

Household decision-making processes and family resources: A case study from Viqueque

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Abstract

Drawing from a place-specific context, this chapter makes explicit a range of local, community and sacred house-based economic values and arrangements which contribute to household decision-making processes. Household (HH) decision making processes in Timor-Leste are an important component in designing the development approaches of government and civil society organisations. Understanding decision-making processes at the household level can enable development practitioners to better design their programs and improve the quality of life for households at the local level. This paper reports on research which has documented gender-based decision-making at household levels across one rural area of Timor-Leste. The primary data for this research was collected from the Municipality of Viqueque, covering 11 *suku* (villages) and four ethno-linguistic groups (Naueti, Makassae, Tetum Terik and Kairui). The research illustrates how rural households make decisions around food preparation, family food gardens (*to'os*) and rice farms (*natar*), livestock (water buffalo, Balinese cows, pigs, and chickens) and household finances.

Keywords: Timor-Leste; rural economy; household decision making

Household (HH) decision making processes in Timor-Leste are an important component in designing the development approaches of government and civil society organisations. Understanding decision-making processes at the household level can enable development practitioners to better design their programs and improve the quality of life for households at the local level. This paper reports on research which has documented gender-based decision-making at household levels across one rural area of Timor-Leste. The primary data for this research was collected from the Municipality of Viqueque, covering 11 *suku* (villages) and four ethno-linguistic groups (Naueti, Makassae, Tetum Terik, and Kairui). The research illustrates how rural households make decisions around food preparation, family food gardens (*to'os*) and rice farms (*natar*), livestock (water buffalo, Balinese cows, pigs, and chickens) and household finances. The data was collected between 2nd-14th of April 2018.

Studies on decision-making processes in Timor-Leste have been largely focused on the public domain (Ospina and Hohe 2001; Niner 2011). The objective of this study is to document and to understand how decisions are made at the household level in relation to family resources. That is, who decides where to farm, what kind of crops to grow, how to use livestock, and how the family money is spent. Drawing from a place-specific context, this chapter makes explicit a range of local, community and sacred house-based economic values and arrangements which contribute to household decision-making processes (see also Chapters 5, 7, and 8, this volume).

Methodology, variables and informants

The data in this study was collected through focus group discussions (FGD) and one-to-one interviews as well as informal discussions and observations. Interviewers used semi structured questions with gender and socio-cultural norms treated as crosscutting issues. The following variables were adopted to understand patterns of the decision-making household:

1. *Household food consumption and family nutrition*. The objectives were to understand patterns of daily food consumption, how daily menus are decided, and the consumption patterns of meals between household members.
2. *Family gardens (to'os) and rice paddies (natar)*: Questions in this section focused on understanding farming practices and the division of labour between men (husbands) and women (wives), decisions around field preparation, seed selection, weeding, harvesting, managing food post-harvest and the consumption of this food in the household.
3. *Livestock (water buffalo, Balinese cattle, pigs, chickens)*: The most commonly reported animals owned by households were water buffalo, Balinese cattle, pigs and chickens. These animals are considered the household's most important livestock resources. Questions explored the types of animals owned by the household, who kept and looked after which animal and decisions around the use of animals.
4. *Household finances*: These questions investigated sources of household cash income; who managed household cash and expenditure choices and decisions.

The total number of informants in the study was 77 (comprising 47 (61%) women and 30 (39%) men). Having a higher number of female informants was an advantage because rural Timorese women are often under-represented in research studies (see Chapter 8, this volume). The education level of the participants was divided into those who were literate (30 (39%)) and those who were illiterate (47 (61%)). Having a higher number of illiterate informants was an advantage for the study

because responses from those with little formal education were heavily influenced by the primacy of the socio-cultural norms in the rural setting rather than external sources, namely schools and higher education institutions. For example, while some have reported that urban educated Timorese assume that most Timorese spend their household income on expenses relating to customary rituals and ceremonies (Guterres 2011), this study in Viqueque found otherwise. In this study the most literate participants had completed only a low to mid-level of education, with the majority attending primary school (81%) and a minority also attending junior high school (14%) and high school (5%).

