



The Contribution of Sumbanese Migrant Construction Workers in Denpasar

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Abstract

This research examines the significant contribution of the Sumbanese people who migrated to Denpasar Island in supporting the city's infrastructure development. The phenomenon of Sumbanese migration to Denpasar in the late 90s is increasing. This is due to the rapid growth of infrastructure that drives the economy and supports tourism in Denpasar, Bali. The presence of Sumbanese people in Denpasar contributes to the economic and housing development there. Qualitative research, incorporating sources from observation, in-depth interviews, and literature studies, reveals that Sumbanese labour with expertise in basic construction is in high demand among foremen who recruit it directly from Sumba to Denpasar. In addition, Sumbanese labour can also meet the needs of the service sector and domestic assistants. This research discusses how this migration is a solution to the economic limitations of the Sumbanese community and how it impacts the economy in Denpasar and Sumba. They send their remittances to Sumba to improve the standard of living of their families in Sumba. Even after gaining work experience in Denpasar and returning to Sumba, new job opportunities can arise there. However, their presence in Denpasar must also face adaptation challenges. Therefore, collaborative efforts are needed between the local government of East Nusa Tenggara, especially Sumba, and the Denpasar City government to improve the workforce's welfare and quality of life so that they can contribute positively to sustainable development in Denpasar City.

Keywords: *Migration; Construction; Economy; Sumbanese Labour; Adaptation*

Introduction

With the advent of globalisation, there has been an increase in internal migration globally and nationally, with people moving from eastern Indonesia to more economically developed areas such as Bali. People move from one place to another in search of a better life and better economic opportunities. Migration affects not only individuals but also the social and economic development of the destination areas. According to data from the Migration Data Portal (2024), there are more than 23.6 million internal migrants in Southeast Asia. In Indonesia, according to the Central Statistics Agency, there was an increase of 25,780 workers in the construction sector in August 2024 compared to the previous year (BPS Bali, 2024).

The construction sector also has strategic potential in national development, producing infrastructure products such as roads, bridges, housing, and buildings, while also serving as social overhead capital that supports the socio-economic activities of the community (Konstruksi Indonesia, 2012). Denpasar is one of the most potential migration destinations for workers from outside the region, including migrants from Sumba (BPS, 2021). The city of Denpasar, as the capital of Bali province and one of the world's tourist destinations, is a major attraction for people from East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), especially Sumba, to migrate to Denpasar. The hospitality, openness, and acceptance of the people of Denpasar are special attractions for migrants. However, amid Bali's openness to labour and investment flows, there are also cultural tensions between migrant groups and local cultural identities.

According to Nordholt (2008), Bali has long been considered an 'open fortress' due to its socio-political conditions that are open to globalisation, including the arrival of tourists, investors, and migrants from Java and NTT. However, at the same time, the Balinese people continue to strive to maintain their cultural identity. This concept is particularly relevant in explaining how the local Balinese community welcomes economic migrants such as those from Sumba, while maintaining a distance in order to preserve harmony and Balinese traditional values. In a global context, this type of internal migration reflects similar tensions faced by many migration destinations with strong local cultural traditions. Studies on internal migration in Indonesia have been extensively examined from economic, social, and cultural perspectives. According to Hugo (1982), Indonesia consists of various ethnic groups that move from one region to another. Some factors drive migration, such as regional disparities between poor and more developed areas. This is in line with Lee's (1980) theory of migration, which emphasises the push and pull factors in the migration process. The findings of Muntaqien et al. (2023) also confirm that labour migration in Indonesia is not only determined by economic conditions, but also by social networks and access to employment opportunities in the destination area. In the Sumba-Denpasar study, limited access to economic and educational opportunities in the area of origin was a pushing factor, while employment opportunities in the construction sector were a pulling factor.

