

Pos-Timor-Leste's Accession to ASEAN: Process, Challenges, and Opportunities for National Development

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Article History:

Received 17 July 2025

1st Revision 19 July 2025

2nd Revision 25 July 2025

3rd Revision 08 September 2025

Accepted on 23 September 2025

Abstract

Purpose: To analyze Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN as a strategic move to strengthen regional integration and enhance the country's diplomatic role in Southeast Asia.

Research methodology: A qualitative approach combined with policy analysis was used to provide an in-depth overview of the accession dynamics.

Results: This study highlighted several key challenges and significant opportunities. Among the challenges identified were limited administrative capacity, uneven infrastructure development, and the need to harmonize national regulations with ASEAN standards. However, the research also recognized notable opportunities, including accelerated national development through enhanced economic cooperation, increased investment, improved regional connectivity, and a stronger role in multilateral forums. These findings emphasize the importance of addressing these challenges while capitalizing on opportunities to foster growth and strengthen the regional integration.

Conclusions: Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN holds considerable potential for national development and regional integration but requires addressing institutional and regulatory challenges to fully maximize membership benefits.

Limitations: The study is based on qualitative analysis and policy review, which may limit generalizability and depend on the availability of current data and official documents, respectively.

Contributions: This Journal Article offers a comprehensive assessment of Timor-Leste's accession process and strategic recommendations to optimize its future ASEAN membership benefits.

Keywords: *Accession, ASEAN, Diplomacy, National Development, Regional Integration, Timor-Leste*

How to Cite: Ximenes, R. Dewi, P.E.T. (2026). Pos-Timor-Leste's Accession to ASEAN: Process, Challenges, and Opportunities for National Development. *Jurnal Studi Pemerintahan dan Akuntabilitas*, 5(2) 125-135

1. Introduction

The Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (Timor-Leste), a new and sovereign country in Southeast Asia, gained independence in 2002. Since then, Timor-Leste has continued to strive for international recognition and active participation in various multilateral platforms, including ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations). Prior to that, Timor Leste first accession to the Regional and Global was with the CPLP (Community Speaking of the Portuguese Language). Accession to ASEAN is not only a diplomatic goal but also a strategic move with significant value for national development, encompassing economic, security, social, and cultural aspects. This accession process involves a comprehensive analysis of the country's capacities, harmonization of legislation, and alignment of strategic policies with the criteria and values upheld by the ASEAN. Nevertheless, Timor-Leste faces various challenges, including institutional limitations, technical capacity, and human resource constraints. However, behind these challenges lie important opportunities to promote regional

integration, attract investment, and learn from the good development practices of other ASEAN member states ([Uesugi, 2021](#)).

[Caballero-Anthony \(2022\)](#) ASEAN's Regional Security Architecture, stated that "ASEAN is an international organization guided by informal diplomacy and consensus-based decision-making, making accession dependent on compatibility with ASEAN norms rather than institutional compliance alone. In addition, [Spastyono, Malike, and Wahyudi \(2024\)](#) stated that "ASEAN is a regional organization that, unlike many other international bodies, prioritizes consensus, non-interference, and informality, making accession a political as much as an institutional process.

Timor-Leste, as a newly independent country, continues to strive to strengthen its international position through regional and global cooperation with other countries. One of Timor-Leste's foreign policy priorities is to become a full member of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations ([ASEAN & Asia](#)). This accession process reflects the national aspiration to enhance political stability, expand economic relations, and strengthen its identity as a member of the Southeast Asian community. This study systematically examines Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN, the challenges it faces, and the opportunities that can be leveraged to support national development. As Timor-Leste faces the limitations of a narrow, resource-dependent economy, ASEAN membership may serve as a catalytic force for reform, enabling the country to diversify its economic base, attract private sector investment, and improve its institutional governance.

However, even though ASEAN is committed to advancing development equity within its member states and Timor-Leste has cultivated robust people-to-people relationships with ASEAN member states, particularly in healthcare, education, and labor mobility, the benefits of integration are not automatic. Successful integration into the ASEAN economic community will require more than diplomacy or signing trade agreements; it demands structural preparedness and strategic alignment with ASEAN norms. Without addressing its bureaucratic inefficiencies, political instability, and continued reliance on oil revenues, Timor-Leste risks remaining dependent on imports of ASEAN goods and services ([Ximenes, Dewi, & Widnyani, 2024](#)).

