



# Social and Economic Mobility in the Indonesia-Timor Leste Border Area (Case Study in Motaain Region Belu Regency)

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**Abstract:** This aims to study dynamic mobility social and economic communities in the Indonesia-East Timor border region with approach locality, which focuses on practices and relations daily public border in responding to national borders. With method qualitative and approach ethnographic, research This describes How identity, network social, and economic strategies constructed in room fluid and interactive borders. Research results show that the state borders are not only as entity administrative, but rather room negotiated social repetition in a way continuously by actor locals through activity cross border.

**Keywords:** Socio-Economic Mobility; Locality; Indonesia-Timor Leste; Border

## 1. Introduction

Border between countries gives rise to a marginal view in discourse face national, good in a way social and economic because of the area This is an interaction zone dynamic between countries and communities locally. In Indonesia, the Indonesia–East Timor border region is one of the areas that is historically, political and culturally of its own complexity (Rejo, 2021). After the independence of East Timor in 2002, the border region like Belu Regency (NTT) became an important point of interaction between countries that not only involve state institutions, but also practices socio-economic public local ongoing cross border.

Social and economic mobility in this region cannot be understood solely in the formal framework of national borders. Border communities often have kinship ties, migration histories, and economic networks that transcend national administrative lines (Neonbeni, Randy Vallentino, Yosep Copertino Apaut, 2023). Informal trade, exchange of services, and daily migration for work and trade are part of everyday life that reflect local agency in responding to state policies and larger geopolitical structures.

Motaain itself is geographically located in Silawan Village, Tasifeto Timur District, Kakuluk Mesak District, Belu Regency, which directly borders Bobonaro District, Timor Leste. The distance from Silawan Village to the center of East Nusa Tenggara Province is 294 km, while the distance to Dili, the capital city of Timor Leste, is 114 km (BPPD, 2025). This shows that public access between countries is very high in Motaain. The Motaain PLBN itself, since it was inaugurated by President Jokowi in 2016, which was built with a local character, namely the Matubesi tribe model design, stands on 8.5 hectares of land. The Motaain PLBN offers services such as immigration, quarantine, security, and administrative management that have been operating since its inauguration (BPPD, 2025).

The Motaain PLBN is equipped with two main zones: the core zone and the supporting zone. The core zone includes cross-border service facilities such as customs, immigration, quarantine, and security. The supporting zone includes the PLBN market, employee dormitories, Wisma Indonesia, terminals, and places of worship. The government plans to develop this supporting zone into an economic and industrial area, making it the second center of economic growth after Kupang (BPN). Visits by high-

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ranking officials, such as the Acting Governor of NTT and the Chairperson of Commission I of the NTT DPRD, showed serious attention to the development of the Motaain PLBN. They highlighted the importance of adequate infrastructure and strict supervision to prevent illegal activities and ensure that the area is safe and conducive to trade activities (BNPP). The Motaain PLBN serves as a symbol of friendship and cooperation between Indonesia and Timor Leste. The market at the Motaain PLBN is a place for social and economic interaction for the people of both countries, strengthening cultural and social relations in the border area. The Wini PLBN and Napan PLBN also contribute to socio-economic development in the border area. PLBN Wini, for example, has recruited 98 children of landowners to work at the PLBN, providing a positive impact on the local economy. PLBN Napan, on the other hand, stands out in terms of culture by adopting the traditional architecture of the Sanak Tribe. Overall, PLBN Motaain has advantages in terms of cross-border activity volume, trade value, and economic area development plans, making it a more significant center of economic growth compared to other cross-border posts in NTT.

In 2024, the Motaain PLBN recorded a total of 334,769 passers-by, consisting of 166,303 people departing and 168,466 people arriving. The export value through this PLBN reached IDR 796 billion, with the main commodities being cement, mineral water, furniture, fish, vegetables, and instant noodles. A total of 8,195 trucks used for transport goods export This (BNPP RI, 2025).