The study included informants from four ethno-linguistic groups in the south-eastern municipality of Viqueque. These included Naueti (18 (23%)), Tetum Terik (27 (35%)), Kairui (10 (13%)) and Makassae (22 (29%)). These comprised 57 (74%) married participants, 5 (6%) widows and 5 (6%) widowers, 8 (11%) boys and 2 (3%) girls. The study was undertaken in 11 *suku* (villages) in four of Viqueque's five Administrative Posts. Two *suku* were in Uatolari (18 (23%)), six *suku* in Viqueque Vila (34 (48%)), two *suku* in Ossu (22 (29%)) and one *suku* in Lakluta (3 (4%)). The Administrative Post of Uatu Carabou was excluded from this study because the two languages (Naueti and Makassae) spoken in this area were covered in other *suku*.

Study findings

Definitions of family and household

The 'household' in this paper describes a physical structure and its usual occupants as a residential unit. A family is taken to be a group consisting of parents and their children living together as a unit. In most cases, many households in rural areas also comprised the elderly parents of either the husband or the wife. This was particularly pronounced as the younger children of the elderly couple were often living outside the village, working or studying in Dili or in other urban areas.

Linked to the idea of household in Timor-Leste is a household's membership of and alliances with other *uma lisan* (ancestral lineages) and associated *Uma Lulik* (sacred houses). To help understand decision making processes at the household level, we briefly discuss the socio-cultural norms linked to these *Uma Lulik* and the ways these are reflected in the meaning and use of public and private spaces in Timor-Leste. Despite their many regional variations, Timorese sacred houses (*Uma Lulik*) are always divided symbolically by a masculine (public) space and feminine (private) space. The feminine space is considered the womb (Hicks 1984), the inner space to nurture life. Meanwhile, the masculine space is considered to be the outer

security for the womb. The feminine space occupies roughly 80% of an *Uma Lulik* interior and the masculine space consists of about 20%.

These spaces are not gender exclusive, men and women have access to both spaces. Likewise, the categories of masculine and feminine spaces in no way infers a separation between men and women, rather it is the case that “men and women operate in both” and that “masculine and feminine aspects exist in both sexes” (Trindade 2019, 46). The symbolic classification of the interior/private/feminine space and exterior/public/masculine space is significant in so far as it determines the kinds of activities that take place in these areas. For example, when discussing issues regarding members of a particular house, discussions are likely to take place inside the private spaces of the house. When negotiating relations with others, these interactions will take place in the exterior, public spaces of the house. Gender dynamics within and without these spaces are contingent on numerous intersecting factors including age, rank, degree of affiliation and personality. The social and spatial organisation of these lineages (*uma lisan*) and sacred houses (*Uma Lulik*) nevertheless plays an important role in shaping the organisation of households, especially concerning what is considered appropriate in public and private spaces.

The difference between public and private spaces in the Timor-Leste context

The concepts of private and public spaces in a Timorese context (in this case contextualised in the Viqueque district) is different to that contextualised in western (or global) terms. To analyse the decision-making process at the household level, one needs to understand how the idea of public and private spaces in Timor-Leste also links with cultural ideas bound up with the *Uma Lulik* and how these spaces influence each other and interact when it comes to decision making. There are numerous anthropological studies which have analysed the decision making process in public space in Timor-Leste. For example, Ospina and Hohe (2001, 140) note that, “the decision making process is the domain of the senior male of the existing social groups within the hamlets. Rural women are not supposed to be outspoken and take the floor in public meetings”. Furthermore, Niner (2011, 417) has observed that, “in public or political decision-making processes senior men dominate, while women, particularly senior women, have symbolic and ritual power”.

