

The Role of The World Bank to Support Economic in Timor-Leste

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ABSTRACT

This research discusses the role of the World Bank in supporting the economic development of Timor-Leste, a small country that faced significant economic challenges post-independence in 2002. As one of the youngest countries in the world, Timor-Leste relies on oil and gas as its main source of income, which creates big risks when those resources are reduced. The World Bank has played an important role in helping diversify the economy and improving the quality of public services through project funding, technical consulting, and strengthening institutions. This article uses a qualitative method with a descriptive approach, utilizing secondary data from World Bank annual reports, government statistics, and academic literature. The main focus is on the education, infrastructure and governance sectors. The research results show that World Bank interventions have improved human development indicators, improved basic infrastructure, and strengthened government governance capacity. However, challenges such as dependence on natural resources and weak institutional capacity remain significant obstacles. In conclusion, World Bank support has had a considerable positive impact on Timor-Leste's economic development, although program sustainability requires strengthening local capacity. This research's recommendations include economic diversification, empowering local institutions, and developing more sustainable funding strategies.

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INTRODUCTION

Timor-Leste, Southeast Asia's youngest country, has embarked on an ambitious journey of nation-building and economic development since gaining independence in 2002. Although rich in natural resources, particularly oil and gas, the country faces significant challenges, including an infrastructure deficit, human resource gaps, and dependence on petroleum revenues (Escollano Saldanha & Muni, 2023). With a population dependent on agriculture and a nascent private sector, Timor-Leste's development trajectory requires a comprehensive strategy and sustained international support (Novak, 2023). In this context, the World Bank has emerged as an important partner in facilitating the country's economic progress (Cisse et al., 2013).

The World Bank's involvement in Timor-Leste aligns with its global mandate to eradicate extreme poverty and promote shared prosperity (World Bank Group, 2018). Leveraging financial resources, technical expertise, and policy guidance, the agency has played a critical role in shaping the country's development policies and implementing transformative projects (Bhattacharya Oppenheim & Stern, 2015). Over the years, its initiatives have targeted key sectors such as infrastructure, education,

health and public financial management, providing a foundation for sustainable economic growth (Cashin et al., 2017). This intervention aims to address structural weaknesses and unlock the potential for inclusive development in Timor-Leste.

One of the distinctive features of Timor-Leste's economy is its heavy dependence on petroleum revenues, which account for more than 90% of government revenues (Johnston, 2023). This dependence poses significant risks, especially in the face of fluctuating world oil prices and depletion of petroleum reserves (Baffes et al., 2015). Recognizing this vulnerability, the World Bank has advocated economic diversification, emphasizing agriculture, tourism, and human resource development as alternative growth engines (World Bank Group, 2014). By encouraging sectoral reforms and increasing institutional capacity, the World Bank aims to reduce dependence on limited resources and increase national economic resilience (Aitalohi, 2021).

Education and skills development are also important on the World Bank's agenda in Timor Leste (Fairman, 2017). The country is facing a shortage of skilled labour, with much of its population lacking access to quality education and vocational training (Windapo, 2016). To address this, the Bank has supported initiatives to improve educational infrastructure, train teachers, and expand access to learning opportunities for marginalized groups (Tyagi et al., 2021). These efforts are critical in equipping the workforce with the skills necessary to meet the demands of the modern economy and attract investment (Bodewig et al., 2014).

Apart from developing human resources, the World Bank also prioritizes investment in infrastructure as a growth catalyst (Arimah, 2017). Limited connectivity, inadequate transport networks and unreliable energy supplies have hampered economic activity and limited access to essential services (Nundy et al., 2021). Through projects such as road construction, electrification, and water supply systems, the World Bank aims to increase productivity, reduce regional disparities, and improve the quality of life for Timor-Leste's citizens (World Bank Group, 2019). This investment is aligned with broader objectives, namely encouraging economic integration and stimulating private sector participation (Davies & Callan, 2015).

