

Ethnography Writing

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Short Introduction

This ethnographic report brings together fieldwork conducted across multiple sites in Indonesia and its surrounding border regions, including A1, A2, B1, B2, C1, Jakarta, as well as selected cross-border observations in neighbouring countries. Rather than treating these locations as separate field sites, I approach them as connected and relational spaces where adaptive social protection, local values, and digital technologies are constantly negotiated, translated, and reassembled in everyday governance.

The research follows how social protection systems operate across very different geographical and political contexts, from remote and conflict-affected highland regions, to more connected lowland urban areas, national policy spaces in Jakarta, and comparative reflections from border countries. Moving across these sites allows me to trace not only differences in implementation, but also recurring patterns in how policies travel, break down, adapt, or are reinterpreted on the ground.

At the centre of this inquiry is the question of how “adaptive social protection” is actually enacted in practice. While it is often presented as a coherent and scalable policy approach, my fieldwork shows that its implementation is shaped by fragmented infrastructures, uneven digital connectivity, local moral standards, and shifting political priorities. Digital technologies do not simply streamline these systems, but also introduce new forms of mediation, exclusion, and improvisation.

Local values, meanwhile, are not external to governance but deeply embedded in how systems are understood and enacted. They shape ideas of deservingness, responsibility, trust, and legitimacy, and influence how social protection is received, contested, or quietly reworked at different levels of the system.

By moving across these diverse sites, this report develops a grounded understanding of how adaptive social protection actually functions beyond policy design. It traces how governance is assembled through crisis, infrastructure, discretion, and everyday practice, and how people navigate, interpret, and live within these shifting systems.

Site code	Location	Brief description of field context
A1	TTU district, East Nusa Tenggara province (on Timor Island)	Rural resettlement village hosting East Timorese refugees displaced during the 1999–2000 post-referendum period. The area is characterised by agrarian livelihoods, strong kinship-based organisation, and layered experiences of displacement, resettlement, and integration into formal and informal social protection systems.
A2	Kupang district, East Nusa Tenggara province (on Timor Island)	Semi-urban coastal resettlement and settlement area with East Timorese refugee presence from the 1999–2000 displacement period. Located near the provincial capital, it features higher mobility, stronger access, and improved connectivity to formal social protection systems and digital infrastructure.
B1	Papua Highland province	Highland Papua setting marked by insecurity, military presence, mobility restrictions, and limited infrastructure, where social

		protection delivery is highly fragmented and mediated through local actors.
B2	Papua province	Lowland regency combining coastal, lake, and inland geographies, including areas around Lake Sentani and access corridors toward the Pacific coast. The area functions as an administrative and mobility hub near the airport, with relatively stronger connectivity, government presence, and mixed rural-urban settlement patterns shaped by migration and resettlement.
C1	West Kalimantan province	Multiethnic coastal city known for religious diversity and tolerance discourse, with structured cash transfer systems, strong volunteer networks, and visible ethnic-economic stratification.
D1	DKI Jakarta province	National policy and administrative capital and centre where social protection systems are designed, coordinated, and digitised, often distant from field-level implementation realities.
Border countries	Malaysia (Sarawak), Brunei Darussalam, Timor-Leste	Comparative cross-border sites used for contextual reflection on welfare regimes, migration, digital access, and differences in social protection systems and state capacity.

Field 1 – Story from A1, East Nusa Tenggara: *“Are we also Indonesia?”*

(February – April 2026)

This was the first place where I conducted my research. I arrived feeling both absurd and scared. I kept asking myself: will I be able to do this? Will I ever finish anything here, now or later?

A1 is a resettlement village, as the locals would describe it. It is located around 6–8 hours by bus from the capital, Kupang, where I live. I travelled there with a scooter attached to the back of the bus, a common practice for transport connecting districts across Timor Island.

Although this was not my first time in the district of Kefamenanu, my previous visits had always been brief, trainings, short trips, never long enough to truly stay. Before choosing A1 as my field site, I conducted an initial visit for familiarisation. During that time, I stayed in a local hotel, prepared formal letters, and visited the house of an acquaintance whose family helped me establish contacts and accompanied me during my stay.