Studies like those cited above often lead people to believe that women are excluded from the decision-making process in both public and private spaces because decision-making is the domain of senior males in the hamlet. Secondly, studies on the decision-making process in Timor-Leste have focused heavily on public space while ignoring private space. More recent work on gender and power in Timor-Leste has begun to unpack these characterisations, highlighting the need to take into account questions of age, rank and affiliation (Silva 2017;

see also Chapter 8, this volume). This study finds that, as is often the case with complex ritual events in the *Uma Lulik*, in the private spaces at the household level, men and women have an equal if differently configured say in decision-making processes. Of further significance to this finding is the fact that in most cases any final decisions concluded in public space have already undergone background consultation processes involving both men and women in private spaces. Men have the responsibility to speak about, negotiate and/or convey the final agreement in public meetings. Because this joint male/female consultation process happens in the background and out of public view, there has been a tendency in the literature to conclude that it is only men who make these decisions.

Additionally, we note that one reason why women participate less in decision-making processes in public spaces is because this space has been incrementally colonised by an explicitly patriarchal religious (Catholic) and administrative (Portuguese) system for almost 500 years. As a result, women often feel insecure or unable to speak out in public spaces. Furthermore, when the Portuguese began to administer a census in 1960 (Weatherbee 1966) and register households and families, they usually registered these households under the name of the head of the household, which in most cases meant that the name of the father/husband was recorded. Hence, the unfolding process of colonisation has meant that the role of men has been emphasised and the role of women downplayed in these circumstances. Colonisation has weakened the status of women in Timorese society. In contrast, Niner (2011) describes how in pre-colonial times queens made decisions at the highest levels of society and were politically and diplomatically powerful.

Trindade (2017, 13) notes that, “most research focuses on analysing women’s participation in political life and decision-making processes in the formal/public sphere, largely ignoring traditional or localized decision-making processes that occur informally”. He further argues that, to comprehend the decision-making process in Timor-Leste, one should expand investigations into the ritual domain (including those that occur in the private spaces of the *Uma Lulik*) because a better understanding of this realm can be used to open the way for enhanced women’s participation in the decision-making process in the public realm. This is because while women are actively involved in the decision-making process on informal matters such as traditional rituals and ceremonies, their participation is less obvious or visible in decision-making in the public sphere. As Trindade (2017) argues, even in the private sphere prior to a decision being made, there will be consultation processes occurring between men and women, although the final decision will usually be announced by a man. What is important in these cases is that it is a collective decision-making process. When social outsiders do not have access or understand these background consultation processes, they conclude that the men have made these decisions themselves without consulting women and other community members.

Depending on the situation, it is also difficult for social outsiders to differentiate between public and private spaces in Timor-Leste. This is because these spaces exist in the mind not in the actual space. Even when social outsiders meet with Timorese in literal private spaces, the status and presence of the outsider means that Timorese will respond as though they are in a public space. In this sense, they will only convey some information about decision-making processes and will likely withhold, or not mention, other information. Conversely when Timorese gather in public arenas, if they feel comfortable enough, then they may interact as though they are in a private space. In these situations, they will speak out more openly. Long-term processes of colonisation and foreign control in Timor-Leste has meant that people have often been persecuted for speaking the truth. This has made Timorese feel insecure in public spaces. For this reason, it is extremely important that research encounters take place in friendly and trusted environments. This will enable a better sharing and exchange of ideas and information.

It should also be noted that there are power imbalances between men and women in public space in certain situations. This is particularly the case when men feel they hold more power in comparison to women and this influences the dominance of men in decision-making processes in public space. While some may blame local cultural norms for the dominance of men in these instances, it is important to remember that during the periods of Portuguese and Indonesian colonisation, men had more opportunity to receive formal education than women. Women often did not feel secure to travel to school because of the distance from their home and for security reasons. Yet evidence suggests that, before Portuguese colonisation, Timorese society was more egalitarian. Portuguese archival research reveals that in the 17th century, around one quarter of all political leaders who signed official documents with the Portuguese colonial administration were women (Kammen 2012; Hägerdal and Kammen 2016). From the 18th century onwards, these female political leaders disappeared from the records. Oral evidence suggests that in the pre-colonial period the island of Timor was ruled by a pre-eminent female leader with the title of '*maromak oan*' (child of the creator). This female role was one of ritual leadership and had a higher value and more power than associated male political leadership (Therik 2004). However, women's involvement in public affairs lessened from the 19th century onwards, suggesting that the Portuguese colonial administration preferred to deal with men than women. This is a key reason why in Timor-Leste today we find fewer women active in decision-making processes in public space.