Although the World Bank's contribution to Timor-Leste's development is substantial, it is not without challenges (Martínez-Galán, 2019). Institutional fragility, governance problems, and dependence on external funding pose obstacles to the effective implementation and sustainability of development programs (Nay, 2013). Moreover, balancing the importance of economic growth with environmental preservation and social justice remains a complex task (Hariram et al., 2023). Understanding the dynamics of these challenges is critical to assessing the effectiveness and future direction of the World Bank's involvement in Timor-Leste (Cook et al., 2019).

This article examines the role of the World Bank in various aspects of supporting Timor-Leste's economic development (Cummins et al., 2019). This chapter explores the strategies used by the World Bank, the results achieved, and the lessons learned from the interventions undertaken (Jonasova & Cooke, 2012). By analyzing the linkages between international aid and local development priorities, this research aims to provide insight into the prospects for sustainable growth in Timor-Leste (Belarmino, 2015). These findings contribute to a broader understanding of the role of multilateral organizations in addressing development challenges in post-conflict countries and resource-dependent economies (Bruch et al., 2016).

LITERATURE REVIEW

The World Bank has long been a leading institution in addressing global economic development challenges, particularly in post-conflict and resource-dependent countries such as Timor-Leste (Daimon-Sato, 2021). Several studies have explored the role of these institutions in promoting growth, alleviating poverty, and building institutional capacity in developing countries (Zhao, 2021). This literature review examines the scholarly discourse regarding the World Bank's involvement in Timor-Leste, focusing on key themes such as economic diversification, infrastructure development, human resource development, and governance reform (Courvisanos & Boavida, 2017).

Post-Conflict Economic Recovery and the Role of International Institutions

Timor-Leste's transition from conflict to independence in 2002 positioned the country as a major recipient of international aid, and the World Bank played a central role (Talesco, 2017). Experts such as Mats (Lundahl et al., 2019) emphasize the importance of multilateral organizations in stabilizing fragile economies by providing financial and technical assistance. In the case of Timor-Leste, the World Bank's efforts are focused on rebuilding critical infrastructure and developing economic institutions capable of supporting long-term growth (World Bank Group, 2018). This contribution is very important considering the fragility of state institutions and dependence on natural resources (Triki, Dimitrova & Valentino, 2022).

Economic Diversification and Resource Dependence

Timor-Leste's dependence on petroleum revenues has drawn attention to the risks of resource dependency (Scheiner, 2015). According to (Ahmadov & Guliyev, 2016) resource-dependent economies often face challenges such as income instability, governance problems, and the “resource curse,” which can hinder sustainable development. The World Bank's strategy in Timor-Leste focuses on mitigating these risks through economic diversification (Lopes, 2021). Studies conducted by Courvisanos & Boavida, (2017) and other research highlight the World Bank's advocacy for investment in agriculture, tourism, and small and medium enterprises (SMEs). These sectors are seen as a viable route to reducing dependence on oil and gas, however, critics argue that progress in diversification remains slow due to weak implementation capacity and limited private sector development (Venables, 2016).

Infrastructure Development

Infrastructure development has been a cornerstone of the World Bank's involvement in Timor-Leste (Martínez-Galán, 2019). Poor connectivity and inadequate public services have become major obstacles to economic growth (Odaró, 2012). In line with development theories such as stages of the growth model, infrastructure is seen as a prerequisite for industrialization and economic integration (Dang & Pheng, 2015). A World Bank report (2019) documents major investments in road construction, electrification and water supply systems in Timor-Leste. However, some experts, such as (Kingsbury, Kramarz & Jacques, 2019), argue that these initiatives face challenges regarding sustainability and maintenance, especially in rural areas where state capacity remains limited.