Once all my equipment for the participatory video workshops arrived, I gathered the courage to begin the fieldwork properly. I had prepared everything I thought I would need, plano paper, board markers, post-it notes, pens, and other materials.

For the fieldwork itself, I decided to rent a room in the town as a basecamp. I would leave my belongings there and travel to the village for day visits or stay overnight for a few days, sometimes up to a week, before returning to the town. This arrangement proved helpful. It allowed me to access stable internet to update my supervisors and attend online meetings. It also gave me space to retreat, reflect, and rest, as staying with local families in the village could be intense.

In the village, I was given a room near the living area, and I chose to stay alone. Even though my stays were temporary and irregular, I felt it was important to contribute to the household. I would buy electricity tokens, bring food or small gifts for the children, and pay the mother of the house to prepare food for my workshops, framing it as catering work so it could also be seen as income.

I tried not to stay too long each week, except during the workshop period when I needed to remain for at least three days, plus additional time for editing, which took longer than I had expected. I was also conscious that staying as a “friend of the family,” where direct payment might be refused, could unintentionally burden the household.

I explained that I do not eat meat, which helped reduce expectations around food. Meat is considered a luxury, while plant-based food, such as tempeh, tofu, eggplant, and vegetables, is more common and accessible. In that sense, I ate what the family usually ate, sometimes even less.

Over time, I built meaningful relationships with people in the village, through household interviews, church attendance, and especially through participatory workshops. Working closely with 8–10 participants allowed us to spend extended time together, form a group chat, and engage in deeper discussions about their lived realities and priorities for the films we created.

We shared many moments, frustration, anger, hope, and laughter.

Broken Road, Broken Connection.

What stood out most in this field site was how difficult it was to access. In this day and age, it is rare to encounter a village that is so hard to reach, especially one located relatively close to a district capital.

If A1 were deep in the mountains or in a remote region, this might make sense. But it is not. The village sits near government buildings, a university, a military complex, and one of the largest churches in the region. Yet it remains excluded, primarily because of a single issue: the road.

In nearly every interview and informal conversation, villagers expressed frustration about the road. At first, I found this puzzling. But over time, I began to understand.

The issue is not simply physical, it is bureaucratic. This would also then strongly reflect brokenness in its digital infrastructure. Responsibility for the road exists in a kind of limbo. No one seems fully accountable. This creates a sense of being permanently “in transit,” where decisions about wellbeing are always deferred. Despite living there for over 20 years, residents remain stuck in uncertainty.

It is not due to lack of funds. Village fund policies in Indonesia allocate budgets to each village, which could potentially support small-scale road repairs. However, because the road’s administrative status is unclear, even these funds cannot be used effectively. No one, including district officials, seems able to provide answers. One participant in the participatory video workshop asked: *“Are we also Indonesia?”*

This question reflects a deeper uncertainty about belonging and recognition, especially for people who chose to become part of Indonesia but still feel excluded from its systems. The condition of the road has far-reaching consequences. It limits access to education, markets, healthcare, technology, and mobility in general.

For example, Pak Agus, a local driver, explained how the poor road conditions affect his livelihood. The cost of repairing his vehicle often exceeds the income he earns from transporting villagers. More critically, he described transporting pregnant women to the nearest Puskesmas (community health centre). Home births are no longer allowed, and even local midwives are prohibited from assisting deliveries. Women must travel to formal facilities, yet the journey itself is dangerous. Some nearly miscarried due to the rough, rocky terrain.

He also recalled transporting a severely ill person. The vehicle struggled to climb the steep road, and although they eventually reached the hospital, it was too late. These are stories of those who managed to leave the village. Many others do not even attempt the journey, due to cost, difficulty, and fear. A four-kilometre road has effectively restricted access to essential services and opportunities.

Food Security

It is not all difficult in this village. From my observations, food security appears relatively stable compared to other sites. Each household has been allocated a piece of farmland alongside their house. This allows families to grow their own food and maintain a level of subsistence. As a result, issues of hunger or food scarcity did not emerge as central themes in my household interviews or group discussions.