However, these opportunities also come with challenges. Purwanto et al. (2020) emphasise that construction workers are often in a vulnerable position due to weak legal protection. In this context, Sumba migrants face similar risks when entering the construction sector in Bali. The success of the construction industry is also determined by human resource management (Supriyadi et al, 2020). Therefore, Sumba migrant workers are not only seen as unskilled labourers, but as an important part of the construction human resource system that supports Bali's development.

Previous studies that have discussed labour include an article by Sari (2023) on the analysis of social security benefits policies for Indonesian migrant workers, which can serve as a reference document for prospective migrant workers to understand the outline of the Indonesian government's protection through social security. A study by Yuniarto (2015) explains migrant workers' understanding of problems, especially those related to life and strategies for solving them. Then there is an article by Marta (2014), which aims to find out the meaning of migrant students' culture of migration, their motives, and their experiences during migration. Then, an article discussing the diaspora of NTT people written by Sunaryo (2024) provides in-depth information about the role of the migrant community from East Nusa Tenggara as a whole in Bali. The four articles have provided information about migration, but not much research has been done on the dynamics of the lives of workers from Sumba and their impact on their lives. This study aims to further examine the contribution of migrant workers from Sumba in the construction sector in Denpasar, highlighting migration patterns, recruitment mechanisms, and their economic contribution to the city of Denpasar and their communities of origin in Sumba.

Theoretically, this study enriches the understanding of internal migration in Indonesia by using the theoretical framework of Everett Lee (1980). The contribution of this research is expected to provide a historical overview of the migration of workers from Sumba to Denpasar and serve as input for local governments and migrant communities in improving the welfare of construction workers.

2. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative approach that examines specific natural conditions and the researcher as a key instrument, using triangulation as a data collection technique and emphasising meaning rather than generalisation (Abdussamad, 2021: iii) to understand the dynamics of labour migration from Sumba to the construction sector in Denpasar. The research was conducted from April 2024 to April 2025 at several project sites in Denpasar and its surroundings, including densely populated areas where migrant workers live temporarily.

Data collection was carried out through participatory observation, in-depth interviews, and documentary studies. Observations were made in bedeng (temporary shelters) and boarding houses, as well as gathering points for the Sumba migrant community. Interviews were conducted with five informants, consisting of construction workers from Sumba, foremen, and Sumba community leaders in Denpasar. Informants were selected using purposive sampling (Nasution, 2023:44), based on criteria such as work experience in construction, origin from Sumba, and role in the migrant community.

The sources were obtained from data from the Bali Provincial Statistics Agency, Flobamora Bali community reports, local media, and relevant literature studies. To test the validity, the researchers compared information from various sources so that the findings would be more accurate and comprehensive.

Data analysis was conducted thematically by analysing migration patterns, types of work performed, and the economic contribution of migrants from Sumba in the construction sector. The results of the analysis were then interpreted within the framework of migration theory to emphasise the push and pull factors in explaining population mobility.

3. Results and Discussion

From Sumba to Denpasar: The Early Traces of Migration

Most migrants from Sumba had little work experience and limited education, so initially they worked for low wages and under less than ideal working conditions. NTT is a province with thousands of islands, one of which is Sumba Island. Sumba Island has four districts, namely East Sumba, Central Sumba, West Sumba and Southwest Sumba. Of the four districts, the largest number of migrants is in Bali, according to Flobamora Bali community membership data in 2023, amounting to 1,845 people (Flobamora Bali Database, 2023).

Sumba's geographical conditions, with its hilly and undulating topography covering an area of 11,040 km², make it the 73rd largest island in the world, with minimal rainfall, facing significant natural and economic challenges (Hamidy et al. 2017). High poverty rates and low employment opportunities have led the people of Sumba to migrate to Denpasar, which offers better economic opportunities than their villages. Data from the Bali Provincial Statistics Agency shows that in August 2024, the number of employed people was 2.67 million, an increase of 47,600 people compared to August 2023. The sector experiencing the highest increase in employment was construction, which increased by 25,780 people (BPS Bali, 2024). The demand in the construction sector presents a significant opportunity for migrants from Sumba. The rapid development of Denpasar requires a workforce, particularly in the construction sector (Astara et al., 2019:42).

