expressed concern that distance learning is not realistic in Timor-Leste's context given the lack of access to computers, low literacy levels, poor internet connectivity and lack of quiet spaces available for study in most homes. This observation was confirmed by UNDP's Socio-Economic Impacts Assessment report conducted in 2021.¹⁶

In addition to child education, trainings provided by NGOs are vital for strengthening women's skills, knowledge and economic empowerment, and providing a safe space for sharing experiences and promoting healing, particularly for GBV survivors and rural women. During periods of restrictions on movement and gathering, many routine trainings were

¹⁶ <https://www.undp.org/timor-leste/blog/starting-career-lockdown-impact-covid-19-youth-education-and-employment-timor-leste>

cancelled, while others were moved online. Several organisations and participants in these trainings reported that the benefits of online training sessions were quite limited due to technological issues and the complexity of materials. They also expressed relief that in-person activities have resumed.

Urban youth and students

Despite facing low risks of severe COVID-19 outcomes,¹⁷ young adults and students in Dili have experienced many harms from COVID-19 restrictions. In addition to the closure of educational facilities for long periods, young people experienced significant disruption to their social lives as a result of COVID-19 restrictions, which has harmed their social development and psychological wellbeing.¹⁸ While it is difficult to quantify the harms of disrupted education and social activities, it is widely acknowledged that the closure of schools and universities worldwide has had a devastating impact on young people's development and wellbeing,¹⁹ particularly those from poorer backgrounds in both developed and developing countries.²⁰ Many experts and international reports have warned that the disruption to education over the last two years has negatively impacted economic growth, individual incomes and psychological and physical wellbeing, which will affect the lives of hundreds of millions of people for decades to come.²¹

Some educational institutions attempted to implement alternative learning systems, but limited technology, materials, internet connectivity, experience with distance learning, and space for learning at home were major barriers for both students and teachers. One university lecturer reported that they attempted to run online classes, but that success was limited by students' inability to understand basic computer functionality, poor internet connection, lack of money for *pulsa* (phone credit) and difficulty communicating about complex topics through Zoom. A WhatsApp group was created to share information and materials with students, but it was impossible to track students' participation or achievement. Although GoTL promised to provide students with support for *pulsa* to facilitate online learning, this program was never implemented.

¹⁷ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642\(21\)00066-3/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanchi/article/PIIS2352-4642(21)00066-3/fulltext)
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7946566/>
<https://www.medrxiv.org/content/10.1101/2020.04.05.20054361v2>

¹⁸ <https://www.undp.org/timor-leste/blog/starting-career-lockdown-impact-covid-19-youth-education-and-employment-timor-leste>

¹⁹ <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/covid19-scale-education-loss-nearly-insurmountable-warns-unicef> <https://doi.org/10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2020.28786>

²⁰ <https://theconversation.com/five-ways-coronavirus-lockdowns-increase-inequality-135767>
<https://www.savethechildren.net/news/covid-19-kids-world%E2%80%99s-poorest-countries-lost-66-more-lifetime-school-richer-peers-save-children>

²¹ https://www.richmondfed.org/publications/research/coronavirus/economic_impact_covid-19_05-22-20 <https://www.oecd.org/coronavirus/policy-responses/education-and-covid-19-focusing-on-the-long-term-impact-of-school-closures-2cea926e/>

Due to “sanitary fence” policies restricting free movement between the capital city and rural areas, many students who come from outside Dili to study in the capital suffered from a sudden loss of income, as family members could no longer bring money to them. This resulted quickly in reduced food intake, while many students could not pay their rent and faced eviction or indebtedness. As a result, many students decided to return to their families in the rural areas, where they could work in subsistence agriculture and access food. Due to poor internet connectivity, this made it impossible for many to access online materials in the few cases where this was provided by educators. Some students remained in Dili while relying on charitable donations organised by informal solidarity networks to meet their basic needs.

People with disabilities

FM heard from several disabled people that their social, economic and psychological conditions deteriorated during COVID-19. Economic activities which disabled people depend on such as handicrafts and recycling were suspended due to restrictions on group activities, which eliminated an important space for socialising, learning skills and generating income. Reduced family incomes and restrictions on movement between Dili and rural areas also affected disabled people living in Dili who rely on family support to meet their basic needs. One disabled person who spoke with FM reported that his work as a trainer for international agencies had stopped completely due to COVID-19 restrictions, which resulted in a total loss of income for long periods.

Due to reduced income in Dili, many disabled people chose to move back to stay with families in rural areas, where they faced reduced access to services and increased social isolation. They experienced increased psychological stress and family pressure as they could not contribute to subsistence agricultural production and felt like a burden on their families. They also experienced discrimination in rural areas due to limited knowledge and understanding of disability issues, while their families often forced them to stay inside due to social stigma around disability.

