

Unrevealing the Role of “Ordinary Chinese Indonesian” in Local Development in Indonesia: A case study in West Timor, Indonesia

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Abstract

Research on development in Indonesia has tended to emphasize state policies and international aid interventions, while roles of local actors have not been carefully considered. Among these actors, Chinese Indonesian communities have historically played important roles in trade, finance, and distribution.

This research note examines the socio-economic roles of “ordinary Chinese” merchants in West Timor, one of Indonesia’s most economically marginalized regions. West Timor, part of East Nusa Tenggara Province, faces harsh ecological conditions, weak infrastructure, and limited access to state-led and international development assistance.

Drawing on preliminary fieldwork conducted since 2024, including interviews with Chinese Indonesian merchants engaged in retail, logistics, construction, and agricultural trade, this study shows that ordinary Chinese actors function as *de facto* development agents. Rather than operating as large capital holders, they sustain local economies through everyday practices such as informal credit provision, aggregation and transport of agricultural products, and the facilitation of market access for small-scale farmers.

Historically rooted in colonial-era trade networks, Chinese communities in Timor have developed dense, locally embedded networks that combine economic activity with social relationships. Despite experiencing political exclusion and discrimination during various periods of Indonesian history, these networks have persisted and adapted, particularly in regions where formal institutions remain weak.

This study argues that the networks of ordinary Chinese in West Timor act as institutional complements to state-led development, filling gaps left by formal policies and aid programs. By highlighting these locally grounded practices, the research challenges state-centric models of development and underscores the importance of engaging with existing economic networks in peripheral regions. While the findings are preliminary, they point to the need for further comparative research on the role of informal yet durable networks in shaping development outcomes.