Of course, this does not mean there are no challenges. However, most households are able to sustain themselves, growing corn, mung beans, vegetables, bananas, and cassava for consumption or storage, and sometimes selling it to purchase other staples such as rice. Water, however, remains an ongoing issue. There is no running water in most homes. Instead, households rely on large water tanks that are filled periodically. When these run dry, people return to older practices, walking to nearby rivers or streams to collect water.

Acceptance and Integration

One of the most striking aspects of A1 is how smoothly the resettlement process has unfolded.

Unlike in my second field site (A2), where segregation and “othering” are still visible, in A1 there is very little distinction made between former refugees and local residents. People no longer refer to each other using those categories. While they may still know which families arrived in 1999 and which are originally from the area, this is not something that shapes everyday interaction. People relate to one another simply as neighbours.

There are several possible reasons for this:

- **Inclusive decision-making from the beginning.** Local customary leaders were involved in the initial settlement process. They sat together, discussed, and collectively agreed to accept incoming families. When people arrived, a welcoming ceremony was held.
- **Equal distribution of resources.** The village itself was not a fully established permanent settlement prior to resettlement. Some families used the land seasonally, but did not live there permanently. After the resettlement, both local families and newcomers were given the same type of housing, land, and facilities. This reduced the potential for jealousy or inequality.

- **Shared language and cultural roots.** Everyone speaks Dawan, and historically they were part of the same broader ethnic group before colonial divisions by the Dutch and Portuguese. While shared language alone does not always guarantee integration in other regions, in A1 it appears to have contributed positively.

This combination of factors has created a relatively cohesive community.

Local Systems of Protection

Another important observation is the strength of locally developed systems of mutual support. These systems operate with a strong sense of equality, there is no visible differentiation between members. For example, when someone passes away, every household contributes rice, sugar, and a small amount of money. This practice is organised not by traditional leaders, but by the RT (neighbourhood administrative leader), reflecting a blend of formal and informal governance.

Customary leaders still play an important role, particularly in resolving conflicts and conducting traditional ceremonies. I was able to witness one such dispute resolution process. People gathered at the customary leader's house. Those directly involved sat inside or on the terrace, while others observed from the yard or nearby areas. Space was limited, but participation extended beyond the physical boundaries of the house.

Local wine was shared, and discussions took place until an agreement was reached regarding the appropriate fine. No formal legal system or police involvement was needed. Once the fine was agreed upon and fulfilled, the matter was considered resolved, and life continued.

Education: "Dare to Dream" Beyond A1

Education in A1 reveals an interesting contrast with other sites. In Indonesia, studying in Java is often seen as a significant aspiration. Java is the political and educational centre of the country, home to some of the oldest and most established universities, dating back to the colonial period.

In A2, I observed that many students drop out due to financial barriers, school fees, uniforms, and transportation costs. Even reaching school can be difficult. In A1, however, a different pattern emerges.

Children commonly walk to nearby junior and senior high schools. More notably, there is a growing trend of pursuing higher education. Attending university is becoming something of a norm, something people see others doing and feel encouraged to follow. This creates a form of positive social pressure.

There is a nearby university in Kefamenanu, which makes higher education more visible and attainable. But beyond that, I found that many families send their children to study in Java, particularly in Semarang. This pathway has become more familiar over time,

often initiated by one “pioneer” student who then helps others navigate the process. What once felt impossible becomes imaginable.

One interviewee who returned from Java explained that the cost of studying there is not necessarily higher than studying locally. In fact, it may offer more opportunities. Students can find part-time work, such as in small shops or laundries, which helps sustain their living expenses. In contrast, such opportunities are extremely limited in Kefamenanu or Kupang due to the smaller local economies.

Digital Access

Observing how people navigate digital access in everyday life revealed practices that would be difficult to capture through interviews alone.

Access to banking, for example, is highly fluid. ATM cards are often shared among family members or neighbours. If someone is travelling to town, others may hand over their cards so that balances can be checked or funds withdrawn. In this context, the ATM card is not treated as a highly secured personal asset, but rather as a practical tool, its value tied mainly to whether government transfers have been received.

