
FATALUKU LABOR MIGRATION AND TRANSNATIONAL CARE IN TIMOR-LESTE

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One of the unexpected and remarkable developments in post-independence Timor-Leste has been the increasing number of young Timorese embarking on diverse, informal pathways of transnational labor migration, mostly to destinations and work opportunities in the United Kingdom (UK). The option of seeking a livelihood overseas has become an increasingly popular one in the face of continuing poor in-country employment possibilities. Timor-Leste's formal economy, both the public and private sectors, employs fewer than a third of the working-age population. Unemployment and underemployment remain persistently high across the country. Among Timor-Leste's working-age population, between 15–64 years of age, for example, now amounting to some 660,000 persons, fully 42 percent are classified variously as “unemployed,” “unpaid household workers,” “informal labor,” “retired,” or “not seeking work.”¹ As ever, young people are over-represented in the figures due to their

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¹ Charles Scheiner, “Can the Petroleum Fund Exorcise the Resource Curse from Timor-Leste?” in *A New Era? Timor-Leste after the UN*, ed. Sue Ingram, Lia Kent, and Andrew McWilliam (Canberra: ANU Press, 2015), <http://www.laohamutuk.org/econ/exor/ScheinerFundExorciseCurseJun2015en.pdf>

work inexperience and limited skill sets. From another perspective, Richard Curtain has noted that employment opportunities in the domestic labor market remain scarce, with no growth in job openings for young people (15–29 years of age) recorded during the time between two Enterprise and Skills Surveys conducted in the capital, Dili, in 2016 and 2017.²

In this paper we explore the characteristics and impacts of this unexpected and spontaneous Timorese labor migration to Western Europe, especially to the UK. The focus of our study involves principally Fataluku migrants and their households of origin in their home district of Lautem and in urban Dili. As early adopters and enthusiastic participants in what has now become a burgeoning chain migration numbering many thousands of workers,³ the Fataluku migrants' experiences and achievements illustrate a significant contemporary development in Timor-Leste's post-conflict landscape.⁴ In the intervening years, especially from 2010, the UK migration option has broadened to include a wide mix of young (under age 30) Timorese aspirants from different regions. In analyzing these developments, we draw on a number of recent surveys that offer complementary insights into migration patterns and possibilities.

New Fataluku Diasporas: Origins and Sustaining Features

Timorese transnational migration to the UK had its origins in the mid-1990s, when Timorese student activists—under threats from police and military repression—sought and secured political asylum from Indonesian authorities by clambering into the Jakarta compounds of various foreign embassies. Between 1993 and 1996, hundreds of young *clandestinos*, using the Indonesia-based Renetil (Resistência Nacional dos Estudantes de Timor-Leste) activist networks of protection and passage, escaped to the West, from where they continued to protest against the continued occupation of their homeland.⁵

A majority of the transplanted Timorese (*suaka politiku*) began their expatriate lives in Lisbon and other Portuguese cities, but, by the mid-1990s, a few had made their way to UK cities, such as London, Liverpool, and Oxford, where they found support for

² Richard Curtain, "Remittances Biggest Export Earner for Timor-Leste after Oil," *Development Policy Centre*, blogpost, March 22, 2018, <http://www.devpolicy.org/remittances-biggest-export-earner-for-timor-leste-after-oil-20180322/>

³ See "Former Members of Private Households Living in Portugal, or Other European Countries, by Sex, Municipality, and Administrative Post of Household," Table 21.e of the 2015 Timor-Leste National Census, which shows that 6,158 East Timorese citizens were resident in European countries at the time. National Statistics Directorate (NSD) and Ministry of Finance, *The Timor-Leste Population and Housing Census 2015* (Dili: Republika Demokratika de Timor-Leste, 2016).

⁴ Andrew R. McWilliam, "Urban–Rural Inequalities and Migration in Timor-Leste," in Ingram et al., *A New Era?* 225–34.

⁵ See: Rei Naldo, *Resistance: A Childhood Fighting for East Timor* (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2007); Constâncio Pinto and Matthew Jardine, *East Timor's Unfinished Struggle: Inside the Timorese Resistance—A Testimony* (Boston: South End Press, 1997); and Carlos da Silva L. F. R. Saky, *RENETIL Iha Luta Libertasaun Timor-Lorosa'e: Antes Sem Título, Do Que Sem Pátria!* (Dili: Renetil, 2013).

their cause and intermittent work to sustain their protest campaigns.⁶ It is from these unlikely but specific overseas familial and political links that the subsequent economic migration of Timorese, and particularly Fataluku migrants, gained momentum and support after the end of Indonesia's occupation of Timor-Leste in late 1999.