Human Resource Development

Human capital is critical to economic transformation, and education has been a key focus of the World Bank's interventions in Timor-Leste (Rosser, & Bremner, 2017). According to Kyllonen (2012), increasing access to quality education and vocational training is essential to equip the workforce with the skills needed in a competitive global

economy. In Timor-Leste, research conducted (Rashid, 2020) revealed persistent gaps in education quality, access and gender equality. The World Bank has addressed these challenges through programs aimed at teacher training, improving school infrastructure, and curriculum development (Abdul-Hamid, Saraogi & Mintz, 2017). Although progress has been made, critics argue that these efforts are not enough to meet the needs of a rapidly growing youth population (Woodman, 2014).

Governance and Institutional Capacity

The effectiveness of World Bank support is highly dependent on governance and institutional capacity in recipient countries (De Janvry & Dethier, 2012). In Timor-Leste, weak institutions have always been an obstacle to implementing and sustaining development programs. Scholars such as (Almeida, 2019) emphasize the importance of state-building in post-conflict contexts, where institutions often lack the legitimacy and capacity to manage development effectively. The World Bank has worked to strengthen public financial management and transparency in Timor-Leste and has succeeded in improving budget implementation and accountability (Downes, Gay & Kraan, 2018). However, governance challenges remain, particularly in the areas of corruption and public sector efficiency (Fatile, 2012).

Criticism and Alternative Perspectives

Although the World Bank's contribution is widely acknowledged, the World Bank's intervention in Timor-Leste has not been without criticism (De Siqueira, 2016). Scholars such as (Babb & Chorev, 2016) argue that the World Bank's reliance on standardized development models may ignore local context and priorities. In Timor Leste, there is debate regarding the alignment of World Bank initiatives with the country's long-term development vision, as articulated in the 2011-2030 Strategic Development Plan (Courvisanos & Boavida, 2017). In addition, concerns regarding aid dependency and the sustainability of externally funded projects have also been raised, underscoring the need for a more participatory and context-sensitive development approach (Esser & Vanderkamp, 2013).

RESEARCH METHODS

This section outlines the research methodology used to investigate the role of the World Bank in supporting economic development in Timor-Leste (Rosser & Bremner, 2017). A qualitative approach was used to provide an in-depth understanding of the strategies, outcomes and challenges associated with the World Bank's interventions in the country (Yamey, 2012). This methodology involves three main components: document analysis, stakeholder interviews, and case study analysis (Wach & Ward, 2013). Each component was selected to triangulate the data and ensure a comprehensive analysis of the research topic (Lemon & Hayes, 2020).

1. Research Design

This research uses a qualitative and exploratory design to analyze the role of the World Bank in Timor-Leste's economic development (Azis & Safira, 2024). This approach was chosen because it allows a detailed examination of a complex phenomenon, especially in contexts where multiple factors such as governance, resource dependency, and institutional capacity interact (Ostrom, 2019). This study aims to identify patterns and relationships between World Bank initiatives and their impact on Timor-Leste's development direction (World Bank Group 2019).

2. Data Collection Method

2.1 Document Analysis

This research relies on secondary data obtained through document analysis. Important documents include (Johnston, 2014):

- Reports and publications by the World Bank, including country partnership frameworks, project evaluation reports, and sectoral analyses.
- Government policy documents, such as the Timor-Leste Strategic Development Plan (2011-2030) and national budget reports.
- Academic articles and studies focusing on Timor-Leste's economic development and the role of international institutions.

Analysis of these documents provides a basis for understanding the scope and objectives of the World Bank's involvement in Timor-Leste, as well as the broader economic and institutional context.

2.2 Stakeholder Interviews

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with key stakeholders to gather insights into practical aspects of the World Bank's interventions. Participants included (Wilhelm et al., 2016):

- Policymakers from the Government of Timor-Leste, especially from the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Strategic Planning and Investment.
- Representatives from the World Bank are involved in project design and implementation in Timor-Leste.
- Local experts, including academics, economists and civil society leaders, provide diverse perspectives.

Interview questions focus on:

- Alignment of World Bank projects with Timor-Leste's development priorities.
- The effectiveness of specific initiatives, particularly in the areas of infrastructure, education, and economic diversification.
- Challenges faced in implementing and sustaining these projects.