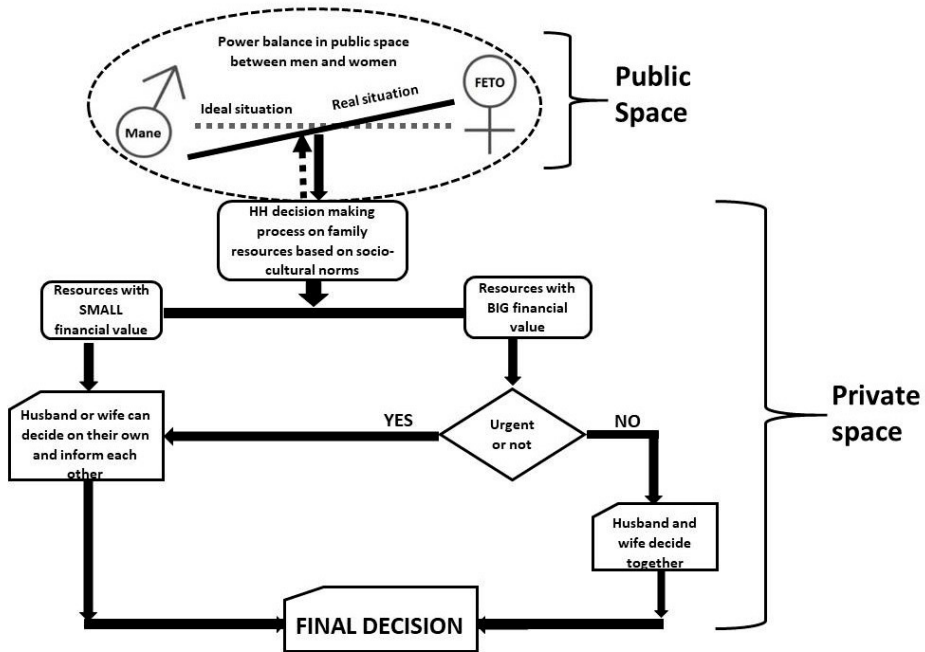


Figure 6.1: Schematic representation of decision making process at household level. The figure depicts the relative weighted power of males and females. Credit: Josh Trindade.

Decision-making processes at the household level in relation to family resources are sketched schematically above (see Figure 6.1). Oral culture in Timor-Leste does not define who should make decisions at household level in regard to resources.

From the diagram above, we can see that, for reasons discussed earlier in the paper, men have more power in public space in comparison to women, yet our findings suggest that women have an equally significant role to play in the private/ less visible space of household decision-making.

To make decisions on household resources, husbands and wives must first weigh the economic value of the goods. If the goods have a 'smaller financial value', then either of them can make a decision and the other will be informed later. For items with a 'larger financial value', husbands and wives must make a joint decision to avoid household conflict. The exception to this is in urgent situations such as when children are sick or when there are educational expenses such as school fees.

Different factors influencing household decision-making

There are different factors that influence a household when making decisions about the deployment of resources (see Figure 6.2).