Besides the encouragement provided by expatriates, a number of additional and crucial enabling factors also shaped the gradual development of migrant outflows from Timor-Leste, especially from the year 2000. The first of these was the decision by the Portuguese government to continue its recognition of East Timorese as Portuguese citizens and, therefore, entitled to secure a Portuguese passport, and with it all the privileges and possibilities of membership in the European Union. This recognition applies to all East Timorese born prior to the declaration of sovereign independence (May 20, 2002), but is also potentially available to those born in East Timor since that date, through their parents' status as Portuguese citizens. In the immediate post-occupation period prior to independence, all that was required was a baptismal certificate; and, later, a proof-of-identity document, effectively a Portuguese identity card known as a *billete identidade*, allowing safe passage to Portugal, where the passport was issued.⁷ Since then, the Portuguese gradually tightened and regularized consular services in East Timor itself and began issuing passports through their embassy in Dili. This arrangement continues to the present day, and large groups of young Timorese regularly gather at Dili's Portuguese Embassy to await news of their documents.

A second enabling factor since the early 2000s was—and still is—the vital role of expatriate Timorese sponsors. Usually based in or close to Lisbon, sponsors have maintained their Timor-Leste connections and an interest in helping other, usually younger Timorese. The key value of sponsors lies in their capacity to be supportive and to facilitate the passport application process through the laborious stages of the Portuguese bureaucracy in Lisbon (e.g., knowing the Portuguese language and how to navigate the bureaucratic obstacles).

The connections between Timor-Leste families and expatriate sponsors in Portugal are of key importance. During the early post-occupation years, in particular, access to a willing sponsor was critical to determining how some Fataluku households and kin networks were able to access support while others missed out. Relatives or contacts who fled East Timor a generation earlier (typically around 1975, in the wake of the Indonesian occupation) have been willing, in some cases, to extend their assistance to families in ancestral communities, especially to a younger generation struggling with unemployment. Sponsors are spoken of highly by those whose families have benefited from their support, while other expatriates who have remained silent or resistant to entreaties from their would-be-migrant relatives or acquaintances are seen as selfish and mean-spirited, or, as one of our Fataluku friends put it, “they have become like Portuguese and forget their social obligations.” Sponsors are motivated by a mix of

⁶ Catholic churches in England and Ireland, particularly through the support organization Catholic Relief Service (CRS), provided active assistance, and a number of academics and their institutions also provided support.

⁷ Andrew McWilliam, “New Fataluku Diasporas and Landscapes of Remittance and Return,” *Local-Global: Identity, Security, Community* 11 (2012; special issue—Nation-Formation, Identity, and Change in Timor-Leste): 72–85.

familial and patriotic obligations, and the desire to make their own contribution to the new nation by supporting its young people and workforce. There are also potential financial rewards for sponsors, as some receive remunerative commissions for their services to cover their costs and time.

Since 2000, as increasing numbers of households gained a foothold in the migration pathway, a pattern of chain migration emerged whereby young aspirants could draw on a wider field of familial contacts and agents to secure support for airfares and passport sponsorship, as well as access to temporary accommodation in England and, often, access to work. Young Fataluku, and Timorese more generally, have taken up these opportunities with enthusiasm, all hoping to emulate the experiences and success of their older siblings and friends who emigrated. Just how many people are actively involved in this burgeoning migration to the UK is difficult to gauge with precision. Figures as high as sixteen thousand Timorese have been discussed in this regard, based on information from the Portuguese Embassy in Dili, the agency that issues Portuguese passports.⁸ A 2012 thesis by Saturlino Esteves lists a figure of 6,500 labor migrants working in the UK between the years 2001 and 2011. The study was based on extensive survey data, but the accuracy of this estimate is unconfirmed.⁹ We also note that the previously cited 2015 National Census included a question about the location of any family members living overseas. The results showed that, at the time of record, almost 5,350 family members were reported to be living in what is classified as “Other European Countries” (i.e., other than Portugal), the great majority of whom are likely to reside in Britain.¹⁰ Of this number, the census data further show that Fataluku labor migrants make up 30 percent (1,611) of the Timorese citizens recorded as living in “Other European Countries.”¹¹

Significant Timorese migration to the UK has also spanned the introduction and expansion of mobile telephony, the internet, and the diverse technologies of social media. These developments are highly influential and continue to shape migration opportunities and practices, just as they do much of global contemporary social relations.¹² Young Timorese have been enthusiastic adopters and consumers of internet telephony and its many platforms, from Skype and Facebook to Instagram and Snapchat, as well as video-call technologies, such as IMO Messenger. These technologies have the effect of collapsing time and distance and permitting migrants to

⁸ Personal communication with staff from the National Directorate of Statistics, Timor-Leste, 2016.