Interviews were conducted in person and virtually, depending on availability, and recorded with participant consent. Data from interviews were transcribed and analyzed thematically.

2.3 Case Study Analysis

This research includes case studies of specific World Bank-funded projects in Timor-Leste to assess their design, implementation and outcomes. Selected projects include (Amaral & Abraham, 2020):

- **Road Network Improvement Project:** Focuses on increasing connectivity between urban and rural areas.
- **Education Sector Support Program:** Aimed at increasing access to quality education and vocational training.
- **Economic Diversification Initiative:** Target agricultural and tourism development to reduce dependence on petroleum revenues.

Case studies were selected based on their significance to Timor-Leste's development goals and data availability.

3. Data Analysis

Data analysis follows a thematic approach to identify patterns and relationships between World Bank interventions and their impacts (Mendoza & Woolcock, 2014). Thematic coding was applied to categorize the data into key themes, including infrastructure development, human capital improvement, governance reform, and

economic diversification (Mohamed et al., 2022). Comparisons were made between findings from document analysis, interviews, and case studies to ensure consistency and reliability (Roller, 2019).

4. Research Limitations

Several limitations were recognized in the research process:

- **Data Availability:** Access to detailed project evaluation reports is sometimes limited, limiting the depth of analysis for certain initiatives.
- **Interview Obstacles:** Scheduling challenges and language barriers limited the number of interviews conducted with local stakeholders. Efforts are being made to overcome this through document analysis and secondary data.
- **Generalization:** These findings are specific to Timor-Leste and may not be directly applicable to other post-conflict countries dependent on natural resources.

5. Ethical Considerations

This research complied with ethical standards to ensure research integrity and protect participants' rights (Vanclay, Baines & Taylor, 2013). Consent was obtained from all interviewees, and confidentiality was maintained where requested (Arifin, 2018). This research also prioritizes transparency in data collection and analysis to ensure the validity of the findings (Tripp, 2018).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the study findings regarding the role of the World Bank in supporting Timor-Leste's economic development (World Bank Group, 2019). The discussion evaluates the results of key interventions, highlighting achievements and challenges across sectors such as infrastructure, human resources, governance and economic diversification (Bringezu et al., 2016). Thematic analysis of the data reveals the impact of the Bank's strategy, as well as gaps that require further attention (Adeabah et al., 2023).

1. Infrastructure Development

One of the World Bank's main contributions in Timor-Leste is infrastructure development, especially transportation and electrification (Heynen, MacGinley & Aguilar, 2024). That Road Network Improvement Project has significantly improved connectivity between urban and rural areas, facilitating access to markets and services (Avery et al., 2017).

- **Results:** Increased mobility has contributed to economic activity, especially in the fields of agriculture and small businesses. Road improvements have also reduced travel times, which is critical for access to healthcare and emergency services.
- **Challenge:** The sustainability of this investment is still a concern. Interviews with stakeholders revealed a lack of maintenance funding and limited regional capacity to manage infrastructure projects effectively. Rural area still facing disparities in infrastructure quality, thereby exacerbating disparities between regions.

2. Education and Human Resources Development

World Bank investments in education target access and quality. Initiatives like the Education Sector Support Program have focused on school building, teacher training, and curriculum updating (Mundy & Verger, 2016).

- **Results:** Primary and secondary education enrollment rates have increased, and infrastructure improvements have created safer learning environments. Teacher training programs have improved classroom practice, although not by much.
- **Challenge:** Persistent disparities in the quality of education, particularly between

urban and rural areas, hamper overall progress. Vocational training programs remain underdeveloped, limiting opportunities for young people to acquire market-relevant skills. Stakeholders emphasized the need for alignment between educational outcomes and labour market demands.

3. Economic Diversification

Economic diversification has been a cornerstone of the World Bank's strategy to reduce Timor-Leste's dependence on petroleum revenues. Initiatives promoting agriculture and tourism have been implemented with mixed results (Escollano, Saldanha & Muni, 2023).

