

How Timor-Leste has mobilised against COVID-19

23 July 2020, by Susanna Barnes, Teresa Hall, Balthasar Kehi, Quintiliano Mok, Lisa Palmer



The Timorese government responded early to the COVID-19 pandemic and closed its borders in mid-March. Credit: University of Melbourne

As of early July, there are currently [no active cases of COVID-19 in Timor-Leste](#), one of Australia's closest neighbors.

Toward the end of June, the country [ended its COVID-19 state of emergency](#) and announced that its international land and air borders would reopen once a week, while maintaining the two-week quarantine for incoming passengers and disinfecting all incoming goods.

While the opening of borders is a welcome relief for many people and businesses across the country, [real health fears remain](#).

An early response

Timor-Leste shares its land borders with [West Timor](#), which is part of Indonesia's Nusa Tenggara Timur Province.

According to Abel Guterres, former Ambassador of Timor-Leste to Australia and a member of Timor-Leste's COVID-19 Emergency Response Team, "There is an increasing number of cases in West Timor, Indonesia and that is a major concern. We are slowly opening the borders and that is potentially going to cause some problems. The Ministry of Health will continue to be on red alert, ongoing mass education of the population is critical."

The government responded early to the COVID-19 pandemic and closed its borders in mid-March—firstly to non-citizens and, soon after, to everyone.

Those Timorese citizens who remained overseas (mostly students, those working in low-skilled occupations in the UK, Ireland and South Korea, or seasonal workers in Australia) were offered support to stay abroad.

The government—which was at the same time experiencing an unrelated political impasse which threatened to bring it down—[declared a state of emergency and issued stay at home orders](#).

Citizens were promised government support packages—including soap, eggs and rice—and anyone earning under \$US500 a month was eligible for a monthly subsidy of \$US100.



Timorese authorities worked with local communities to encourage them to both self-police and disseminate COVID-19 health information. Credit: University of Melbourne

The border with Indonesia was actively patrolled by authorities who enforced the closure and stay at home orders. With many Timorese families spread across residences along both sides of the border, the relevant authorities needed to work with local communities to encourage them to both self-police and disseminate COVID-19 health information.

Mr Guterres observes that women in these areas were vocal supporters of the border closure, noting too that their children had now become adept at reminding adults to wash their hands frequently.

By the end of May, Timor-Leste had had just 24 confirmed cases of COVID-19, mostly Timorese students who had returned from studying in Indonesia.

All of these cases were successfully quarantined in the capital Dili and all recovered. But one East Timorese woman working in a Northern Ireland meatworks [did pass away from complications associated with COVID-19.](#)

Village life

As Timorese frequently do when they sense trouble, many left the capital just before a state of emergency was declared and returned to their

home villages.

Across the country, elders held ritual ceremonies to ask their ancestors for assistance in combatting COVID-19.

But digital technology also played a role here. For several weeks, these ceremonies were posted and shared among families and the wider Timorese community on Facebook.

In ritual speech, the elders addressed the disease as a living being and implored it not to travel to Timor-Leste, and if it did, it was entreated to take animals and not human beings.

In the villages, people say they experienced a better standard of living than in the city where the COVID-19 emergency had caused serious disturbances.

In the more fertile rural areas in the east of the country, where people retain access to a diversity of cultivated and wild foods, life was relatively unaffected.

Interestingly, the primary concern of many rural people wasn't COVID-19, but the rain.



In common with many countries across the globe, the additional burden of care for school age children and other household members has fallen on women and young girls during the pandemic. Credit: University of Melbourne

The season's rains arrived very late, delaying staple crops which have since struggled to grow under changed environmental conditions. Some areas have seen a burgeoning of agricultural pests.

Then, towards the end of the delayed rainy season, there was widespread flooding affecting much of the country.

Long-term disruption

Back in the capital, [small businesses](#) and individual traders have been hit hard by the emergency measures which have led to a near standstill in opportunities for economic activity.

Along with businesses and small traders, the COVID-19 state of emergency has also had an impact on school and university students. School and university closures meant students were sent home to study, but with little in the way of on-line learning tools and materials this was impossible for most.

It is unclear what the long-term impact of this disruption will be—especially for girls who were nearing the end of their formal schooling.

In common with many countries across the globe, the additional [burden of care for school age children and other household members](#) has fallen on women and young girls.

International and local non-governmental organization were quick to raise concern regarding the effects of stay-at-home and social distancing orders on vulnerable women and children.

And sadly, reflecting the global statistics during lockdown, local organizations reported an [increase in cases of domestic violence](#) during the state of emergency.

A positive outcome from the country's emergency response has been renewed attention to the issue of mental health in the country, especially in the capital.

While Timor-Leste's mental health strategy has [struggled to gain traction over the years](#), with the [increased focus internationally on the mental health impacts of COVID-19](#) as a result of isolation, uncertainty, job loss and economic impacts, there have been pop-up mental health initiatives that include the first ever [mental health hotline](#).

The real challenge will be whether longer term, [more systematic approaches to population mental health](#) will be revisited to help Timor through its post-COVID-19 period.

While the country has managed its way through the acute phase of the COVID-19 crisis, time will tell if the country's ability to mobilize its population will continue to keep the threat of COVID-19 at bay.

This article was first published on [Pursuit](#). Read the [original article](#).

Provided by University of Melbourne

APA citation: How Timor-Leste has mobilised against COVID-19 (2020, July 23) retrieved 30 May 2022 from <https://medicalxpress.com/news/2020-07-timor-leste-mobilised-covid-.html>

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