⁹ Saturlino Esteves, “Kontribusi Tenaga Kerja Timor-Leste di Inggris dalam peningkatan pendapatan keluarga” (thesis, Skripsi Fakultas Ilmu Pemerintahan, Universidade Nacional Timor Lorosa’e, 2012).

¹⁰ After Indonesia (where about 7,300 Timorese citizens reside), the UK is by far the most populous place of residence for expatriate Timor-Leste citizens, albeit carrying Portuguese passports. This is a feature and consequence of the pattern of informal chain migration based on familial networks, whereby younger family members follow in the pioneering footsteps of their elder siblings and cousins. That and the fact that, historically, there have been abundant low-skilled work opportunities in the UK versus relatively few in Portugal.

¹¹ It is worth commenting that another thousand labor migrants are recorded as coming from Dom Alexio, an urban subdistrict of Dili’s. This is an area with many Fataluku residents who are likely to be well represented in labor-migration numbers. It suggests that Fataluku could represent as much as 40 percent of the informal labor migrants to the UK at that time. See NSD and Ministry of Finance, *Timor-Leste Population and Housing Census 2015*, Table 21.e.

¹² See: Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996); and Nico Besnier, *On the Edge of the Global: Modern Anxieties in a Pacific Island Nation* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2011).

maintain regular and sustained reciprocal communications with friends and family anywhere in the world.¹³ As forms of enabling technologies, they have also been instrumental in fostering the emergence of translocal communities around sustained patterns of labor migration and the growth of social remittances with attendant relationships of care and mutual obligations to family.¹⁴ Social media also enables the speedy dissemination of news, gossip, images, and records of events among familial and community networks, both within and between the UK and Timor-Leste. The cumulative impact of all this technology is the creation of strong and abiding transnational and translocal interactions that are increasingly reinforced by physical visits and holidays (vacations) spent back home in Lautem and Dili.

Comparative Perspectives

Despite the remarkable expansion of transnational labor migration to the United Kingdom for over a decade, there have been comparatively few attempts to understand the motivations and demographic profiles of those involved. Timor-Leste's government has largely ignored such emigration to date, mainly due to the informal nature of the migration networks involved. It has focused its energies instead, almost exclusively, on various bilateral agreements with regional neighbors—such as South Korea and Australia—for limited temporary and contract migration opportunities.¹⁵

Until recently the only systematic household survey of migrant households to Britain was one conducted by a team led by Fikreth Shuaib in 2007 under the auspices of Australia's Foundation for Development Cooperation (FDC).¹⁶ The Shuaib survey canvassed the experiences of 105 Dili-based households with family members working in Britain.¹⁷ The respondents highlighted a number of key features of the UK labor migration experience, including the preponderance of male labor migrants (90 percent), the pattern of pursuing largely unskilled work placements (80 percent), and the high proportion of migrants sending regular cash remittances home to support their families in Timor-Leste.

Until 2016, however, there were no follow-up attempts to assess the trends and expansion of the informal, transnational migration to Britain since the Shuaib survey, despite the dramatic, albeit anecdotal, increase in numbers since 2008. As researchers

¹³ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1991).

¹⁴ McWilliam, "New Fataluku Diasporas."

¹⁵ See: Pyone Myat Thu and Ismenio Martins da Silva, "The Australian Seasonal Workers Program: Timor-Leste's Case," *In Brief* 2013/13, ANU Canberra, 2013; and Ann Wigglesworth and Zulmira Fonseca, "Experiences of Young Timorese as Migrant Workers in Korea," paper presented at the Australasian Aid Conference, Canberra, 2016.

¹⁶ Fikreth Shuaib, ed., "Leveraging Remittances with Microfinance: Timor Leste Country Report" (Foundation for Development Cooperation, Brisbane, Australia), <https://www.microfinancegateway.org/sites/default/files/mfg-en-paper-leveraging-remittances-with-microfinance-timor-leste-country-report-dec-2007.pdf>

¹⁷ Shuaib observed that the majority of cases discussed in his survey involved labor migrants from Timor-Leste's rural areas, but does not specifically identify the respondents' origin settlements. We suspect that many of the surveyed households comprised Fataluku participants, given their prominence among labor migrants during the early years of independence and their strong presence in Dili (and based on the 2015 census results).

following Fataluku involvement in the labor migration experience over a number of years, we felt it was clearly time for a comparative statistical update on the sector. But in the absence of any sign of this occurring, by 2016 one of us (McWilliam) had resolved to implement a dedicated household survey and reprise the approach taken by Shuaib, but specifically directed to Fataluku households in Lautem and Dili.

Ironically, however, in preparing to undertake our household survey in mid-2016, both of us became aware of a group of Timorese researchers, operating under the auspices of the Asia Foundation with Australian Aid funding, who were preparing to implement their own survey in Lautem, focusing specifically on the United Kingdom and Fataluku migration experiences there. We saw this as a timely development and, having had the opportunity to meet the main investigators and discuss the scope and format of their survey, we were able to adjust our approach and provide a supplementary and complementary set of perspectives on the same general issues.