Some disabled people also reported suffering abuses at the hands of security forces during the implementation of COVID-19 rules. While these incidents thankfully do not appear to have been widespread, they are a worrying indication about the ability of security forces to implement rules safely and without discrimination. Overall, these incidents and pressures have contributed to worsened psychological and physical wellbeing among many disabled people, with several participants in FM’s research reporting strong feelings of hopelessness, despair and depression during COVID-19.

COVID-19 and Human Security: a multifactorial crisis

Socio-economic impacts: national development, livelihoods and poverty

Since independence, and especially since the arrival of oil revenues, GoTL expenditures on salaries, goods, services and infrastructure have been the main driver of economic growth in Timor-Leste.²² During 2020, government expenditures fell by 9%, partly because of political problems, but also due to governmental disruption related to the COVID-19 State of Emergency.²³ Lower state spending, along with reduced consumption and exports, resulted in negative GDP growth of 7% during 2020.²⁴ Similar collapses in economic growth occurred worldwide during 2020; however, in countries such as Timor-Leste with limited safety nets and a large proportion of the population living in or close to poverty, the immediate effects of such economic contraction on people's lives will be worse. The World Bank reported that economic growth is expected to increase to 1.9% in 2021, but stressed the need to improve overall economic performance, especially increasing non-oil sources of state revenue.²⁵

Beginning in 2020, FM warned about the implications that the COVID-19 crisis would have for both people's immediate wellbeing and for long-term poverty alleviation efforts, including achieving economic diversification and improving state capacity. Due to limited data, FM's analysis at the time was based on our knowledge of Timor-Leste's socio-economic realities and international debates about the multifactorial impacts of the COVID-19 crisis, including many warnings issued by international organisations and experts regarding the potential and real effects of containment measures on incomes, food security, national development, non-COVID-19 health issues and fundamental rights.²⁶ Meanwhile, daily conversation in Timor-Leste during 2021 was full of discussion about the suffering caused by restrictions on free movement and the inability of the Government to meet people's basic needs.

UNDP conducted Socio-economic Impact Assessments in 2020 and 2021 which aimed to analyse the broader effects of the crisis on families, communities and businesses. These studies found that the COVID-19 crisis had exacerbated existing fragilities and inequalities, and disproportionately affected the most vulnerable households and families. Even households with relatively higher socio-economic status experienced heightened food

²² <https://www.theigc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/Policy-paper-Timor-Lestes-drivers-of-growth-and-sectoral-transformation.pdf>

²³ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/timor-leste/publication/may-2021-timor-leste-economic-report-charting-a-new-path>

²⁴ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/timor-leste/publication/may-2021-timor-leste-economic-report-charting-a-new-path>

²⁵ <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2021/12/15/timor-leste-economy-showing-signs-of-recovery-as-covid-19-cases-drop>

²⁶ <https://www.usglc.org/coronavirus/global-hunger/>

insecurity, illustrating the intensity of the economic contraction which occurred early in the crisis. UNDP's second study, concluded in late 2021, found that while incomes had mostly recovered from the collapse which occurred in 2020, this did not necessarily mean that incomes had recovered to pre-pandemic levels.²⁷ The report also found that food insecurity persists among many poorer households.

Beginning in May 2020, recognising the economic hardship COVID-19 restrictions had created, GoTL implemented relief programs including cash transfers, food aid and subsidies for water and electricity. However, as noted by UNDP, these programs suffered from a lack of data on how to effectively distribute the assistance and evaluate its benefits. Later, the *Sesta Bázika* ("Basic Basket") program aimed to relieve people's economic suffering by providing subsidies for basic goods. While well-intentioned, the program suffered from many problems, including logistical difficulties and corruption.²⁸ The program was initiated in 2020, but many families did not receive assistance until late 2021 (some families have not received any assistance at all). The amount of support received was often inadequate to replace lost income, and there were reports of rotten and expired food being distributed through the program. There is also widespread suspicion that the program fostered corruption, as people with political connections took advantage of the program's poor administration to enrich themselves by manipulating prices.

Education and secondary health impacts

Health and education provision in Timor-Leste were heavily disrupted by COVID-19 restrictions, leading to a variety of negative secondary effects. As noted above, FM's discussions with education sector stakeholders and families suggest that distance learning is not practical in Timor-Leste's context, meaning that many children and young people received no education at all during periods of closures. To our knowledge there has been little research done into how school closures have affected children and young people in Timor-Leste, both in relation to their educational development, and to their social and psychological wellbeing. Education is critical for both individual and national socio-economic development, and Timor-Leste's educational system is already suffering from serious structural problems. Thus, the unprecedented disruption of education during COVID-19 is likely to have serious negative effects on Timor-Leste's development.