I witnessed one woman handing her ATM card to a neighbour on a motorbike and loudly calling out her PIN number from her porch, audible to several nearby houses. This reflects a very different understanding of risk and trust. At the same time, there is also fear. Many people worry about losing their cards or entering the wrong PIN, which could result in the card being swallowed by the machine. For this reason, some prefer using local agents rather than ATMs.

Most elderly people rely on younger family members, children or grandchildren, to help them use ATMs or mobile phones. This intergenerational dependency is consistent across digital practices. There is only one banking agent in the village. She operates from a small shop and explained that she became an agent after completing a loan with the bank. Rather than actively applying, she was offered the opportunity by a bank officer, something she described as being “helped.”

Becoming an agent is seen as an achievement that requires access and connection. She was provided with an EDC machine and can facilitate transactions such as withdrawing government assistance, purchasing electricity tokens, and receiving remittances. She charges a small fee for these services. However, connectivity remains a major challenge. To address this, she installed a private modem (Orbit) at her own expense.

Despite these limitations, her presence significantly reduces the cost and effort required for villagers to access financial services. Without her, people would need to spend between 25,000–50,000 IDR just to travel to town. Even within the village, distance matters. Hamlets are spread out, and people often need to walk considerable distances to reach her shop, distances that are manageable for locals but challenging for outsiders like myself.

Formal Social Protection

Despite all the limitations, formal social protection programs do reach the village. This was something I found quite striking. In many ways, A1 feels invisible when it comes to infrastructure, connectivity, water, and road access. Yet, at the same time, it is visible enough within the state system to receive government assistance. This visibility comes from being officially registered as a village. That status matters.

Programs may be limited in amount and coverage, but they exist. This creates a contrast. People are excluded in some systems, yet included in others. This raises an important reflection for me. Inclusion is not uniform. A village can be recognised administratively, but still neglected materially.

Fluid Borders, Adat, and “Rat Paths”

Another layer of complexity in A1 is its proximity to the border with Timor-Leste.

Movement across the border is not only economic or practical. It is deeply tied to *adat* (customary law), to kinship, and to obligation. People continue to return to their places of origin for ceremonies such as funerals and weddings. These are not optional events. They are binding. There is a strong sense that one must attend, must show presence, must bring contributions. There is an invisible thread that connects people across borders through these adat practices.

However, crossing the border is not always straightforward. In the past, passports and visas were expensive and difficult to obtain. As a result, many people chose to cross through what they call *jalan tikus*, or “rat paths.” These are informal routes through forests and remote areas. Crossing in this way often involves paying local guides. These guides are not necessarily there to show the physical path, as villagers already know the terrain. Their role is more about ensuring silence and safety. They act as intermediaries who can guarantee that nothing will be reported to border guards. In that sense, what is being paid for is not direction, but protection.

People even transport goods across these paths. One story described someone bringing a large pig for *adat* ceremonies from A1 to Oecussi. This would be nearly impossible through official border crossings, where regulations, inspections, and costs would make it unfeasible. So informal routes persist, not only because they are cheaper, but because they make certain social and cultural practices possible.

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Field 3 - Story from B1, Papua Highland

(May – June 2026)

This is what I have been waiting for. I have always wanted to visit again after my earlier work assignment there. I had stayed in B1 before, and it left a lasting mark on my heart. The conditions there, and how precarious and marginalised people live, combined with ongoing military operations, make it a continuously unsafe place to visit, including for Indigenous people who still hold strong connections to their ancestral land.

I had to take a long, long journey from Timor Island, with a transit in the capital before a direct flight to B2, the capital of Papua Province, previously the capital of all Papua before regional administrative fragmentation. It is interesting that from east to east, we still have to transit through the west first. This already reflects how underdeveloped infrastructure is in the eastern part of the country. From B2, I flew directly to B1. I did not plan to stay or conduct fieldwork in B2, but this later changed unexpectedly.

Initial contact and entry into B1

I had an initial contact with Y, a local Hubula tribe young man and community health graduate who had previously been involved in a local foundation working with an organisation I had collaborated with before. Although the project had long ended, he was now working as a human rights activist. He agreed to meet me, talk with me, and guide me on where to go and how to navigate the area safely.