In presenting a selection of the survey results here, we draw on the findings of both household surveys. Our study of fifty-four households drew on respondents from a range of settlements in Lautem, as well as Fataluku households in Dili. We combined a formal questionnaire with semi-structured interviews and discussion. The Asia Foundation study, based on a survey of 357 Lautem households, was conducted during July 2016 and comprises a stratified sample of villages according to their respective contributions of labor migrants to the United Kingdom.¹⁸ Fully ten Fataluku villages (*suco*) were included in the Asia Foundation survey, but one of these, Suco Fuiloro, which incorporates the municipal capital of Los Palos within its boundaries, represented 54 percent (193) of the survey respondents due to the high numbers of labor migrants who came from this area.¹⁹ Table 1 provides a summary of selected responses to specific questions directed to householders interviewed for the two surveys.

The two surveys produced quite consistent results, and in many respects confirmed and reinforced those obtained by Shuaib in the 2008 survey.²⁰ Men, whether married or unmarried, remain much more likely to become labor migrants than women. For married couples, there used to be a tendency for wives to remain in Timor-Leste (often with their children) while husbands worked overseas. It is now common for wives (and any children) to join their husbands and settle in Britain, having secured their own passports and travel arrangements. This has been an emergent trend over time and reflects a growing acceptance, especially among migrants' parents, to support labor migration, even if doing so means long-term physical absence and separation from their children and grandchildren.

¹⁸ Joviano Salves Reis, Luciano Dias Cabral, and Jonas Vidal Valentim, "Impaktu Traballador Iha Ingleterra no Norte Irlandia be Prosperiedade Familia iha Munisipiu Lautem" (final report, Asia Foundation, Jakarta, with the support of Policy Leaders Group and Australian Aid, 2016).

¹⁹ Suco Fuiloro has eleven constituent hamlets, or *aldeia*—including Ira Ara and Lere Loho, which have been key participating communities in the labor migration outflow and that, in many respects, represent the epicenter of migration to the UK. The fact that ten villages had sufficient numbers of migrants to qualify for the sample shows the widespread popularity of the UK migration option.

²⁰ Shuaib, "Leveraging Remittances with Microfinance."

Table 1: Labor-migrant Characteristics

	Lautem and Dili Survey (54 households)	Asia Foundation Survey (357 households)
Gender	90.5% male 9.5% female	89.1% male 10.9% female
Age at departure for the UK	< 20 years = 27.4% 20–25 = 32.6% 26–30 = 20% > 30 = 20%	NA
Year of departure to the UK	Pre-2002 = 9.2% 2002–05 = 7.4% 2006–10 = 32.3% 2011–16 = 51.1%	2008–14 = 86.9% (the peak flow was in 2012, 20.4%)
Employment status, livelihood prior to migration	Employed = 16.7% Unemployed = 40.5% Student = 35.7% Other = 7.1%	Agricultural work = 9.4% Unemployed = 66.6% Student = 17.2% Other = 6.8%
Marital status	61.2% = single 38.8% = married	60.6% single 39.4% married
Sponsors in Lisbon	V. Jourdão = 47.6% R. Martins = 16.7% Sra Lobato = 5.5% Other, mixed = 30.2%	NA

Our survey highlights the dramatic increase in migrant departures after 2006, as migration's popularity grew and access to migration channels opened up. A significant factor in this trend is the pattern of chain migration facilitated by the presence of family members resident in the UK who are willing to help fund travel, and provide accommodation (initially) for their relatives from Timor-Leste.²¹

According to the survey data, the largest numbers of labor migrants to the UK, more than 50 percent in both surveys, left in 2010 or later. Of interest here is that the majority of those who elected to migrate were either unemployed (*dezempregu*), recent graduates of high school, or students attending tertiary institutions. Fewer than

²¹ The year 2006 marked a time of crisis (*crizé*) in Timor-Leste that saw a breakdown of relations between the military and police force and widespread outbreaks of communal violence, especially in Dili. In the prevailing context of economic stagnation and political dysfunction, migration and international work prospects became an attractive option. See "Independent Special Commission of Inquiry for Timor-Leste" (United Nations report, Geneva, October 2, 2006). While neither survey summarized in Table 1 explicitly asked who helped to establish workers in the UK, we conclude from many hours of discussions with labor migrants that having existing family ties in the UK was a paramount factor in their deciding to migrate.

