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# Social protection and state legitimacy in Timor-Leste

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# Introduction

This study examines the three main social assistance schemes that have been in place since 2008:

- *Bolsa da Mãe*, including *Bolsa da Mãe Jerasaun Foun*
- Support Allowance for the Elderly and Disabled
- Veterans payments

The research has two phases:

- 1) tracing the political drivers of Timor-Leste's social assistance schemes and government communication of the targeting through official statements, media reports, and interviews where possible
- 2) fieldwork to explore citizen perceptions of social assistance allocation through a field experiment combined with focus group discussions

The project aims to provide insights into how social assistance policies can shape perceptions of state legitimacy among citizens, positively or negatively.

# State Legitimacy & Social Cohesion

- State legitimacy defined as public acceptance of the underlying system of rules and expectations from which the actions of the government derive (Migdal, 2001)
  - A core component of state building
- Distributional and procedural legitimacy
  - For example access to public goods (Ndaruhutse, 2012), impartiality leading to higher levels of trust in government (Rothstein, 2009)
- Perceptions of fairness and equity can influence state legitimacy (McLoughlin, 2015)
  - Uneven access to university education de-legitimized state among excluded Tamil minority
- Relationship between social protection and social cohesion (Burchi et al., 2022)
  - Limited existing research mainly focused on horizontal dimensions of social cohesion (between citizens)
  - Social protection can also contribute to vertical dimension of social cohesion (trust in state), but there is a lack of empirical evidence

# Research Questions



How do government narratives and citizen perceptions of social assistance allocation in Timor-Leste interact?



What are the implications for state legitimacy in post-conflict settings?

# Methodology

- Mixed methods approach
- ‘Lab-in-the field’ experiment
  - Questionnaire
  - Allocation exercise (4 rounds)
  - Focus group discussion
- Semi-structured interviews with key stakeholders involved with designing and delivering social assistance schemes



# Research Sites



Municipality	Characteristics
Dili	Urban, Central
Bobonaro (Maliana)	Peri-urban, West
Baucau (Laga)	Rural, East

# Respondent Demographics

- N = 284
- Gender
- Age range = 18-77 years
- Veterans
- Veteran generation
- People with disabilities
- Youth



# Initial Observations

Emerging pattern that respondents frequently disagree that people should not be helped if they can work

- This makes sense in the Timorese context, but is unusual even among countries with high poverty
- For example, research in Zambia and South Africa has found strong beliefs that people with labour capacity should not receive government assistance, despite lack of work (Pruce, 2022; Fouksman, 2019)



Respondents also often disagree that people should have to do something in return for receiving a government transfer

- Suggests that removal of conditionalities fits with citizen expectations
- Nuance here in terms of expectations of what people use money for, and also some belief (mostly among young people in Dili) that transfers should be invested so they are not needed in the longer term
- May have interesting implications for the reciprocal aspect of state-citizen relations
- Further data from FGD questions will shed more light on this

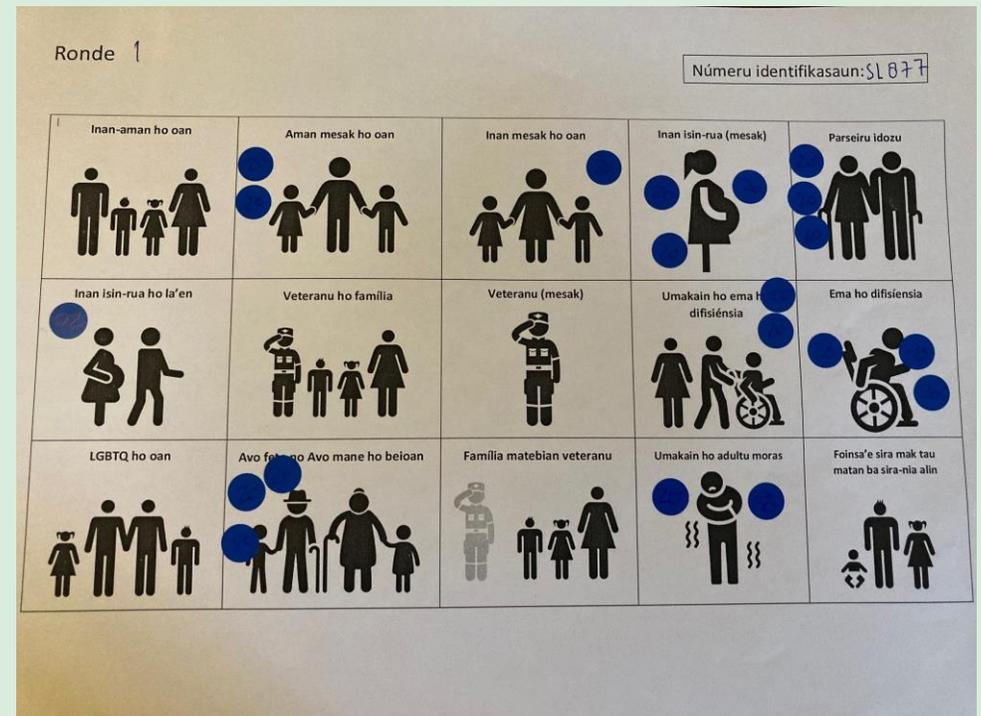
# Initial Observations

Allocation preferences broadly seem to align with the existing schemes with strong support for pregnant women, people with disabilities and the elderly (although to a lesser extent)

Additional groups that attracted support were youth looking after siblings (orphans specifically mentioned), single parents and households with sick adults

Possible revealed preference that many respondents don't give any money to any category of veteran or give less than to other groups, with the following caveats:

- People may consider that the veterans already have money
- And/or people perceive veterans to have power and connections, therefore less need of assistance
- Hoping to reveal more nuance in FGD data



# Initial Observations

Emerging theme that respondents think the transfer amounts should be increased for Bolsa da Mae and people with disabilities in particular, for various reasons:

- There are a lot of needs for children e.g. uniform, shoes for school, sometimes tuition fees
- Nutritious food, e.g. local chicken, is expensive
- Need to sustain family as well as themselves

However, respondents found it more difficult to identify areas of spending to reduce. Some suggestions include:

- Sesta Bazika
- Pensaun Vitalisia
- Government expenditures, such as new Pajero vehicles
- Provide job opportunities rather than cash transfers



# What Next?

- Present initial observations for feedback and sense-checking (21-24 November 2022)
- Present initial observations at AAC conference in Canberra (29 November 2022)
- Finalise secondary data collection and follow up interviews (remotely) where possible (November 2022-February 2023)
- Transcription, translation, data entry (November 2022-February 2023)
- Analysis (Feb-March 2023)
- Write up research briefing (April 2023)
- Translate research briefing into Tetum (May 2023)
- Research briefing circulated and available on DLP website (end May 2023)

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