Behind the Barracks and Projects: Portraits of Migrant Life in Sumba

Based on the interviews, most of the migrants were men aged 20-35 from Southwest Sumba Regency. They entered the construction sector through informal channels, namely by being recruited

directly by foremen who had kinship networks or came from the same region. None of the informants had ever received technical training or certification in the informal sector, but some had previously worked as construction workers in Sumba. This situation indicates that Sumba workers' skills are mostly acquired through direct practice in the field, rather than through training or experience. In line with Maddepongeng's (2016) research, sustained construction work experience improves workers' competence even without formal certificates, enabling them to adapt to the needs of projects in Denpasar.

Most respondents worked as unskilled labourers (60%), such as foundation diggers, cement mixers, and demolition workers, while only 5% had become foremen. Daily wages range from Rp100,000 to Rp150,000, depending on the scale of the project and the relationship with the foreman. Some daily wages are paid at the end of the day, without a written employment contract (Interview with Agustinus Nale, August 2024).

For housing, some migrants live in project beds, while others live in rented accommodation with very basic conditions. They do not have BPJS Ketenagakerjaan (social security), but some have a Sumba Identity Card (KTP) and a diploma, although most do not have official identification, either a KTP or a diploma.

Sumba migrants are known for their strong work ethic, as they work hard in construction jobs. However, the hard work done by Sumba migrants is sometimes not commensurate with the wages they receive. The reason for this is that they lack specialised skills, so they tend to do odd jobs. The lack of identity documents, such as KTPs, is also the reason why they do not have health insurance as workers and are not registered with the National Health Insurance (JKN). However, some have received attention from their employers and are provided with social security from the Employment Social Security Agency (BPJS Ketenagakerjaan).

Sumba migrants in Denpasar show diverse patterns in supporting their families back home. Those who are married generally send remittances regularly to Sumba to cover household expenses. The funds sent are used to meet family needs and for ceremonies. In Lee's perspective (1980), migrants based on the dimension of time are people who move to another place to settle for six months or more. Migrants can be defined as a permanent change of residence, without restrictions on the distance of the move, whether voluntary or forced, either abroad or within the country (Sunaryo, 2011:38). Those who move without the intention of settling are called seasonal migrants, such as pedicab drivers, construction workers, or food stall entrepreneurs, who seek livelihoods in the city but regularly return to their hometowns. In this case, some Sumba migrants settle for more than six months, while others become seasonal migrants. Seasonal migration is usually undertaken by farmers who leave their homes after the rice planting season to work elsewhere and return during the harvest season. The driving factors are poverty and limited employment opportunities in Sumba, while job opportunities in the construction sector in Denpasar are the main pull factor.

The main challenges faced are limited skills and legal identity. Those who work as construction workers live in simple shacks and have little interaction with their surroundings. These conditions cause them to move from one project to another, while some choose to return to Sumba after saving money and then return to Bali because they have become accustomed to city life (Results of Focus Group Discussion with Sumba Migrants in Bali, 11 September 2025).

Building Bali, Supporting Sumba

The migration of Sumba people to Denpasar to escape economic constraints is a highly complex and interconnected phenomenon. According to data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS), the top five origins of migrants to Denpasar are East Nusa Tenggara (NTT), West Nusa Tenggara (NTB), DKI Jakarta, and Central Java (BPS, 2021). Of these five migrants, we will discuss migrants from Sumba, NTT, who move to Denpasar.