- **Results:** Support for small farmers has increased agricultural productivity in some areas, while pilot programs in ecotourism have created employment opportunities for local communities.
- **Challenge:** Progress on diversification has been slow due to weak private sector involvement, inadequate infrastructure, and bureaucratic inefficiencies. For example, agricultural projects often face logistical challenges due to limited market access and inadequate supply chains. Tourism development is hampered by underdeveloped facilities and a lack of trained personnel.

4. Governance and Institutional Capacity

Strengthening governance is central to the World Bank's approach to Timor-Leste. Efforts to improve public financial management and increase transparency have shown some success (Goldfinch & Derouen 2014).

- **Results:** Reforms in budget planning and execution have increased discipline fiscal. Digital platforms for public financial management have increased accountability for government spending.
- **Challenge:** Governance issues, including corruption and inefficiency in public service delivery, remain significant obstacles.

Table 1. Summarizing the World Bank's financial support to Timor-Leste from 2019 to 2023 across the specified sectors:

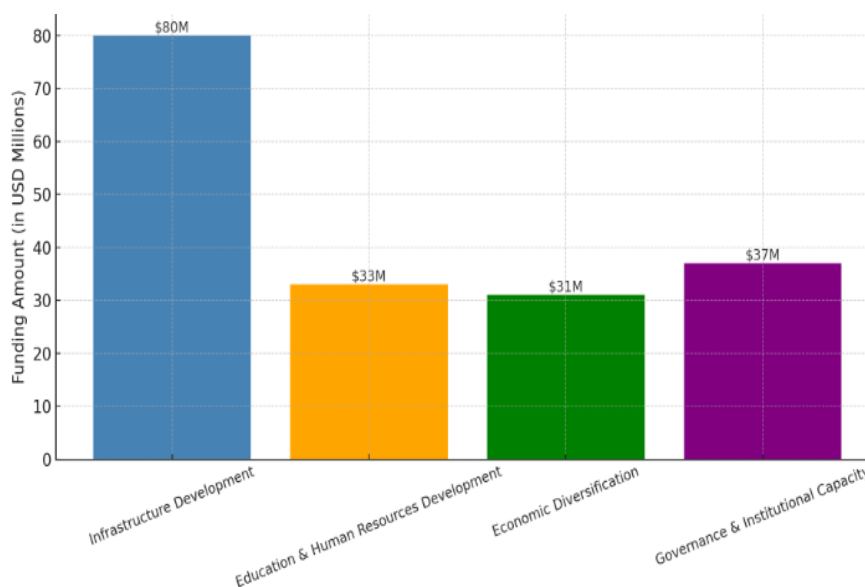
Sector	Project/Program Name	Year Approved	Funding Amount (USD)	Description
Infrastructure Development	Timor-Leste Branch Roads Project (Phase II)	2020	\$40 million	Road rehabilitation to improve rural and urban connectivity.
	Water Supply and Sanitation Project	2023	\$40 million	Expansion of clean water and sanitation services in underserved areas.
Education and Human Resources Development	Basic Education Strengthening Project	2021	\$15 million	Improved school infrastructure and teacher training.
	Timor-Leste Human Capital Development Program	2022	\$18 million	Investments in health, education, and social protection systems.
Economic Diversification	Sustainable Agriculture Productivity Project	2019	\$21 million	Boosting smallholder farmers' productivity and market access.
	Private Sector Competitiveness Project	2022	\$10 million	Enhancing small and medium enterprises (SMEs) and diversifying the economy.