²⁷

https://www.tl.undp.org/content/dam/timorleste/docs/reports/SEIA_Executive%20Summary_ENG.pdf

²⁸ <https://webcelso.net/2020/12/16/a-paradox-of-food-subsidies-siesta-basica-in-timor-leste/>

FM's direct observations and evidence from around the world on the negative effects of COVID-19 restrictions on healthcare access²⁹ suggest that restrictions likely exacerbated other existing health problems in Timor-Leste, especially poverty-related diseases which contribute to high rates of morbidity and mortality in Timor-Leste. Many people experienced reduced income and increased food insecurity, which has contributed to malnutrition-related health problems, a major source of morbidity and mortality in Timor-Leste. Of course, the negative health impacts of increased poverty and reduced economic growth are well known, and numerous experts have noted that these secondary effects will impact the lives of millions of people long into the future.³⁰ In addition, while restrictions on movement and gathering aimed to reduce COVID-19 transmission by limiting people's contacts, forcing people to stay in crowded homes with unsanitary conditions for prolonged periods may have increased transmission of serious infectious diseases such as tuberculosis,³¹ another significant contributor to ill health in Timor-Leste.³²

UNDP reported that restrictions on movement and anxiety about being forced into isolation if tested positive resulted in reduced access to healthcare facilities.³³ FM has also heard direct anecdotal reports of several deaths which occurred because of missed treatment for chronic illnesses due to fears about enforced testing and isolation. Mandatory swab testing in health facilities resulted in delayed treatment for many people. In one widely publicised case, delayed treatment due to COVID-19 testing requirements resulted in the death of a pregnant woman and her baby, as the attending hospital staff refused to treat the woman until negative test results were received.³⁴ As noted above, civil society organisations have found that intensified psychological stress, often driven by economic hardship, has contributed to increased incidences of domestic violence and numerous suicides, particularly among women.

In addition to noting the secondary health impacts of restrictions, numerous public health experts have questioned the benefits of mass testing and quarantine of healthy individuals

²⁹ <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S027795362200065X>

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370\(22\)00192-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370(22)00192-4/fulltext)

³⁰ <https://www.ifpri.org/publication/impacts-covid-19-global-poverty-food-security-and-diets>

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X2100139X>

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)31647-0/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(20)31647-0/fulltext)

³¹ <https://jech.bmj.com/content/76/3/310>

³² https://www.statistics.gov.tl/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/Census_booklet_-Mortality-1707-ver-2.pdf

³³ See page 11, UNDP SEIA report, 2021

https://www.tl.undp.org/content/dam/timorleste/docs/reports/SEIA_Executive%20Summary_ENG.pdf

³⁴ <https://gmntv.tl/saude-e-educacao/08/2021/ms-odete-rejeita-fo-komentariu-kona-ba-inan-isin-rua-mate-ih-vera-cruz/>

given their extremely high costs for individuals, society and governments.³⁵ While COVID-19 swab tests usually do not cause direct harm,³⁶ large-scale PCR testing using complex laboratory equipment requires the allocation of significant quantities of financial and human resources. Many health experts have also argued that mass testing of asymptomatic people is of dubious epidemiological value.³⁷ Meanwhile, several countries which were initially praised for their mass testing, contact tracing and quarantine programs have since experienced major outbreaks and abandoned this strategy, raising questions about the sustainability of this approach, especially in countries with severe capacity limitations.³⁸ Recognising these problems, the WHO published guidance in June 2021 stating that: “Widespread screening of asymptomatic individuals is not currently recommended as a strategy due to the significant costs associated with it and the lack of data on its operational effectiveness.”³⁹

For countries with limited resources and widespread poverty such as Timor-Leste, these questions are even more relevant. Since the beginning of the pandemic, Timor-Leste has allocated significant financial and human resources to testing and quarantining thousands of otherwise healthy people, diverting state resources away from other urgent health problems which already receive inadequate attention. With international assistance, GoTL has built several isolation facilities around the country⁴⁰ – which now sit empty – at a cost of millions of dollars. FM wonders whether this money may have been better spent on other infrastructure which is critical to public health, such as improving sanitation and drinking water, fixing plumbing in the National Hospital to enable handwashing, or expanding school feeding programs to reduce child malnutrition. We are also sad that other serious health problems which result in hundreds of preventable deaths among children each year in Timor-Leste are not treated with the same urgency or allocation of state and donor resources as seen with COVID-19.

³⁵ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600\(20\)30453-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600(20)30453-7/fulltext)
<https://academic.oup.com/jtm/article/27/7/taaa192/5922349> <https://doi.org/10.1093/jtm/taaa192>
[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600\(20\)30453-7/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lanres/article/PIIS2213-2600(20)30453-7/fulltext)

³⁶ Research has found that swab tests can result in serious negative side-effects. The study below found 1.24 cases of serious complications occurred per 100,000 tests carried out. During COVID-19, there has been an unprecedented expansion of swab testing worldwide, often being carried out by people with minimal experience and training. Thus, it can be reasonably assumed that many otherwise healthy people have experienced serious side-effects from COVID-19 swab testing.