17 percent were classified as employed, and often this referred to underemployment in the agricultural sector—for example, helping out with the family’s crop and livestock production. Continued poor employment conditions and a persistent lack of work opportunities in the Timor-Leste economy, especially in rural areas, are major push factors for migration.²² High school graduates in our survey who failed to secure places in a university or employment in town, and whose parents were not in a position to support further education, often elected to work in the UK as a way to build savings and gain experience prior to pursuing studies in later years. To what extent such plans come to fruition is an empirical question about which there is limited information, but, anecdotally, it remains an important objective for many young migrants.

Working in the United Kingdom

As the focus of the surveys was directed primarily to the experiences of Fataluku households with family members in the United Kingdom, there was limited attention accorded to the nature of the migrant work and travel experience *per se*. But the survey results do offer some broad information on the UK migrant experience.²³

The Asia Foundation survey, for example, shows that the great majority of UK labor migrants settled and found employment in England (88.1 percent), with 11.6 percent working in Northern Ireland. Our survey broadly corroborated those numbers, with 66.6 percent reportedly based in England and 8.9 percent in Northern Ireland, but with a significant contingent, 24.3 percent, not knowing where their relatives were currently resident. Such uncertainty is consistent with our experience that there is considerable variation among households about knowing the actual whereabouts and work that their children or husbands are pursuing. The terms *Inglatera* (England) or *Irlandia* (for Northern Ireland) are often applied imprecisely as a general locative catch-all. Furthermore, there is also considerable mobility among migrants themselves and people may live in both regions for different periods of time. Given the nature of migrants’ familial ties and kin-based networks, there is also a tendency for Fataluku and Timorese migrants more generally to concentrate in particular towns or cities. Fataluku, for example, are well represented in places like Northern Ireland’s Dungannon and Portadown, where there are thousands of resident Timorese, most of whom work in the region’s meat-packing factories.²⁴ Other centers—such as Oxford, Peterborough, Liverpool, London, and Bristol, among numerous other cities—are also targeted places, and to a degree reflect the recent historical patterns of migration flows in response to declining economic conditions associated with the Global Financial Crisis (2007–09).²⁵ Conversely, other households have very specific knowledge of the

²² McWilliam, “Urban-Rural Inequalities and Migration in Timor-Leste.”

²³ Ann Wigglesworth and Lionel Boxer, “Transitional Livelihoods: Timorese Migrant Workers in the UK,” *Development Policy Blog*, 2017, http://devpolicy.org/2017-Australasian-Aid-Conference/Papers/Wigglesworth-Boxer_Transitional-livelihoods-Timorese-migrant-workers-UK.pdf

²⁴ Gordon Peake, *Beloved Land: Stories, Struggles, and Secrets from Timor-Leste* (London: Scribe Publications, 2014).

²⁵ McWilliam’s own ethnographic research in the UK (see: “New Fataluku Diasporas”) suggests that reduced work opportunities due to weakening economic conditions encouraged young Timorese to venture further afield in search of work, dramatically expanding the number of locations where they are resident.

whereabouts of their relatives and the towns and businesses in which they work. This knowledge is often a function of both access to and use of social media, although not all households have the wherewithal to purchase personal computers or smart phones. That said, these days all Fataluku settlements have young members with personal devices and smart phones who can provide informal word-of-mouth news services and reporting based on their regular engagement with Facebook and other interactive web platforms.

Figure 2: Fataluku Migrant Employment in UK (Lautem and Dili Survey, 54 respondents)

Restaurant	Hotel, Pub	Factory	Other	Unknown
16 (30%)	7 (13%)	25 (46%)	1 (2%)	5 (9%)

Figure 2 highlights employment categories in which migrants are known to secure employment. These work categories are consistent with the widely reported practice of finding opportunities in the UK's minimum-wage sector, for around £250 (US\$320) per week. Restaurant work is popular and for many provides entry into the UK's workforce. The work requires little or no fluency in English, and workers often receive cash-in-hand and complimentary meals. On the other hand, there are also stories of new migrants being poorly treated in the hospitality sector, agreeing to little more than semi-indentured working arrangements for under-award remuneration and to pay off loans and "accommodation" costs charged by unscrupulous restaurant owners. Migrants' ignorance of work regulations and a lack of English-language skills means that workers are often tricked into precarious employment situations and fail to register for employment insurance along with access to the national health services.

Factory work was the most prevalent reported employment and this includes a wide variety of production facilities and packaging industries that are widely distributed across Britain. Most of the British supermarkets, such as Tesco, Morrisons, and Sainsbury's, have established industrial-scale sorting and packaging operations in locations around the country. Many Timorese migrants work in fixed-term and temporary contract arrangements in these facilities and find accommodation in nearby dormitory towns. In Northern Ireland, as noted earlier, the town of Dungannon has long been a migrant destination for Fataluku migrants. There, thousands of Timorese workers are employed in Moy Park's chicken-slaughtering and packaging operations, which have distribution networks across the UK and throughout Europe. In Oxford, Fataluku migrants work on the large BMW production line (for Mini Minor vehicles), which has attracted high numbers of applicants who secure work through contract hire agencies. Low wage, shift work factory jobs are widely available in different areas where bulk handling of goods is prevalent, but these are not always full-time occupations, and in times of economic slowdowns shift workers can find their hours reduced.