Bilateral relations between Indonesia and Timor Leste are generally shared in summary history, namely the colonial period, post colonialism, the integration period and parts from Indonesia in 1975-1999, early independence 1999-2002, and post independence (Mahendra et al., 2022). On the beak time said, intertwined forming bilateral relations fact history. Second group public own connection kinship Because originate from the same tribe. Although thus potential conflict Can happen Because sovereignty (post independences). Responding to the matter said, bilateral cooperation was carried out between both countries with the construction of a cross-border post which is becoming nine priorities development national the Indonesian side, with objective main is support growth economy local, strengthening sovereign territory and increasing service cross- border (Seran, 2018).

Mobility social between border communities of Motaain marked with service education, such as most the people in Timor Leste choose to send to school children they are in Indonesia because of the assumption that the quality of education in Indonesia is better Good from Education in the area they. This is can know from amount children who attend school around the border area majority is children who come from Timor Leste, although based on empirical data We experience difficulty in categorize the amount of valid data because most of them go to school choose for stay together family or relatives who are registered as Indonesian citizens, but in fact is inhabitant the people of Timor Leste. As an example concretely, one of State Universities located in North Central Timor Regency based on the number of data students as many as 6,952, but those registered as student foreign totaling 2 people in the database (Universitas Timor, 2025).

Work The same in a way economy depicted through existence swap exchange goods and services at what level needs and dependencies East Timor's staple food is very high. This is because the amount exported goods to Timor Leste is more tall If compared to Indonesia (Nuradhawati, 2022). The level of need for this is what triggered its existence to improve economy business trade with the surrounding community border especially in Motaain. The same thing also happens to service health Because access going to center the city of Dili is quite Far so most the Timor Leste community living around border choose for get service health in Belu Regency because easy access reach and quality very good service (Republika.co.id, 2024). The economic cooperation that was established gave an impact positively for the perpetrator economy like accommodation and also other UMKM actors (Amtiran et al., 2025).

A number of studies are interesting about mobility social public borders, such as study (Shintia Taneo, Paulina Y. Amtiran, Christien C. Foenay, 2024), who concluded that trading cross border between Indonesian and Timor Leste communities improve income and social status, but on the other hand there is his weakness namely fluctuation in price of various goods and services because of No existence standardization standard. Another study developed by (Nuban et al., 2024) concluded that mobility, social and economic growth give improved income, open field work, reduce level unemployment, and existence of various development infrastructure covering access roads, and open isolated areas, so that can be accessed. Impact negative effects caused from existence openness This among them is distribution income that is not evenly between group society, because mark different currencies, the existence of unfair market competition Healthy between capital owner with proletarian society, as well as challenge security Because existence change social events that occur very quickly (Bau et al., 2023).

In another study, researchers find existence traditional market opportunities located in North Central Timor Regency, not only as means swap exchange goods but also as means meeting family and event friendship between second group communities on the border who do not capable buy passport and visa or No take care of Cross-Border Passes, so that traditional markets become room public for they to weave friendship (Sugiarti, 2021). This has proved it that the market is not just place transact, but become event transgression between group society. So that government area, even the government center, expected to give attention to the openness of the public in traditional markets. Presence of government and state through policy border, development infrastructure, and control migration, in practice, often clash with pattern practice daily society that is transnational. Therefore that, study This aiming for understand mobility social and economic communities in the Indonesia-Timor Leste border region through approach locality, to describe How public to form practice and relations cross- country that is not always in line with formal logic of state (Binsasi & Korbaffo, 2022).

The lack of studies related to borders using a locality approach is the main factor that drives this research. Locality is not only interpreted as a geographical location, but as a social and cultural construction lived by border communities. This means that the practice of cross-border mobility and interaction needs to be analyzed through the lens of how local communities construct the meaning of borders, manage relations with neighboring countries, and form survival strategies in complex spaces. One of studies that are general review about locality is study (Bele et al., 2021), which concludes a number of matter interesting like involvement institution custom Ti'sian Tak Ni'an in Makir and Lamaksenu Villages in taking decision related the problem that occurred between group the surrounding community border like problem customs, marriage even up to the policy swap exchange goods and services (Binsasi, 2022).