<https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamaotolaryngology/fullarticle/2779393>

³⁷ <https://www.bmj.com/content/373/bmj.n1058>

³⁸ <https://www.ft.com/content/69c77f4d-6998-4863-966b-08ca91142dd7> See also: <http://theconversation.com/mass-covid-testing-and-sequencing-is-unsustainable-heres-how-future-surveillance-can-be-done-177404>

³⁹ <https://apps.who.int/iris/bitstream/handle/10665/342002/WHO-2019-nCoV-lab-testing-2021.1-eng.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>

⁴⁰ <https://reliefweb.int/report/timor-leste/timor-leste-break-ground-us-funded-isolation-facility-baucau>

Human rights violations by security forces

Beyond questions about the secondary socio-economic and health effects of Timor-Leste's COVID-19 response, an additional consequence of the SoE and emergency measures was to incentivise state security forces to restrict citizens' daily lives to an unprecedented extent. Several major incidents during 2021 illustrated the risks of directing security forces to intervene in citizens' normal daily activities under the guise of public health. For example, in March 2021 PNTL arrested hundreds of people exercising and buying goods for allegedly being in violation of COVID-19 rules. They were later released without charge after spending several hours sitting in a crowded pen in the hot sun without adequate food, water or access to toilets. The incident was widely debated on social media, with many arguing that PNTL's action was disproportionate and incorrect as exercising outdoors was allowed under the rules, and some of those arrested were on their way to buy essential goods when detained. FM wrote at the time that this incident illustrated the danger of implementing arbitrary rules without clear guidance, while highlighting the Government's failure to clearly communicate rules to the police and PNTL's lack of capacity to safely implement them without violating people's basic rights and dignity.⁴¹

A subsequent incident which illustrated the arbitrary and unscientific nature of COVID-19 measures in Timor-Leste occurred when PNTL with the Ministry of Health established a checkpoint outside the main police training centre in Dili, where all passing motorists were forced to undergo a swab test. While most people complied, some resisted, arguing that this was a violation of their rights. Videos circulated on social media showing people arguing and fighting with PNTL members to be allowed to leave the testing area. FM wrote at the time that such testing, in addition to unnecessarily provoking tensions between PNTL and the community, lacked any scientific rationale while violating medical ethical principles.⁴²

Even after the Government lifted domestic restrictions on movement in September 2021, some Municipal authorities established police checkpoints to check people's vaccine papers, with those found to not have been vaccinated being brought aside to receive vaccination on the spot. It is not clear what happened in cases where people declined to be vaccinated, but these incidents reveal a worrying authoritarian tendency and disregard for people's medical freedom and dignity. FM is extremely concerned that such authoritarianism has been given renewed licence under the legitimising narrative of COVID-19 containment. Moreover, while PNTL's approach to the enforcement of COVID-19 measures mostly avoided serious

⁴¹ <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2021/03/26/arbitrary-rules-threaten-public-wellbeing-and-national-security/>

⁴² <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2021/05/05/mandatory-swab-testing-is-unethical-undemocratic-and-illogical/>

abuses, such incidents validate FM's previous concerns that the rules would inevitably provoke human rights violations and conflict between communities and the state.⁴³

While GoTL argues that restriction of fundamental Constitutional rights was legal under the State of Emergency, and justified to protect public health, FM sees that it is also important to highlight the precedent that the pandemic response has established for the future, including its implications for democratic rights and freedoms. FM is concerned that the declaration of the SoE and implementation of various containment measures occurred in Timor-Leste without any democratic debate or serious cost-benefit analysis. We also see that there has been little interest from policy makers to evaluate the overall impacts or efficacy of the pandemic response, which suggests that valuable lessons for future emergency responses are being missed.

Furthermore, the state gave itself unprecedented power to restrict people's daily lives and activities under the SoE. Such power comes with major potential for authoritarianism and abuse, especially when exercised by security forces which many faces challenges related to discipline and use of force. Indeed, UN Secretary General António Guterres warned that leaders around the world took advantage of the COVID-19 crisis to expand their power and erode democratic checks.⁴⁴ While FM does not believe that Timor-Leste will experience the levels of authoritarianism which have been seen in some other countries anytime soon, it is still important to discuss these risks and effects of COVID-19 to ensure that this does not occur in the future.

Impacts on rights, freedoms and state-citizen relations

FM is grateful that GoTL decided to end the SoE and the most restrictive measures which affect people's daily lives once vaccination rates increased and COVID-19 cases fell. However, in addition to the impacts on people's security and wellbeing discussed above, there has been little recognition of the fact that many people's rights, freedom and dignity were violated during the implementation of COVID-19 measures. Due to the visible harms caused by many restrictions, and pre-existing distrust of the state, many Timorese people are extremely distrustful of GoTL's COVID-19 response. This has further eroded the relationship between citizens and the state, which FM fears could contribute to national instability and conflict if it remains unaddressed.