Governance and Institutional Capacity	Health System Strengthening for Pandemic Preparedness	2022	\$25 million	Improving health governance and institutional capacity for pandemic resilience. Strengthening transparency and efficiency in public financial management.
	Public Financial Management Improvement Program	2020	\$12 million	

Source: World Bank (2023)

According to the Table 1, Between 2019-2023, the World Bank is funding several projects in Timor-Leste, with a focus on infrastructure, human resources, economic diversification and governance to promote sustainable development. In Infrastructure Development, two major projects received \$80 million: the Branch Roads Project (Phase II) (2020, \$40 Million) which aims to improve connectivity through road rehabilitation, and the Water Supply and Sanitation Project (2023, \$40 Million) which focuses on expanding development clean water and sanitation services in underserved areas. Education and Human Resources Development allocated \$33 million to two programs: the Basic Education Strengthening Project (2021, \$15 million), which improves school infrastructure and teacher training, and the Human Resources Development Program (2022, \$18 million), which targets health, education, and social protection systems. For Economic Diversification, \$31 million supports initiatives such as the Sustainable Agricultural Productivity Project (2019, \$21 million), increasing smallholder productivity and market access, and the Private Sector Competitiveness Project (2022, \$10 million), increasing SMEs and diversifying the economy. In the area of Governance and Institutional Capacity, \$37 million funds Strengthening Health Systems for Pandemic Preparedness (2022, \$25 million) and the Public Financial Management Improvement Program (2020, \$12 million), which improve governance resilience and financial transparency. This investment highlights the World Bank's commitment to comprehensively address Timor-Leste's development priorities.

Figure 1. Is a bar chart showing the World Bank's economic support to Timor-Leste across our sectors from 2019 to 2023. Each bar represents the total funding (in millions of USD) allocated to a specific sector.



Source: World Bank 2019-2023

Based on the information from the figure 1, Is a bar chart depicting World Bank financial assistance to Timor-Leste from 2019 to 2023, categorized into four main sectors. Each bar represents the total amount of funding (in millions of USD) allocated to each sector. The Infrastructure Development sector received the largest allocation, at \$80 million, reflecting its priority on projects such as road rehabilitation and improving water supplies. This significant investment highlights the importance of improving connectivity and basic services. Governance and Institutional Capacity ranked second, with \$37 million allocated to strengthen health systems, pandemic preparedness and financial management transparency. The sector emphasizes the need for a strong institutional framework for sustainable growth. The Education and Human Resources Development sector received \$33 million, indicating a focus on improving education infrastructure, teacher training, and human capital investments to build a skilled and resilient workforce. Economic Diversification received \$31 million, supporting agriculture and small and medium-sized businesses to encourage economic growth outside traditional sectors. This chart highlights the World Bank's strategic focus on infrastructure and governance while addressing human resources and economic diversification to comprehensively support Timor-Leste's development goal.

5. Cross-Sectoral Observation of Corruption, weak implementation capacity

The World Bank's interventions are interdependent. For example, infrastructure improvements will facilitate better access to schools and markets, while governance reforms will increase the efficiency of education and infrastructure investment (Dang & Pheng, 2015). However, systemic problems-such as institutional fragility and insufficient local capacity-inhibit the realization of these synergies.

6. Aligning Strategy with Local Needs

Despite the World Bank's enormous contribution, stakeholders consistently highlighted the importance of adapting interventions to Timor-Leste's unique context. The main themes that emerged from the discussion included (Mercer et al., 2014):

- **Capacity Increase:** Strengthening local institutions is very important to ensure the sustainability of development efforts.
- **Private Sector Involvement:** Greater involvement of local businesses can accelerate progress in economic diversification.
- **Sustainability Focus:** Projects require long-term maintenance mechanisms and the ability to adapt to changing circumstances.

Overall, while the World Bank has laid the foundation for progress in Timor-Leste, future initiatives must prioritize local ownership, inclusiveness, and resilience to achieve sustainable development outcomes.

CONCLUSION

The World Bank has been a pivotal partner in Timor-Leste's economic development, contributing significantly to infrastructure, education, and governance reforms. While these efforts have yielded positive outcomes, persistent challenges such as resource dependency, weak institutions, and limited private sector engagement constrain their impact. Moving forward, it is crucial to enhance the sustainability and inclusivity of development programs. Greater emphasis on capacity building, public-private partnerships, and alignment with local development priorities can strengthen the foundation for long-term growth.

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