Based on the overview above so researcher feel need review about How mobility social and economic public the border between Indonesia and Timor Leste with approach locality to express facts and realities that form structure social in the surrounding community border precisely around the Motaain PLBN Belu Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province.

Formulation the problem offered is How form mobility social and economic communities living around the Indonesian- East Timor border region and How interaction cross country influence structure social and economic the surrounding community border. The main goal from this study is to identify forms of social and economic interconnectedness between group public as well as to examine influence interaction and the transformation of social and economic public local. Urgency from study This lies in relevance in context development area inclusive and reality - based borders local. With understanding dynamics socio-economic from perspective society, it is hoped can appear to approach more policies adaptive, dialogic and empowering actors locally as subject important in connection between countries.

## 2. Materials and Methods

Study carried out in border areas between Indonesia and Timor Leste, especially at the Motaain PLBN which is located in Silawan Village, District the Kakuluk Mesak, Belu Regency, East Nusa Tenggara Province. The research was conducted for 2 months, from March to April 2025. This study uses a qualitative approach as offered by Crasweel in (Fadli, 2021) with a focus on the locality approach, namely looking at the social mobility of the community based on the social, economic, cultural, and geographical dynamics that are typical in the border area. The types and sources of data used in this study are in-depth interviews with border communities (traders, traditional leaders, youth, and border crossers), then researchers conduct direct observations of social and economic activities at the border, and conduct Focus Group Discussions (FGD) with community leaders and village officials. Secondary data used are documents from local governments (BPS, DISPERINDAG, Immigration, and Border Agencies), and previous studies, journals, proceedings and reports from research institutions. Data Collection Techniques are carried out by means of semi-structured interviews to explore the experiences of vertical and horizontal social mobility of people at the border. The researchers also did not forget to conduct participatory observations where researchers were directly involved in community activities to understand patterns of life and cross-border interactions.

The analysis was conducted descriptively-qualitatively with the following steps, namely data reduction, where researchers filter important information from the results of interviews and observations and group data based on themes such as work, education, social relations, and local culture. Then interpret the meaning of social mobility based on the local border context. After interpreting the meaning, then conclusions are drawn inductively, with data validity using triangulation of sources and methods, namely comparing the results of interviews, observations, and official documents to ensure data consistency, and conducting member checking to confirm the temporary findings to the main informant.

To test the validity of qualitative data on the social and economic mobility of informal communities obtained through interviews, observations, and official documents, the researcher used source triangulation, method triangulation, and time triangulation. Source triangulation involves collecting data from various sources to verify the information obtained, then comparing data from interviews with key and supporting informants, and official documents, to ensure consistency of information. Method triangulation is carried out by exploring phenomena from different perspectives, then combining in-depth interviews, direct observation, and document analysis to gain a more comprehensive understanding.

## 3. Results and Discussion

The mobility of the Indonesian and Timor Leste border communities is reflected in the form of migration patterns between communities. Based on the results of observations and data processing in the field, various forms of migration patterns between community groups were found, both naturally and due to the formation of needs and social constructions that surround them. This migration pattern forms a form of mobility between communities, both Indonesia and Timor Leste communities that are located around the border area. The mobility patterns of the Indonesian-Timor Leste border communities are influenced by various factors such as history, social, economic, and cultural. The forms mobility that is formed can depicted in points main as following:

### 3.1 *Mobility informal cross- border*

Many people on the border such as in Belu and Malaka Districts (East Nusa Tenggara) still share kinship and culture with residents in Timor Leste. They often cross borders informally without official documents to attend traditional events, visit family,

trade, or work. This is caused by many matter based on results confirmation researcher among them is factor old habits that still exist There is assumption that they own one area so that No need use passport or visa, even though the country has give convenience besides passport and visa there are cross- border passes that are not so burdensome from side finance However still just public choose illegal route because the claimed process too long (Mukhamdanah, 2020). Other factors that support illegal behavior is lack of security Because such a wide land border range causes limitations on supervision from the party in charge to reach every frequent point passed by the community border. Such a phenomenon shows that sometimes strength of kinship ties brotherhood more strongly from the limits of sovereignty. The transfer due to culture and proximity defeat pole sovereignty, and open braid togetherness to form harmonization culture between the public.

### **3.2 Seasonal mobility**

The pattern of mobility between the Indonesian and Timor Leste border communities that has become a phenomenon is mobilization in the form of seasonal migration. Residents from Timor Leste sometimes migrate seasonally to Indonesian territory to work in the agricultural sector or other economic activities during certain seasons. Conversely, Indonesian citizens also sometimes migrate to Timor Leste to trade or seek employment opportunities (Binsasi et al., 2024). This is common due to economic needs and food sufficiency, and generally the supporting factor is the different planting season patterns between the two regions which are actually on the same island. Another reason that is found and known is the existence of job opportunities where in Indonesia development projects are usually carried out in the middle of the current year which causes unskilled laborers such as builders to choose to migrate to Timor Leste to find work, because as a new sovereign country, it has triggered many development projects whose centers are in the city of Dili (the capital of Timor Leste) and its surroundings. Seasonal mobility is often undertaken by border communities to take advantage of temporary economic opportunities. For example, subsistence farmers may temporarily move to more fertile areas during the planting season, or informal workers seek employment in a particular sector for a specific period. This indicates adaptation to economic and climate fluctuations that affect their livelihoods. Permanent migration, on the other hand, is often driven by economic disparities between origin and destination. People from areas with limited economic opportunities may choose to settle in areas with better access to jobs, education, and other services. On the Indonesia-Timor Leste border, for example, some individuals choose to settle in Indonesia because of easier access to goods and services, while others migrate to Timor Leste to take advantage of economic opportunities there. Strong kinship and cultural ties between communities on both sides of the border play a significant role in facilitating mobility. Activities such as family visits, participation in traditional ceremonies, and informal trade often involve movement across national borders. This suggests that national administrative borders are not always a barrier to social and economic interactions among border communities. Seasonal and permanent mobility across border areas constitutes a complex form of social adaptation to cross-border economic structures. Border communities demonstrate flexibility in responding to economic, social, and policy changes, drawing on cross-border social and cultural networks. Understanding these dynamics is essential for designing policies that support well-being and stability in border areas.

### **3.3 Mobility due to economic factors**

It is undeniable that the level of economic income of the people nationally in East Nusa Tenggara Province is ranked the lowest (Nalle et al., 2022), causing the level of poverty and limited employment opportunities in border areas to encourage some people to migrate to cities in Indonesia or even to Timor Leste which have certain labor needs. Cross-border trade, both legal and illegal, is an important livelihood. Another factor that causes migration is the lack of local economic opportunities. Several studies

have found several factors that cause low levels of community income, especially those around the border area due to the suppression of agricultural product prices that do not comply with the standards given. For example, Belu Regency has qualified agricultural products such as tamarind, candlenut, but the price manipulation carried out by distributor agents causes low community income, even though the harvest is abundant (Siburian, 2006) and (Firdha Rahmadhanti, 2025).

### ***3.4 Mobility Because bond social and cultural***

Many communities on the border, especially Motaain, originate from ethnic groups or the same ethnicity, such as Tetun, or Bunak. They share similar languages, customs, and traditions, regardless of modern state borders. They are united by traditional ceremonies, marriages, and funerals are often the reason for moving between countries. The challenges encountered from this mobility are related to citizenship such as official documents which are often a difficult problem to resolve, even though the government has provided convenience in the form of Border Passes (Yohanes Arman, Junaldo Klau, 2024), which are not costly to the community.