Bali, as a world tourist destination with development in the tourism sector, has the highest contribution to the Gross Regional Domestic Product (GRDP) of Bali Province and is also the sector that absorbs the most labour (Astara et al., 2019:8-9). High regional income requires labour, especially in the tourism and construction sectors. This opens up vast opportunities for migrants from surrounding areas who need work. Productive-aged migrants from Sumba with limited education take advantage of this opportunity to work in Denpasar. In the Central Statistics Agency's census data, migrants are divided into two types: lifelong migrants and risen migrants. Lifelong migrants are those whose place of birth is different from their current place of residence (at the time of enumeration), while recent migrants are those whose place of residence five years ago is different from their current place of residence (at the time of enumeration) (BPS Bali Province Census 2023).

The number of recent migrants in Denpasar City can be seen in the Table 1.

Table 1: Number of Migrants in Denpasar in 2023

City	Rank	Province of Birth	Number
Denpasar	1	East Java	10.687
	2	East Nusa Tenggara	3.412
	3	West Nusa Tenggara	1.654
	4	DKI Jakarta	1.258
	5	Central Java	1.070

Source: Migration Statistics for Bali Province Results of the 2023 Long Form Population Census

Based on the table above, the number of migrants in Denpasar City, the highest came from East Java, namely 10,687 people, followed by East Nusa Tenggara, 3,412 people, West Nusa Tenggara, 1,654, DKI Jakarta, 1,258, and Central Java, 1,070. Preliminary data were obtained from the Bali Provincial Migrant Statistics Agency. The five largest provinces of origin were selected, while other provinces were not included in the data table. Denpasar has the highest population density due to its large population. This is because Denpasar's appeal as the provincial capital attracts migrants to work in Denpasar. The geographical location of East Java, which is relatively close to Denpasar, has led to a large number of migrants from East Java working in Denpasar. For migrants from Sumba, better economic opportunities are the main reason for migrating. The jobs offered are more varied, opening up greater migration opportunities for the people of Sumba to migrate to Denpasar.

Data from the Flobamora Bali Extended Family Association (IKB) community reinforces this finding. In 2023, there were 11,190 migrants from NTT, while there were 1,845 members from Sumba, consisting of 692 members of Ikatan Sumba Barat (IKSB), Ikatan Sumba Barat Daya (IKSBD) with 445 individuals, Ikatan Sumba Tengah (IKST) with 374 individuals, and Himpunan Keluarga Matawai Amahu Sumba Timur (HIKMAST) with 334 individuals. Based on data on the number of Sumba migrants registered in the community, it is estimated that there are 40,000 migrants from NTT in Bali, with a significant proportion coming from Sumba (Interview with Herman Umbu Billy, in Denpasar, 2024, Flobamora Bali database, 2023).

The large number of Sumba migrants, especially those of productive age, makes them one of the labour groups that support the construction sector in Denpasar. Although most of them work as unskilled labourers with limited skills, their contribution is beneficial in supporting the smooth running of development in Denpasar. This is in line with the Ministry of Public Works (2012), which states that the success of the construction sector is largely determined by the contributions of various actors, including field workers.

Migrants from Sumba, particularly from West Sumba and Southwest Sumba, are the dominant group working in the construction sector in Denpasar. This demonstrates the practice of network-based migration, in which kinship and regional origins play an important role in the recruitment process.

Contractors in Bali have an increasing need for unskilled labour, especially with the rapid development of property and infrastructure construction. Subawa (2024) also mentions that most migrants to Denpasar work in the informal sector as odd-job workers and labourers (Maya, 2024).

The construction sector is a mainstay of development in Bali, especially for the tourism industry. Rapid development has opened up many job opportunities. One project in the city of Denpasar requires up to 1,200 workers, employing local workers (Makmun, 2024). In addition to local workers, workers from outside the region, including Sumba, are also needed. These job offers attract migrants from Sumba due to the lack of employment opportunities in their region. This shows that differences in economic conditions in the region of origin are a driving factor in migration.