⁴³ <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2021/03/12/covid-19-measures-must-be-clear-balanced-and-reduce-social-panic/>

⁴⁴ <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development/2021/feb/22/world-faces-pandemic-human-rights-abuses-covid-19-antonio-guterres> See also: <https://academic.oup.com/jlb/advance-article/doi/10.1093/jlb/ljaa064/5912724>

Examples of infringement of rights and dignity include the fact that thousands of people were forced to quarantine in government facilities under varying conditions. More privileged people could pay to quarantine in comfortable hotels or self-isolate at home, but many others experienced poor conditions such as no access to fresh air or sunlight, inadequate food and no support for communication. Enforced quarantine also deprived people of their incomes, separated families and likely contributed to poor physical and psychological health in numerous cases.

Many Timorese people, including dozens of people who spoke with FM, have expressed distrust towards GoTL's COVID-19 response. Social media discussions reveal widespread popular frustration and scepticism regarding the motivations and benefits of GoTL's COVID-19 response. Another major theme of public discussion is the disparity between GoTL's intense focus on COVID-19 compared with other serious health problems such as dengue, which results in the deaths of many children each year in Timor-Leste but receives little attention from the state. Many comments left under the Ministry of Health's COVID-19 Facebook posts called for GoTL to pay greater attention to controlling dengue rather than focusing on COVID-19,⁴⁵ illustrating how many believe that COVID-19 received a disproportionate share of public resources.

The allocation for COVID-19 in the 2022 State Budget alone is \$37 million – not including additional donor funding – which is far greater than GoTL's spending on water and sanitation in most years since independence. Meanwhile, large numbers of Timorese people continue to suffer from a lack of adequate sanitation and clean drinking water, which, together with poor nutrition, are responsible for thousands of deaths each year, including hundreds of children. Indeed, the annual dengue epidemics relate directly to the lack of state investment in water supply, sanitation and drainage. Such disparities are difficult to explain and justify given the direct impacts of COVID-19 in Timor-Leste relative to the harm caused by poor sanitation, nutrition and infectious diseases such as TB and dengue.

Vaccinations and voluntary informed consent

Many Timorese and international observers have praised GoTL's vaccination program for achieving relatively high coverage among the population. Nonetheless, FM is concerned that the program was also characterised by coercion and a lack of information about serious potential vaccine side effects.⁴⁶ There was also no discussion in Timor-Leste about the

⁴⁵ Facebook: <https://web.facebook.com/MinisteriodaSaudeTL>

⁴⁶ Serious side effects from COVID-19 vaccinations have been widely documented in many countries, including heart damage, blood clots, menstrual disruption in women, paralysis and death. In recognition of this, many governments, including GoTL, implemented compensation programs for severe adverse reactions from COVID-19 vaccinations.

relative risk of COVID-19 among different population groups and the implications this raises for the risk-benefit ratio of COVID-19 vaccination for some groups, especially children.⁴⁷

FM notes that although the Prime Minister stated that vaccination must be based on individual choice, GoTL mandated vaccination for civil servants, effectively forcing its employees to be vaccinated or face loss of livelihood. FM has also heard reports of people being told by government officials that they would lose access to state benefits if they did not accept vaccination, while some parents were told that their children would be unable to attend school if the children themselves were not vaccinated.

FM supports voluntary vaccination for vulnerable groups and others who choose to be vaccinated. However, we believe that it is unethical to limit fundamental rights and access to basic services based on personal decisions about health treatments, especially when data on their long-term efficacy, negative side-effects and risk-benefit ratio are still incomplete. Important scientific, epidemiological, ethical and policy questions around COVID-19 vaccination are being widely debated by experts across the world, but so far there has been no serious discussion in Timor-Leste about these complex issues. FM is therefore concerned that Timor-Leste's vaccination program has not been based on all available evidence or well-established medical ethics.

Discussion: the importance of contextually appropriate policies and cost-benefit analysis

FM and many others have repeatedly warned Timor-Leste's decision makers about the danger of "copy-pasting" laws, policies and programs from other countries without sufficiently adapting them to Timor-Leste's specific context, conditions and needs.⁴⁸ Indeed, international development researchers have increasingly criticised "best practice" approaches which fail to consider and adapt to local realities.⁴⁹ Timor-Leste has direct experience of well-intentioned programs which create negative secondary impacts, especially when models and concepts are "imported" from other places without sufficient consideration of the local context. Despite this well-known policy problem, in response to COVID-19, many developing country governments implemented sweeping restrictions and

⁴⁷ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/apa.16430>
<https://blogs.bmj.com/bmj/2021/07/13/covid-19-vaccines-for-children-hypothetical-benefits-to-adults-do-not-outweigh-risks-to-children/>