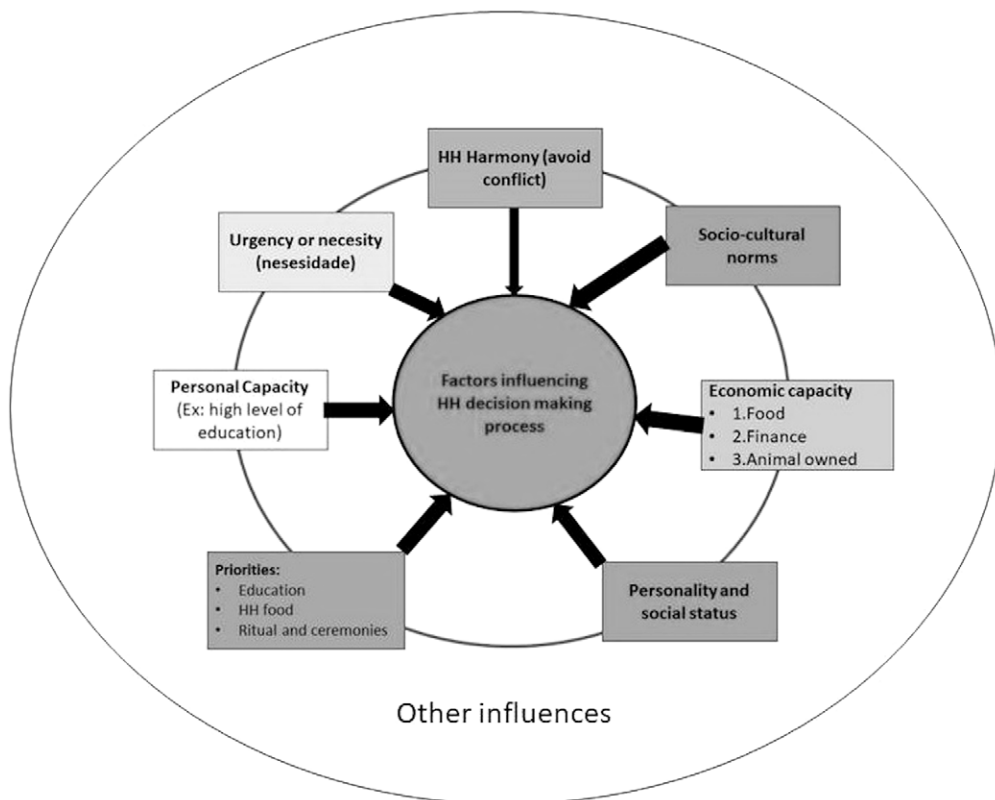


Figure 6.2: Factors influencing household (HH) decision making. Credit: Josh Trindade

- *HH Harmony*: to make a decision in a HH, all HH members should have a high regard for HH harmony. This means that every decision must take into account the interest of all HH members to prevent conflict. To secure this, HH members often undertake informal consultation between parents, children, and other HH members. As a result of this, HH members sometimes sacrifice their personal interests for HH harmony.
- *Socio-Cultural Norms*: Timorese socio-cultural norms that are passed down inter-generationally influence the decision-making process at the HH level whether directly or indirectly.

- *Economic Capacity*: Another key contributing factor to the HH decision making process is economic capacity. Before making decisions, households will consider economic capacity over the long term, especially the availability of stores of food, HH finances, and the amount of livestock owned.
- *Personality and Social Status*: Within a given HH, men or women who have strong personalities and/or come from families of higher social status tend to influence the decision-making process at the HH level.
- *Priority*: HH priorities also influence decision-making processes at HH level.
- *Personal capacity (education level)*: The other influencing factor in HH decision making is personal capacity. For example, men or women with higher levels of education or who have access to and control over a large amount of resources, tend to influence decision-making processes at HH level.
- *Urgency*: To make a decision at the HH level, both spouses should consider the urgency of the need. For example, providing for the need of a family member who is sick is more important than providing resources for an unrelated cultural ceremony.

Negotiation processes

This study found that withholding sexual intercourse is sometimes used to negotiate an individual's interest and the outcome of decision-making processes.¹ For example, one participant from a women's group in Viqueque explained that: "If I want to do something but my husband does not allow me to do it, then I can get angry. When this happens, sometimes I throw things around. At night when we sleep, I can turn away from him. But I don't do this for too long, because he can go and find another woman" (FGD with Women Group, Waimori Village).