Sustaining Connections with Home

A significant aspect of Fataluku migration to Britain for work has been the community's commitment to sharing the benefits of their labor and experiences overseas and maintaining close communication with their families and friends back home. As part of both household surveys, questions were asked about frequency of communication. In the Asia Foundation survey, 42.6 percent of respondents said that they communicated on a weekly basis with their relatives in the UK, while as many as 25.2 percent said they did so daily.²⁶ The most commonly mentioned technology used since 2012 is Facebook, and to a lesser extent Skype and Viber (now Messenger and Instagram).²⁷ A similar response was noted in our survey, with more than half reporting regular communication and almost 10 percent talking on a daily basis.²⁸ Preferred platforms included Skype, Facebook, Viber, and mobile-phone calls.

It is also apparent that the impact of regular transnational communication in recent years has been a significant factor in the willingness and ability of migrants to maintain their social relationships with their families and communities in Timor-Leste. This means that today's migrant workers in the UK are much more likely to participate in their village's social events and fulfil their families' expectations, compared to during the pre-internet past, when lengthy gaps in communication severed that sense of active participation in family and village life. One of our interviewees recalled his experiences in the previous decade, when telephone calls from the UK cost £10 or more per connection, precluding lengthy or regular conversations. The extent of the change since then was brought home very clearly during a visit to friends in the hamlet of Lere Loho (Los Palos). There, via the magic of a virtually free IMO video call, one of us was able to have a lengthy chat with a friend, Olivio, as he rode his bicycle to Oxford's BMW factory to begin his shift on a fine summer morning. The capacity for this kind of live-streaming experience provides immediacy to the migrant experience that, while never a satisfying alternative to a physical presence, enables a powerful sense of emotional connection and coeval continuity.²⁹

It has also been evident for some time that there have been significant economic benefits accruing to Timor-based households due to labor migration to the UK—namely, the receipt of remittances and support from their loved ones. The capacity and willingness of UK-based migrants to allocate savings from their wages and direct remittances to their families at home is testimony to the continuing strength of familial transnational relationships. Both household surveys confirm the significance of cash remittances from Britain to relatives in Timor-Leste, usually via reliable, if expensive,

²⁶ Reis et al., "Impaktu Traballador Iha Inglaterra no Norte Irlandia be Prosperiedade Familia iha Munisipiu Lautem," 33.

²⁷ Prior to 2012, internet communication across Lautem was restricted and unreliable. In that year the Chinese-backed electricity grid was rolled out across the country, which dramatically improved telecommunications networks.

²⁸ A further 9.6 percent were said to communicate infrequently or rarely. The frequency of calls is likely to be related to the ages of migrants and the length of time away. Young, recent travelers often called more frequently.

²⁹ Andrew McWilliam, "Time and the Other for Transnational Timorese Migrants: Changing Patterns of Engagement" (unpublished paper presented at the American Anthropological Association, Denver, Colorado, September 20–23, 2015).

Western Union financial transfers.³⁰ These transfers of export earnings have had a highly significant and beneficial impact on recipient households, but a detailed enumeration of the variable transfers is difficult to capture in a broad survey. The Asia Foundation survey found that 45 percent of respondents reported regularly receiving between US\$1,000–3,000 every two to five months,³¹ which gives a sense of the scale of support provided. In comparative terms, it means that these households are generating up to three times the average income of Timor-Leste’s rural households.³² It also supports Shuaib’s conclusions on the impact of UK-sourced remittances that “(h)ouseholds with members working overseas are better off financially by many multiples than households pursuing local employment.”³³

As to how these funds are expended, there is a pattern consistent with Shuaib’s findings from his 105-household survey in Dili. Those results showed that 45 percent of families used some of their cash remittances to support daily household consumption, 41 percent used some for housing improvements, 30 percent for school fees, and 10 percent for loan repayments. Most families also saved a portion of the funds, which they then directed into education expenses (75 percent of households), housing improvements (35 percent), weddings and funerals (18 percent), and business investments (10 percent).³⁴

There is, however, a great deal of variability among individual households—a variability that very much reflects the specific situation and needs of the households. In our survey, the great majority of respondents (44, or 82 percent) reported receiving regular financial support from absent members working overseas. The amounts ranged from regular payments of US\$300 a month to intermittent contributions of US\$500 or more, usually when requested by the family. About six of our respondents had only recently begun working overseas and were still generating savings of their own. A minority of households with children working overseas refused to ask these workers to send money home. As one father who disapproved of taking his children’s savings commented, “we send them over there for their futures, not ours.” His view, however, was unusual. Usually, a combination of social demands and exchange obligations at home, and the desire for migrants to care for their parents, wives, and children, results in frequent allocations for familial provisioning.