⁴⁸ <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2021/04/16/new-elite-consensus-is-needed-to-avoid-further-crisis/>

⁴⁹ <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1002/pad.622>
<https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/media/57a089b3ed915d622c000363/61065-BestPracticetoBestFit.pdf> <https://odi.org/en/publications/from-best-practice-to-best-fit-understanding-and-navigating-wicked-problems-in-international-development/>

measures which provoked unprecedented disruption of social and economic life, with little consideration of their practical implementation in different contexts or effects on poor people's lives.⁵⁰

Research focused on the COVID-19 crisis in developing countries has found that the unprecedented disruption caused by pandemic restrictions has produced immense suffering, insecurity and life-years lost, with the burden falling heaviest on socio-economically marginalised people.⁵¹ The World Bank has estimated that around 100 million people fell into extreme poverty during 2020-2021,⁵² which will exacerbate poverty-related health problems which are responsible for significant mortality and morbidity in developing countries.⁵³ At the same time, supply chain disruption, income loss and increased food prices during the pandemic resulted in sharply increased food insecurity around the world, exacerbating malnutrition related illnesses and deaths.⁵⁴

International organisations have stated that the disruption of essential healthcare programs due to restrictions on movement and changed protocols caused hundreds of thousands of additional deaths among young people in the Global South, at a minimum.⁵⁵ Extended school closures have harmed the development, safety and wellbeing of hundreds of millions of children, while creating many long-term socio-economic consequences which will negatively affect health outcomes long into the future.⁵⁶ The gendered impacts of "lockdown" and accompanying economic, education and healthcare disruption have also been widely documented,⁵⁷ with dramatically increased levels of domestic violence, psychological stress, forced marriages and early pregnancy being observed in many regions during COVID-19,⁵⁸ including in Timor-Leste.⁵⁹

⁵⁰ <https://academic.oup.com/heapol/article/36/7/1152/6263531>
<https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/maq.12599>

⁵¹ <https://ebrary.ifpri.org/digital/collection/p15738coll2/id/134229>

⁵² <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2021/12/20/year-2021-in-review-the-inequality-pandemic>

⁵³ <https://journals.plos.org/plosone/article?id=10.1371/journal.pone.0253073>

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC1180662/>

⁵⁴ <https://www.ifpri.org/publication/impact-covid-19-household-food-insecurity-and-interlinkages-child-feeding-practices-and> <https://www.usglc.org/coronavirus/global-hunger/>

⁵⁵ UNICEF estimated that 228,000 additional children died in South Asia in 2020 due to healthcare disruption alone <https://www.unicef.org/rosa/media/13066/file/Main%20Report.pdf>

⁵⁶ <https://jamanetwork.com/journals/jamanetworkopen/fullarticle/2772834>

<https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse/consequences>

⁵⁷ <https://data.unwomen.org/publications/unlocking-lockdown-gendered-effects-covid-19-achieving-sdgs-asia-and-pacific>

⁵⁸ <https://www.unwomen.org/en/news/in-focus/in-focus-gender-equality-in-covid-19-response/violence-against-women-during-covid-19>

<https://www.liebertpub.com/doi/10.1089/vio.2020.0069>

⁵⁹ <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2021/12/09/human-security-impacts-for-women-and-children-during-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

Meanwhile, despite early fears that COVID-19 would devastate least-developed countries due to limited health capacity, widespread co-morbidities and the unfeasibility of implementing strict containment measures,⁶⁰ COVID-19 mortality has been lower than expected in least-developed countries,⁶¹ including in Timor-Leste.⁶² This has prompted many researchers to investigate how factors such as average population age, obesity rates, latitude, climate, exposure to sunlight, urbanisation, wealth distribution and prior exposure to other diseases shape COVID-19 mortality and morbidity,⁶³ independently of government restrictions and individual behaviour. In light of these secondary effects and the relatively low health burden of COVID-19 in least developed countries, many have voiced concerns about the disproportionate impacts of COVID-19 restrictions, especially for poor and informally employed people who make up the bulk of the population in most developing countries.⁶⁴ Similarly, some WHO officials have expressed concern about the widespread adoption of “lockdown” as a primary pandemic control mechanism, and urged governments to consider the disproportionate impact of such policies on the poor and vulnerable.⁶⁵

Moreover, the mixed benefits and proven harms of many of the most restrictive measures are reflected in ongoing debates among experts about the efficacy, sustainability, trade-offs

⁶⁰ <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/04/10/poor-countries-social-distancing-coronavirus/>
<https://www.cgdev.org/blog/does-one-size-fit-all-realistic-alternatives-covid-19-response-low-income-countries> <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12992-021-00662-y>

⁶¹ A UN report from April 2021 notes that “least developed countries appear to be less affected by the COVID-19 pandemic than other developing countries, and far less than developed countries”

https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/publication/CDP_Comprehensive_Study_2021.pdf See also:
<https://www.ghspjournal.org/content/9/3/433>