On some occasions, before decisions are made, there will also be informal negotiation processes occurring between family members in order to secure their interests. There are many ways in which this is done between family members. For example, if a wife wants something from her husband, she will cook nice food and speak softly and nicely to him and vice versa. When men do not get what they want from their wives, they will try to leave the house to cool down and avoid a violent situation in the home. The emotional aspects of household decision-making are thus important to consider. If either the husband or the wife act without first gaining the permission of the other, this can trigger conflict and disharmony in the HH, and often this in turn can lead to domestic violence.

Participants also informed us that sometimes when problems arise between spouses, they do not talk to each other for a while. For some this may be a brief period of up to two hours, but for others it may take one or two days before they acknowledge and repair their rift. Some others informed us that such rifts may

continue over the longer term, although a situation such as visitors to the house will mean the spouses make peace temporarily. When their guests leave, they will continue not talking to one another.

Decisions on food, nutrition and household resources

Food in the Household

Cooking is normally carried out by women, but when women are sick or not at home, men cook too. While what food is prepared is primarily a woman's decision, men may request foods that they wish to eat.

Household chores are undertaken by women assisted by the daughters in the household. Men may help when they have time. While two participants in this study explained that in their households domestic tasks were divided equally between men and women, this is not the case for the majority of households. Women generally decide on the allocation of domestic tasks. One participant explained that, because she was breastfeeding, she was not currently doing domestic chores and that she was also asked to eat first when the meals were ready.

When meals are ready, all household members eat together at the table at the same time, but customarily the male head of the household will take his food first. If one of the household members is not at home during mealtime, their food will be set aside for when they return. The now common practice of eating together at a table reinforces the household hierarchy. Timorese meal habits have changed over time and most households now adopt the Portuguese style of eating at tables. Traditionally Timorese ate on a bamboo platform (*hadak leten*) inside the house with food divided into portions on the plates of each household member.

Household Nutrition

Women's decisions about daily food consumption also determine household nutrition. When asked about what they had consumed for the previous evening's meal, the foods listed by the participants were rice and vegetables (cassava leaves, Chinese cabbage, pumpkin leaves), *etu sedok* (a mixture of rice, black beans and vegetables boiled in one pot) and *batar-da'an* (pounded corn boiled with kidney beans, peanuts and vegetables). All respondents (men and women) stated that they had not consumed meat in the previous evening's meal. While a minority of respondents reported that they consumed meat once or twice a month, the majority reported that they eat meat only when there is a traditional ritual and ceremony (*lia mate no lia moris*). Those who have access to money may sometimes buy fish sold on street stalls or by mobile fish sellers.

Young children (under-five) are served each morning with either *sasoro mutin de'it* (just white rice porridge) or rice porridge and vegetables (carrot and pumpkin

leaves). For lunch they eat rice and vegetables and at night they are served more porridge. All mothers who participated in this research had breastfed their children for six months or more.

Family swidden gardens (to'os) and wet-rice fields (natar)

Family swidden gardens (*to'os*) are used primarily to grow maize, cassava, black beans and other staple crops. Family gardens and wet-rice fields are considered important family resources and are the basis of the livelihoods of most farmers.

The majority of participants in this study owned swidden gardens (*to'os*), but only some owned or had access to wet-rice fields (*natar*). Those living in the Administrative Post of Uatolari had both *to'os* and *natar*, while those living in Viqueque Villa and Ossu had limited to no access to *natar* and usually had access to *to'os*. Those who only had access to *natar* were able to do so as labourers in the fields belonging to others. In these cases, the harvest would be divided equally between workers and land owners.

When asking about how places are selected for the family swidden garden (*to'os*) most respondents explained that it was the husband who decided where to make the gardens and farm each season. Others described this as a joint decision between the spouses. People explained that they will select a site based on soil fertility and the distance from the family home. *To'os* is planted either on family-owned or community land.