Over half of the migrants’ remittances support Timor-based household consumption (Figure 3, next page), especially the purchase of food staples, like rice. Indeed, the purchase of rice instead of growing maize (*cele*) has been a major change in

³⁰ Western Union accounted for around 98 percent of transfers from Britain, while its relatively new competition, Moneygram, attracted less than 2 percent of transfers. Moneygram is said to be slow in transferring money and has insufficient outlets.

³¹ Reis et al., *Impaktu Traballador Iha Ingleterra no Norte Irlandia be Prosperiedade Familia iha Munisipiu Lautem*, 27.

³² Hamutuk Lao, “Understanding Timor-Leste’s Context,” 2013, <http://laohamutuk.blogspot.com.au/2013/06/understanding-timor-lestes-context.html>

³³ Shuaib, “Leveraging Remittances with Microfinance,” 20.

³⁴ Shuaib, “Leveraging Remittances with Microfinance,” 18.

consumption in recent years, as remittance payments and other social transfers have reduced the need and inclination to cultivate crops.³⁵

Figure 3: Distribution of Remittances (Lautem and Dili Survey, N = 54; multiple answers allowed)

Consumption	House-building	Education costs	Cultural gifts	Other
29 (53.7%)	19 (35.2%)	12 (22.2%)	15 (27.7%)	4 (7.4%)

House construction, education of siblings or younger relatives,³⁶ and what are glossed as “cultural gifts” are the other three key priorities. Cultural gifts are indicators of the extent to which labor migrants participate in the obligatory gift exchanges that shape life-cycle rituals and sociality in Fataluku extended-family networks (e.g., funerals, marriages, baptisms, end-of-mourning ceremonies, sacrificial ceremonies, ritual healing procedures, and so on). The comparatively high spending in this category suggests that migrants remain closely engaged and connected to the daily rhythms and events of everyday family life in Timor-Leste.

Regular remittances greatly benefit the households and communities that receive those funds. Capital-district settlements like Ira Ara and Lere Loho have been completely transformed in appearance. With the majority of resident households receiving cash remittances from children or siblings working overseas, there has been an explosion of new house construction and house renovation across the settlements.³⁷ These construction projects have in turn encouraged investment in the local construction sector, such as cinder-block production (*patako*) and the sales or leasing of large trucks for haulage and sand deliveries.³⁸ The whole process of labor migration, remittances, and economic expansion contrasts dramatically with those areas of Timor-Leste that have not benefitted from similar kinds of informal, external financial support.

Finally, we note that both recent surveys enquired about UK-based migrants’ return visits to their home communities. The results, once again, are broadly consistent. The Asia Foundation survey found that almost half of the migrants had never physically returned to their home communities in Timor-Leste. At the same time, more than 40 percent traveled home annually, most of them for up to a month.³⁹ By comparison, the results of our survey found that only about a fifth of the migrant workers had not yet returned home from overseas, although they were often in regular

³⁵ In recent years increased government payments for pensions and compensation for the deaths of close family members during the war of liberation have supplemented cash remittances and reduced the need or desire to produce and consume maize, which, until relatively recently, had been the major staple crop.

³⁶ Angie Bexley, “Getting an Education: Links to Indonesian Schools and Universities Remain Strong in East Timor,” *Inside Indonesia* 96 (April–June 2009), <https://www.insideindonesia.org/getting-an-education>

³⁷ Personal communication with hamlet heads.

³⁸ Mitsubishi Colt diesel tip-trucks imported from Surabaya, Indonesia, are the vehicle of choice for haulage services and building-supply deliveries for the construction boom. Families that can afford to purchase such a truck can open a home-based business that provides a lucrative source of household income.

³⁹ Reis et al., “Impaktu Traballador Iha Inglaterra no Norte Irlandia be Prosperiedade Familia iha Munisipiu Lautem,” 35.

communication, while more than half had returned at least once. In our sample, the majority of those who hadn't yet returned were recent migrants (since 2014) and had not generated sufficient savings to afford a "holiday" (using the UK-inspired parlance many seem to prefer these days). The practice of taking breaks to visit relatives in Timor-Leste is increasingly common and reflects a combination of frequent communication between the UK and Timor-Leste, and the availability of paid holiday time off for workers in the UK. These factors have also been supported by the global deregulation of airlines, which has created bargain-priced airfares between London and Dili.