Initially, I had planned to conduct interviews with local government officials and do household visits, moving from house to house as I had done in Timor. However, this was not possible. During my 26 days there, there were at least four amber to red security warnings restricting movement outside the city and military posts, let alone remote villages.

On several occasions, drunk individuals stopped vehicles, asking for money and blocking access roads. Movement is considered safer when Indigenous people travel due to an unwritten code of respect among local groups, where the outsider, particularly the military, is often seen as the common threat. However, when alcohol is involved, conflicts can escalate quickly. Many Indigenous residents also reported being robbed, both on the streets and inside their homes. The situation felt unstable and unpredictable at every level. Precarity, displacement, and the presence of abandoned children and youth created further layers of social fragility.

Army, economy, and everyday control

The presence of the army is deeply resented. People openly express their dislike, and they associate military presence not only with security, but also with control over key

economic activities, including fuel distribution, alcohol circulation, and even illegal gambling networks. There is a widespread perception that military actors profit from precarity itself.

Alcoholism is a major issue. While Indigenous Papuans do not traditionally produce alcohol, unlike other Indonesian regions with palm wine or local brewing practices, alcohol and drugs including glue are widely consumed. These are introduced external substances, and many local narratives link their circulation, directly or indirectly, to structures of power and control.

Symbols of resistance: Bintang Kejora

The Bintang Kejora flag remains a silent, visible, and contested symbol of identity, agency, and resistance. I bought a bag with the symbol sold informally outside the airport, freely yet not openly displayed everywhere. People wear it in daily life, but it cannot be shown in public spaces such as sports stadiums. It exists in a space that is both present and suppressed at the same time.

The jump of civilisation: from stone age to Starlink

There is a striking and uneven jump of civilisation happening here. One moment, there is a traditional hut, and the next, Starlink internet is installed inside it. I spoke with an agent, formerly a colleague, who explained that Starlink is becoming a growing business, although mostly accessible to restaurant owners, hotels, or boarding house operators.

I also observed how people carry Android phones inside traditional huts without electricity or stable signal. Having a phone is now a necessity. Many shops now line the main streets of Papua.

On my first informal visit to a traditional house, before I even asked questions, I was simply sitting, drinking hot tea and eating freshly grilled cassava over an open fire. I observed how parents were confused about how to help their children apply for high school or university because everything is now digital. They do not know what a PDF is, or how to scan documents. These seemingly simple technological requirements become major barriers to access.

Sitting in a Honai: witnessing a father and daughter reunion

Everybody is hurt and trying to survive. People are hurt by those closest to them, and it affects the entire social system.

During one visit, I was invited into a honai. It was my first night entering inside one, and I remember feeling excited, observing everything, the fire in the center, the old kettle boiling water, and the warm tea we were sharing.

I did not know at the time that I would witness a deeply emotional moment, a daughter reconnecting with her father after a long period of not speaking. I overheard a conversation about the father's declining health, questions about how health insurance worked or failed to work, and a story of manipulation involving someone who promised government aid and cash transfers. Families were asked to pool money to open bank accounts, but once opened, the money disappeared.

It made me wonder how many similar cases exist. It also made me reflect on how large-scale cash transfer systems can unintentionally generate new forms of fraud, often in batch-like patterns that reduce individual visibility and risk for perpetrators.

Class system and internal stratification

There is a clear class structure here, as in many other places, but shaped by specific local configurations. Indigenous people occupy both elite government positions and marginalised positions. Money flows primarily through government budgets, mining, and plantation projects. However, access to government resources does not always translate into equitable distribution for local communities.

I became acquainted with Y's family, who run a local initiative providing education and food for children across several posts. One of the brothers is a civil servant, though not in a high-ranking position. He feels relatively safe and often does not fully follow official security warnings.

However, a senior Indigenous official in the governor's office once expressed surprise that I travelled alone and strongly warned me to be careful. She acknowledged the risks and implied that even she could be vulnerable due to her political positioning and elite family background, despite sharing Indigenous identity markers such as curly hair and dark skin.

Formal social protection: a crumbling system

In my view, the formal social protection system here is fragmented and, in many ways, broken.