Clearing swidden gardens and rice field preparation is considered men's work, but women also contribute when they have free time. It is considered that men and women contribute equally to field preparation, planting seeds, weeding and harvesting, even though they do not necessarily do the same amount of work. Prescriptive gender relations mean that men and women commonly do different jobs, but these roles are considered to be equal or complementary (Niner 2012; Hicks 2012; Wigglesworth 2010; see also Chapter 8, this volume). For example, respondents from one Focus Group Discussion explained that when men clear the fields or carried out fencing, women would be in charge of preparing food at home to take to the men in the fields at midday. These two tasks are considered equal contributions to household life. One advantage of these prescriptive gender relations is a division of tasks which contributes to household harmony. A disadvantage of these prescriptive gender relations is that women often spend many more hours working on their household and agricultural tasks compared to men.

After crops are harvested, it is the responsibility of the women to manage the harvest storage and consumption. If one of the household members decides to sell a portion of the harvest, they must first consult with other household members in order to avoid conflict.

Livestock

Livestock are considered one of the most valuable assets of a household. Livestock may be sold during emergency situations such as for paying school fees or for healthcare costs when someone gets sick.

The most important livestock for most people are water buffalo or Balinese cattle, pigs, goats or sheep and chickens. The most common animals owned by households are pigs and chickens. Only a small percentage (less than 5% of participants) of household respondents owned water buffalo or Balinese cattle.

In a customary exchange sense, water buffalo and Bali cattle are associated with masculinity or men, therefore it is the men who look after them. Women will look after buffalo when men are not available. Women are customarily associated with pigs because it is considered a female (feminine) animal in marriage exchange. In life cycle (*lia mate no lia moris*) rituals, the fertility-taking group (*fetosan*) gives buffalo to the fertility-giving group (*umane*) who provides a return gift of a pig. Some respondents explained that while women and men can help collect food to feed the pigs, it is women's daily responsibility to feed the pigs. Men will feed pigs when women in the household are sick, giving birth or are not at home.

As livestock have a great economic value for households, except in urgent situations, decisions over animals like a water buffalo, Balinese cattle and pigs need to be made by consultation between spouses and other household members. Decisions about the use of livestock with a lesser economic value, such as chickens, may be made independently by either spouse.

Family Finances

The main sources of cash income for households are selling agricultural produce, selling livestock, contributions from other household members who are employed, and social security payments made to the elderly or veteran's pensions. In some cases, the household heads (one or both spouses) may be employed in the government or non-government sector.

All participants, both men and women, agreed that it is women (the wife) who manages a household's finances. This does not imply that women have autonomy to spend the money however they wish, but rather that men and women usually come to a joint decision about all significant household spending. Both men and women have autonomy over matters involving smaller expenditure.

There are variations between households in terms of what is considered to be of significant economic value. For some households, anything over US\$10 is considered significant, while for other households this amount may be over US\$50.

All participants agreed that household spending should be first on education, second on food and third on customary activities such as life-cycle rituals. This order of priority contradicts popular beliefs, especially those of educated Dili-based

residents, which assert that the majority of rural households spend all of their money on customary activities such as life-cycle rituals.

Conclusions

The objective of this study was to document and to understand how decisions are made at the household level in relation to family resources. That is, who decides where to farm, what kind of crops to grow, how to use livestock, how to allocate food resources and how the family money is spent. While the study identified a tendency toward prescriptive gender relations guiding the allocation of household tasks, it found that these roles were understood to be complementary between men and women. The identified socio-cultural norm for household decision-making was one of collaboration between spouses and where necessary other household members. The necessity for collaborative or joint decisions was especially the case for matters concerning the use or expenditure of significant household resources.

Previous studies on the decision-making process in Timor-Leste have focused heavily on the public sphere with little to no attention to decision-making in private spaces such as households. This household research across four ethno-linguistic groups in the Viqueque Municipality recommends that further study into decision-making in the private sphere be extended to other language groups in Timor-Leste.

Household decision making processes in Timor-Leste are an important component to consider and inform the development approaches of government and civil society organisations. Culturally and context-specific understandings of household decision-making processes are needed to enable development practitioners to better design the programs which aim to improve the quality of life and economy for households at the local level.

Notes

¹ This is an area which requires further research.

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