Implications for the Future

For all the reasons discussed above, the UK's 2016 vote to leave the European Union (Brexit) came as a shock to many Fataluku migrant households and other Timorese participants in the lucrative British employment market. There has since been much concern expressed about the consequences and implications of the Brexit vote as, potentially, migrant workers carrying Portuguese passports could be turned away.

Almost three years after the vote, there is still considerable uncertainty over the practical consequences of Brexit. But we tend to agree with one of our respondents, Arnaldo, a veteran of the UK labor-migration experience, who left for Portugal in 2001 due to the absence of work opportunities in Los Palos. Arnaldo has been traveling back and forth for years, and was home in July 2017 to see his family and supervise work on his fine new house that is nearing completion. Arnaldo's view is that, for those who are established residents and workers, with bank accounts and legal entitlements, they will probably continue to have the freedom to come and go and be permitted to continue living and working in Britain.⁴⁰ The ones who may struggle are the recent or would-be migrants, those with no clear connections or track record in-country. For that reason and the push factor of very few employment prospects at home, since the Brexit vote, we speculate that the flow of young Fataluku migrants to the UK has, if anything, only increased, as these young people seek access to one proven avenue for generating income and savings.

As for the level of financial support remitted by migrant workers to Timor-Leste communities, some evidence is provided in the Asia Foundation report relating to Western Union cash transfers. As noted earlier, Western Union is by far the most common transfer platform used by labor migrants for sending remittances directly to Dili. According to the report, nearly US\$25million was remitted in 2015 and, of this amount, 75 percent of the funds originated in the United Kingdom (US\$18,700,000).⁴¹ In comparative terms, these transfers are greater than the 2017 total export value of Timor-Leste's coffee crop, and means that informal labor migration in 2017 provided

⁴⁰ Arnaldo himself also makes a point to renew his passport at the Portuguese Embassy in London, rather than through official channels in Lisbon, as many of the other young migrants do—usually paying their sponsors to deal with the Portuguese bureaucracy.

⁴¹ Reis et al., "Impaktu Traballador Iha Ingleterra no Norte Irlandia be Prosperiedade Familia iha Munisipiu Lautem."

the most significant source of non-oil revenue for the country.⁴² We also note that these figures capture only a portion of the total remitted funds from UK employment, given that many returning and visiting labor migrants usually carry with them substantial amounts of undeclared cash (both their own and that of friends in the UK) for hand-delivery to relatives and friends in Timor. Be that as it may, the fact remains that labor migration to the United Kingdom is a vital employment alternative for many young Timorese.⁴³ This is especially notable because Timor-Leste's domestic unemployment and underemployment remains endemic, and its dependency on dwindling oil revenues looks unsustainable in the absence of any new petroleum development projects.⁴⁴

The value of UK chain migration also goes well beyond measuring its financial benefits. It is evident that, through the immediacy of social-media communications and increased frequency of return visits, new avenues for the expression and maintenance of sociality are being created and further elaborated. In other words, these enforced absences are creating novel forms of reciprocity that work to generate a significantly expanded field of Fataluku social relations.⁴⁵

Labor migration also mirrors the distinction that Stephen Gudeman has made between community and market economies.⁴⁶ In the development of multiple, trans-local Fataluku identities, all driven by the economic possibilities of global markets, cash-based transactions and remittances are converted into expressions of care and obligation, and directed towards sustaining relationships kept for their own sake. The collective commitment to the remittance landscapes of Lautem and familial connections in Dili—through house construction and renovation, livelihood and educational support, and life-cycle rituals (especially marriage and funerals)—are all part of this extended field of sociality. The sharing experience confirms Gudeman's observation that such transactions within the community economy are "never just about the objects themselves, but the social relationships created, sustained, and reproduced through them."⁴⁷ This is the enduring and redemptive legacy of Fataluku's circular transnational migration.

⁴² See Curtain, "Remittances Biggest Export Earner for Timor-Leste after Oil." By comparison, Shuaib's 2008 report estimated that UK-based migrants were remitting up to five million US dollars per annum to Timor-Leste, a figure that has seen a six-fold increase in the intervening seven years.

⁴³ To a lesser extent, the labor-migration dynamic applies, too, to participation in various Timor-Leste government-sponsored labor-exchange agreements with Korea, Malaysia, and Australia. These formal schemes are beneficial for most of the participants, but do not, at this point, generate the same level of export income as the informal system.

⁴⁴ Charles Scheiner, "After the Oil Runs Dry: Economics and Government Finances," in McWilliam and Leach, *The Routledge Handbook of Contemporary Timor-Leste*, 87–109.

⁴⁵ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*.

⁴⁶ Stephen Gudeman, *Economy's Tension: The Dialectics of Community and Market* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2008). See also Stephen Gudeman, *The Anthropology of Economy: Community Market and Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 2001).

⁴⁷ Gudeman, *Economy's Tension*, 80.