The post office acts as the main distribution channel, often led by non-local staff. Similar patterns exist in other institutions such as BMKG (Meteorology, Hydrology, and Climatology) office, where personnel are frequently assigned from Java or other islands in the west. This is not necessarily intentional at the individual level, but it creates structural disconnections. Furthermore, for health service, many people are also afraid

to access hospitals or health centres due to fear and distrust, including fears of violence. As a result, free healthcare does not automatically translate into actual access to care.

In my interviews, I met households who were listed as recipients of programs such as PKH or BPNT but had never actually received anything. They had reported the issue but were met with bureaucratic silence, standardised responses, repeated explanations, and ultimately no resolution.

One recurring narrative is the idea of “local wisdom” used to justify distribution practices. In Highland Papua, cash is often sent to the post office and then handed to village leaders or representatives, who sign documents stating distribution has occurred. In practice, this creates a system where accountability is unclear, and actual receipt of funds by households is uncertain.

Even at national level, officials often refer to evaluation reports, yet these are not easily accessible or are externally funded studies rather than systematic internal evaluations.

Digital access and everyday infrastructure

Digital connectivity in Highland Papua remains limited. In urban areas, basic BTS networks exist, but speeds can drop to around 135 Kbps, making even basic digital work difficult.

Despite this, mobile phone ownership is widespread. In one meeting about street children, many displaced due to conflict, I observed that almost everyone present had a smartphone. When a child was called to take a photo with a senior official, nearly everyone in the room immediately raised their smartphones to capture the moment despite having almost nothing in day-to-day lives. In rural villages, however, connectivity is almost non-existent. Yet even there, phones are still used offline, for photos, videos, or games.

Starlink is beginning to appear, mostly through private boarding houses or cafés. I also met a social affairs IT officer who showed me the systems they use. While software is standardised nationally, its use remains rigid and not flexible. When asked about AI or machine learning, responses were often vague or uncertain. There is a strong gap between technological availability in society and technological integration within governance systems.

26-day lived experience: autoethnography

Safety, fear, and sadness, all at once.

As a researcher, I continuously reflected on myself as an outsider navigating this space. I often felt fear. I could be perceived as Javanese based on appearance, although I am

not. I feel more connected to Papua as someone from the eastern region, but I do not physically resemble Melanesian identity. This placed me in an ambiguous position. I could be mistaken for an outsider, a spy, or a threat.

At the same time, I could also be targeted by military forces if my research was deemed sensitive. I could be deported, or worse, detained or harmed if considered suspicious. There was no clear safe position to stand in.

Yet I also recognised my privilege. I could potentially seek protection from law enforcement in ways that Indigenous Papuans often cannot, due to deep distrust and racial profiling embedded in state institutions.

I cried many times during fieldwork, not only because of fear, but because of deep sadness. Sadness at injustice, at how people are both vulnerable and generous, and at how their lands and lives have been repeatedly contested and violated by those in power.

I still remember there was a chaos ruptured right on the road where I live, in fact I was walking pass the mass and saying hi to people as they were wearing traditional attires for dance performance and bringing traditional arches etc., as they were invited to perform to welcome a higher degree officials from Jakarta. So, I was intrigued and and asking questions before walking away peacefully to my boarding house. I have not arrived to the gate, 50 meters away from the incident, and the tension escalated as they waited outside of the gate of the vice governor of highland Papua house, yet they were not welcomed at all. People felt they are not feed properly or not being paid properly. These shifts can happen quickly.

Final reflection: fragmentation, invisibility, and conditional protection

Across systems, there is fragmentation, not only of databases, but of responsibility itself. Ministries do not share data effectively. Emergency responses operate in parallel rather than in integration. At the same time, new forms of automated exclusion are emerging, such as detection of online gambling activity linked to social protection eligibility. These systems raise ethical questions, especially in contexts where phones and bank accounts are shared within families or communities.

In many cases, decisions about inclusion or exclusion depend on volunteers, local discretion, or automated flags. Yet accountability is diffuse. People often accept this as fate rather than as a right that can be questioned. What emerges is not only a technical system of social protection, but a deeply social, moral, and political one, where technology, authority, and local interpretations of “deservingness” continuously shape who is seen, who is excluded, and who is left behind.

(REDACTED)