### ***3.5 Permanent mobility or post-conflict relocation***

After the 1999 East Timorese independence referendum, many pro-integration East Timorese chose to settle in Indonesia, especially in NTT, and most of them became Indonesian citizens. Other reasons related to permanent mobility were found for various reasons including security reasons, reasons of residence, East Timorese who were pro-integration with Indonesia were worried about being treated unfairly or retaliated against by the pro-independence side. Therefore, they chose to settle in Indonesia and not return to East Timor. In terms of residence, the former East Timorese community received relocation from the Indonesian government (Maing, 2021).

### ***3.6 Mobility due to social services***

Social mobility in health services in the Indonesian-East Timor border communities is caused by various factors related to access, quality of service, and geographic proximity. Although both countries have their own health systems, this mobility often occurs across borders, especially in areas such as Belu Regency (NTT) which directly borders Bobonaro District (East Timor). This is caused by several things, including health facilities in the Indonesian border areas, such as in Atambua (Belu Regency), which are generally more complete and affordable than in the East Timor region. The people of East Timor, especially in the area's borders, often look for services at the health center or House sick Indonesia because they feel the service is good or fast. The following reasons caused by several areas of Timor Leste bordering with Indonesia more near to facility health in Indonesia than to center health in Dili, because access roads and transportation to the capital of Timor Leste is difficult or far away, citizen more choose to facility health in Indonesia which is geographical more easy reachable. In addition, in an emergency (such as childbirth, accident, or plague disease), officers of Indonesian health often help citizens of Timor Leste because of humanitarian reasons. There is some informal cooperation between cross-border medical personnel in handling certain cases (Hartati et al., 2022). The last reason is that Timor Leste, as a relatively small country, still builds system health. Many areas border Not yet own power medical or facility adequate cause part East Timorese citizens carry out " mobility" social health " to the territory of Indonesia, and several case, service health basic in Indonesia (especially Health Center) can accessed for free or with cost low, so that interesting inhabitant from Timor Leste to take advantage of it.

## **4. Conclusions**

Border areas are not marginalized spaces, but rather important arenas for social and economic mobility that shape the way of life of local communities in interacting with the state and transnational actors. The Motaain border area is a point of intensive interaction

between Indonesian and Timor Leste citizens, where cross-border activities occur not only in the form of trade in goods, but also in the mobility of labor, services, and socio-cultural relations. The presence of the Motaain PLBN encourages the growth of the local economy, both through legal trade and services that support cross-border activities. However, most economic actors still come from lower-middle class communities, with an informal system. Economic and social activities that occur often take place informally and are poorly monitored, potentially causing security problems, smuggling, and violations of immigration regulations. Locality that is established through kinship and cultural relations between communities on both sides of the border is very strong, this is what makes the state border not completely separate from their social and economic interactions. In addition, vertical social mobility (economic or social class advancement) is still limited due to lack of access to education, skills, and adequate business capital. This phenomenon shows the importance of cross-country cooperation in border areas to guarantee the basic rights of the community. To address the complexity of informal yet functional socio-economic mobility in border areas, such as between Indonesia and Timor Leste, comprehensive policies are needed at both the micro and macro levels. These policies must be able to accommodate the socio-economic realities of border communities that are often not in line with the administrative construction of the state.

**Micro Policy: Empowering Local Communities , Strengthening Local MSMEs,** The government encourages the development of Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) in border areas through facilitating People's Business Credit (KUR), entrepreneurship training, and cross-border market access. For example, in Sambas, West Kalimantan, a business meeting was held between local MSME actors and Malaysia to facilitate the export of local products.

**Legality and Management of Traditional Markets ,** In areas such as Napan Village, North Central Timor, the management of border markets has not been optimal due to weak coordination between the community and related agencies, resulting in rampant illegal markets. Clear coordination is needed between related agencies and the community to optimize the management of border markets.