Employment conditions in Denpasar are relatively good, with an unemployment rate of 1.37 per cent, which is among the lowest compared to other regions in Indonesia (Disnaker, 2019). The presence of workers from Sumba has contributed to the rapid growth of the construction sector, particularly in meeting the demand for property and infrastructure to support tourism. Many of them are engaged in physical labour such as excavation, casting, and building structure installation. However, their work is challenging (Rahu, 2024).

The economic contribution of migrants is not only felt in Denpasar, but also in Sumba. Those who migrate to help their families financially mostly send their earnings home. The wages earned by Sumba migrants vary, but with the wages they earn, these migrants can live decently in Denpasar and still manage to send part of their income home to continue their education, hold traditional ceremonies, and meet their daily needs. In the long term, the remittances received by families can also encourage the growth of small businesses in Sumba (Interview with Anderanus in Denpasar, 2024). Thus, it is not only beneficial economically for migrants but also for the community in their area of origin.

In comparison, Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) from NTT who worked abroad during the period 2011-2022 sent a total of Rp 1 trillion from 13,898 NTT PMI (Selly, 2024; Soebanto, 2023). The difference is that official PMI generally receive protection from the state, while internal migrants from Sumba work without adequate protection, even though they also regularly send money to their families in Sumba.

Despite their contributions, migrants still face various problems. Low levels of education and formal skills limit them to low-wage and high-risk jobs. The lack of regulation and supervision of migrant workers' working conditions increases the risk of exploitation. Basuki (2024) also notes that construction workers in various regions of Indonesia face similar problems, particularly in relation to access to technical training, social security, and inadequate labour protection standards. To overcome these challenges, a development approach centred on humanity and diversity could be the solution. This approach provides equal access to basic rights such as education, health, and social protection. In addition, skills training and vocational education can increase their competitiveness in the labour market.

To overcome this, the Provincial Government of Bali and the Regional Government of Sumba have collaborated with stakeholders to create a ready-to-work workforce. Workforce training before departure, as well as on-the-job training, is conducted to produce a suitable workforce. The procedural socialisation of Indonesian workforce placement and the eradication of human trafficking are organised by the Transmigration and Manpower Office in West Sumba Regency in collaboration with stakeholders (Lende, 2024).

However, special training for local migrant workers has not been widely implemented. One initiative by the Chairman of Flobamora Bali, Herman Umbu Billy, in collaboration with stakeholders, was to hold training for foremen on 21 February 2025 in Denpasar. This training was beneficial in order to improve the skills of construction workers, especially those from Sumba, to reduce the potential for conflict between foremen and construction workers. The training was attended by 35 participants from

NTT foremen, with material on the role and responsibilities of foremen in managing teams and being responsible for the quality standards of their work (Interview with Herman Umbu Billy, 2024; Balitopik.com, 2025).

With this training, it is hoped that Sumba migrants will be able to synergise with local workers so that the contribution of Sumba migrants not only strengthens Bali's development but also has a significant impact on the welfare of their home region.

Conclusion

The migration of Sumba people to Denpasar is a strategy to overcome economic limitations in their home region. Factors such as a lack of employment opportunities, high poverty rates, and limited access to education in Sumba encourage migration. Denpasar, as the capital of the province of Bali and the closest city to Sumba, offers world-class tourism and therefore requires labour, especially in the service and construction sectors. This is a factor that attracts migrants from Sumba and its surroundings to come to Denpasar.

The majority of Sumba migrants in Denpasar work in the informal sector. Although conditions are not always ideal, they can live well and are even considered successful in their new home. Some return home quickly, but many settle down. They try to adapt to the social and cultural environment in Denpasar to improve their standard of living. They are even able to switch from being labourers to business owners with the skills they have acquired while working.

Workers from Sumba are also able to contribute not only to the Denpasar community. From the results of their work, they can send money to their families in Sumba, thereby improving the welfare of their families in their hometowns. However, the challenges they face also need to be addressed by the provincial governments of Bali and NTT so that they can receive guidance and skills training and their rights as workers are protected, thereby providing mutual benefits.

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