<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2021.751197/full>

⁶² There have been 133 COVID-related deaths recorded in Timor-Leste, most of which occurred during 2021. Based on Timor-Leste’s estimated all-cause mortality rate of 5.9 per 1000 people in 2019, and population of 1.3 million, around 7,800 deaths would have occurred during 2021 in the absence of COVID-19. <https://www.statista.com/statistics/728881/death-rate-in-timor-leste/>

⁶³ <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2020.604339/full> <https://doi.org/10.1186/s12916-020-01872-8/> <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S266646902200001X>
<https://nutrition.bmj.com/content/3/1/118>

<https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0305750X20303788>

https://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=3866607

[https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370\(20\)30208-X/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/eclinm/article/PIIS2589-5370(20)30208-X/fulltext)

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34350941/> <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7859712>

<https://science.sciencemag.org/content/371/6524/27?intcmp=trendmd-sci>

<https://nutrition.bmj.com/content/early/2020/06/14/bmjnph-2020-000110>

<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-021-87692-z> <https://gh.bmj.com/content/5/5/e002699>

<https://aasopenresearch.org/articles/4-47> <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/pirs.12647>

⁶⁴ <https://anthrosource.onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/maq.12599>

<https://www.cgdev.org/blog/more-harm-good-net-impact-covid-19-policies-what-matters-health>

<https://blogs.imf.org/2020/08/27/covid-19-without-help-low-income-developing-countries-risk-a-lost-decade/>

https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---ed_protect/---protrav/---travail/documents/briefingnote/wcms_743523.pdf

⁶⁵ <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-10-12/world-health-organization-coronavirus-lockdown-advice/12753688>

and net effects of governmental responses to COVID-19 across various contexts.⁶⁶ Evaluating the efficacy and net effects of pandemic policies is also challenging due to the inherent difficulty of separating the direct health impacts of COVID-19 from the effects – positive and negative – of responses to the disease.⁶⁷ Acknowledging these complexities, an OECD report published in January 2022 on evaluations of governmental responses to COVID-19 stated that the “effectiveness of lockdown and restriction measures should probably be further assessed”, while noting “the impact of lockdowns on domestic violence, alcohol consumption, youth, and mental health.”⁶⁸

Timor-Leste shares many characteristics with other countries which experienced low COVID-19 mortality rates, such as young average age, low obesity rates, low urbanisation and tropical climate. Given the impracticality of “social distancing” and other measures in Timor-Leste, these population and geographic factors may have played a role in limiting the direct health impacts of COVID-19, beyond the direct effects of government measures or individual behaviour. Unfortunately, no studies have been carried which can enable us to understand more about the true drivers of COVID-19 transmission and mortality in Timor-Leste. FM therefore suggests that further analysis is needed to fully understand the efficacy – and negative secondary effects – of the restrictions implemented in Timor-Leste. We hope that the information and analysis contained in this report can contribute to the ongoing discussion about how to ensure that public policies are adequately adapted to Timor-Leste’s needs and context. In this way, future public health policies can be designed and implemented in such a way which maximises protection of vulnerable groups, while minimising broad socio-economic and other harms which negatively impact the lives and wellbeing of the vulnerable population.

⁶⁶ <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/more-harm-good-net-impact-covid-19-policies-what-matters-health>
<https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpubh.2021.625778/full>
<https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13571516.2021.1976051>
<https://doi.org/10.1093/heapol/czab054> <https://www.bmj.com/company/newsroom/the-health-impacts-of-lockdowns-are-not-worse-than-those-of-large-covid-19-outbreaks-at-least-in-the-short-term/>
<https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpubh.2021.625778> <http://theconversation.com/why-nobody-will-ever-agree-on-whether-covid-lockdowns-were-worth-it-161154>
<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-022-05482-7> <https://gh.bmj.com/content/6/8/e006653>
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8890786/>
<https://academic.oup.com/cesifo/article/67/3/318/6199605>
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC8890786/>
<https://academic.oup.com/cesifo/article/67/3/318/6199605> <https://www.nature.com/articles/s41562-020-01009-0>

⁶⁷ <https://www.health.org.uk/publications/long-reads/what-has-happened-to-non-covid-mortality-during-the-pandemic> <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/abs/10.1111/eci.13423>

⁶⁸ https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=1125_1125436-7j5hea8nk4&title=First-lessons-from-government-evaluations-of-COVID-19-responses

Conclusion

In this report, FM has documented the experiences of numerous Timorese people who experienced various forms of insecurity during COVID-19. The report also discussed some of the implications of the COVID-19 crisis for Timor-Leste's socio-economic development, democracy and national stability. Finally, it explored some critical questions regarding the practical implementation and concrete effects of the COVID-19 response in Timor-Leste. While our research capacities as a small civil society organisation are limited, we believe that the direct experiences documented in this report are broadly representative of Timorese society, and that we have provided adequate evidence to support our arguments and speculation about the dynamics of the COVID-19 pandemic in Timor-Leste, including references to numerous international reports and expert commentary.