#### Improving Access to Basic Services

Border areas often experience limited access to basic services such as education, health, and infrastructure. The government needs to improve the provision of basic services in border areas to support community welfare.

#### Macro Policy: Regional Integration and Cooperation

**Development of Border Special Economic Zones (SEZs),** The government can develop Special Economic Zones (SEZs) on the border to encourage economic activities, trade, and tourism. These SEZs can involve MSMEs and facilitate cross-border trade with supporting infrastructure and regulations.

#### Subregional Economic Cooperation

Indonesia can utilize subregional economic cooperation, such as the Timor Leste-Indonesia-Australia Growth Triangle (TIA-GT), to improve connectivity and development in eastern Indonesia. This cooperation can help address economic and infrastructure gaps in border areas.

#### Improving Infrastructure and Connectivity

The government needs to build more border crossing posts with complete facilities and supporting infrastructure to facilitate community mobility and legal trade. This can also reduce illegal border crossings that are rampant due to the lack of official facilities.

## 5. Suggestion:

The government needs to strengthen the function of the PLBN not only as an entry and exit gate, but also as an integrated service center for trade, job training, and socio-cultural facilitation. Informal economic actors on the border need to be fostered and facilitated so that they can run their businesses legally and sustainably, for example through cross-border cooperatives or MSME partnerships. Vocational education and training programs are needed for border communities to improve skills and open up

better job opportunities, both domestically and across borders. The Indonesian government needs to improve coordination with the Timor Leste authorities for more effective border supervision without disrupting social interaction in the community. Border policies need to consider the cultural dimensions and family relationships of the community, with a humanistic and community-based approach. To make the State Cross-Border Post (PLBN) a center for strengthening the legal economy based on local community participation, a holistic and integrated long-term strategy is needed. This strategy must include aspects of infrastructure, economic empowerment, governance, and strengthening the capacity of the local community.

a. Infrastructure and Connectivity Development.

Support Zone Development: In addition to the main PLBN building, it is necessary to develop supporting zones such as markets, goods terminals, and logistics facilities to support the economic activities of the surrounding community. Accessibility Improvement: Ensure good road access and adequate transportation facilities to connect the PLBN with local production and distribution centers.

b. Local Economic Empowerment.

MSME Strengthening: Provide training, capital, and market access for local Micro, Small, and Medium Enterprises (MSMEs) so that they can actively participate in economic activities at the PLBN. Development of Superior Commodities: Encourage the production and processing of local commodities that have export potential, such as agriculture, livestock, and handicrafts.

c. Strengthening Governance and Regulation

Inter-Agency Coordination: Increase synergy between the central government, regional governments, and related institutions in managing the PLBN to ensure consistent and effective policies. Masterplan Preparation: Create a master plan for the development of the border area economy that involves all stakeholders, including local communities.

d. Strengthening Community Capacity and Participation

Training and Education: Organizing training programs to improve the technical and managerial skills of the community in managing businesses and participating in economic activities at the PLBN. Enhancing Legal Awareness: Providing education on the importance of legal economic activities and the negative impacts of illegal activities in border areas.

e. Utilization of Technology and Innovation

Service Digitalization: Implementing a cashless payment system and digital platform to facilitate transactions and increase transparency. Digital Marketing: Encouraging local MSMEs to utilize social media and e-commerce in promoting their products to a wider market.

f. Border Tourism Development

Cultural and Natural Tourism Promotion: Developing local tourism potential, such as national parks and cultural festivals, to attract tourists and increase community income. Tourism Support Facilities: Providing facilities such as tourist information centers, accommodation, and adequate transportation services to support tourism activities in border areas. By implementing these strategies consistently and sustainably, PLBN can transform into a legal economic strengthening center that empowers local communities and strengthens state sovereignty in border areas.

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