Many institutions – including GoTL – have recognised the heavy socio-economic impacts created by COVID-19 restrictions in Timor-Leste, including the fact that the burden has fallen overwhelmingly on disadvantaged groups. As in almost all developing countries, progress in critical areas such as poverty alleviation and education has been reversed during COVID-19, and the effects of this reversal will continue to be felt long into the future. Reduced income, food insecurity and malnutrition have already caused additional health problems, shortened life spans and reduced quality of life for many, while the impacts of more than a year of interrupted education for hundreds of thousands of young people are still unknown. While it is difficult to quantify due to the lack of data, COVID-19 restrictions and protocols have also led to reduced healthcare access and preventable deaths in Timor-Leste. The implementation of travel restrictions, enforced quarantine and other measures provoked violations of human rights and basic dignity, while eroding trust between many communities and state institutions.

While it may be that GoTL's response was necessary to limit COVID-19 transmission and mortality and thus save lives overall, serious analysis of the practical implementation of COVID-19 measures in Timor-Leste's context suggests that they may have been less effective in controlling the disease than some observers assume. On the other hand, some evidence suggests that certain structural population and geographical factors may have been significant in limiting the direct health impacts of COVID-19 in Timor-Leste.⁶⁹

⁶⁹ <https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpubh.2020.604339>
<https://papers.ssrn.com/abstract=3866607> <https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/33532128/>
<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC7859712> <https://aasopenresearch.org/articles/4-47>
<https://www.nature.com/articles/s41598-021-87692-z> <https://gh.bmj.com/content/5/5/e002699>
<http://theconversation.com/the-impact-of-covid-19-has-been-lower-in-africa-we-explore-the-reasons-164955> <https://www.science.org/doi/abs/10.1126/science.abf8832>
<https://nutrition.bmj.com/content/3/1/118> <https://doi.org/10.1093/inthealth/ihaa040>

Unfortunately, there are no concrete data available which can help to determine which factors were most decisive in shaping COVID-19's trajectory in Timor-Leste. However, evaluations of the dynamics of COVID-19 and concrete effects of containment measures in both developed and developing country contexts illustrate the mixed relationships between many containment measures and COVID-19 mortality and morbidity.

Without exception, FM's discussions with community members found that the restrictions imposed by GoTL in response to COVID-19 directly impacted their economic security and physical and psychological wellbeing. The negative effects have been disproportionately felt by poor people, women, children, students, disabled people and the informally employed majority. A commonly heard phrase in Timor-Leste during COVID-19 was: "*Ami sei la mate tanba Covid, maibe ami sei mate tanba hamlaha*" ("We won't die from Covid, but we will die from hunger"). Analysis of social media discussions reveals that many Timorese people consider the Government's focus on COVID-19 to have been disproportionate when compared with other serious diseases such as dengue fever. Thus, it appears that GoTL's COVID-19 response has created an impression that GoTL has neglected the urgent needs of citizens in favour of following international recommendations and protocols, regardless of their direct impacts to people's lives on the ground.

Thankfully, it now appears that the pandemic has subsided in Timor-Leste. Increased economic activity has been visible in Dili and international flights are reconnecting Timor-Leste with the world. While FM is grateful that the direct health impacts of COVID-19 in Timor-Leste were minimal, we are concerned that there has not yet been a robust public discussion about many of the secondary harms produced by restrictions and associated socio-economic, healthcare and educational disruption. By highlighting these concerns and debates, FM does not intend to dismiss the danger of COVID-19, especially for at-risk groups. Rather, we hope that this report can contribute to public debate on this critical issue. In this way, we can avoid repeating past mistakes, while helping decision makers address Timorese people's most urgent needs to promote their security and wellbeing.

Recommendations

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:

<https://pubmed.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/34593571/>
<https://www.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpubh.2021.751197>

- 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,⁷⁰ and as many experts critical of the global response to COVID-19 have pointed out,⁷¹ 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.⁷² Many countries have ended mandatory quarantine policies for all travellers, while most countries which continue to enforce

⁷⁰ <https://www.fundasaunmahein.org/2021/03/12/covid-19-measures-must-be-clear-balanced-and-reduce-social-panic/>

⁷¹ [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736\(21\)00193-8/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/lancet/article/PIIS0140-6736(21)00193-8/fulltext)
[https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736\(20\)31422-7.pdf](https://www.thelancet.com/pdfs/journals/lancet/PIIS0140-6736(20)31422-7.pdf)

⁷² [https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099\(21\)00768-4/fulltext](https://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099(21)00768-4/fulltext)

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.⁷³ 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.

⁷³ <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/18918131.2021.1965367>
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