Regional integration has become an important strategy for Southeast Asian countries to enhance their political, economic, and social cooperation. As a strong regional organization, ASEAN provides a platform for its member states to achieve sustainable development and regional stability. Timor-Leste, as a new and developing country, has demonstrated its commitment to joining ASEAN as a strategic step to strengthen its regional position and accelerate national development ([Lestari, 2026](#)). However, this accession process is not without challenges, which require a deep understanding and appropriate strategies. One of the most important aims is to ensure that Timor Leste is regionally located in South Asia.

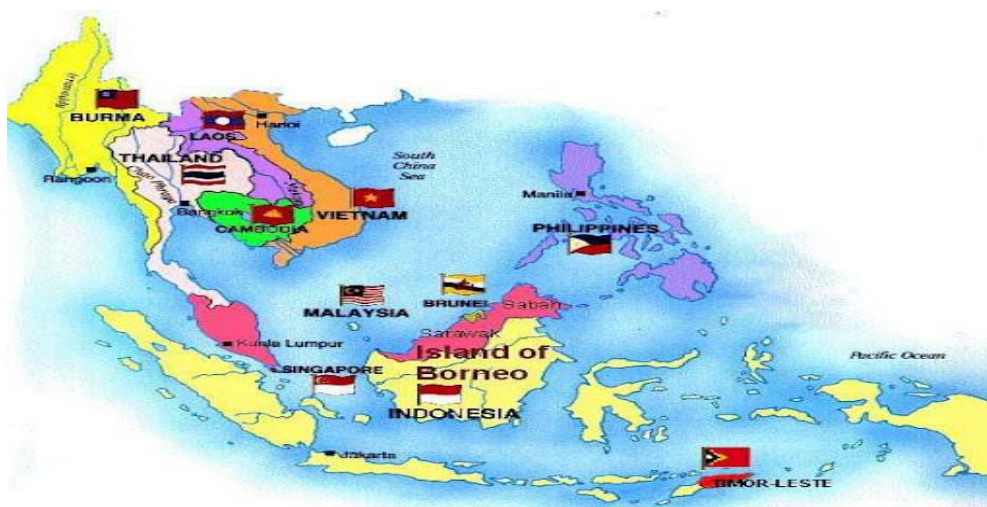


Figure 1. Map Timor Leste in the Region of ASEAN

2. Literature Review and Hypothesis Development

ASEAN provides important lessons for Timor-Leste. Laos, a landlocked country with limited economic capacity, successfully became an ASEAN member after undertaking various policy adjustments and receiving technical support from its regional partners. The country has focused on strengthening its bureaucracy and developing cross-border infrastructure to support integration. Despite facing international pressure due to its domestic political situation, Myanmar was accepted into ASEAN because of geopolitical considerations and its commitment to core ASEAN principles, such as non-intervention and consensus. Cambodia faced delays in its membership due to internal political conflicts and was only able to join after demonstrating progress in government reform and political stability. These three countries illustrate that the accession process requires time, serious internal reforms, and active diplomacy, accompanied by regional support ([Chen, 2023](#)).

From a theoretical perspective, Ernst Haas, through the concept of neo-functionalism, argues that regional integration is not solely driven by economic interests but also by spillover effects, where integration in one sector leads to gradual and interconnected integration in other sectors. This is relevant in the context of ASEAN, which began with economic cooperation and later expanded into the political, security, social, and cultural areas. Meanwhile, Béla Balassa developed the theory of stages of economic integration, starting from a free trade area, customs union, and common market, and eventually a full economic union. These two approaches help explain that accession is not merely an administrative process but also a gradual transformation of the economic, legal, and institutional structures of the candidate country. Therefore, understanding these theories is essential for assessing Timor-Leste's preparedness and strategies for full integration into ASEAN.

Several previous studies have provided important contributions to understanding the dynamics of Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN.

1. [Auliyani and Putri \(2024\)](#), report on the Capacity Assessment of Public Institutions emphasized the importance of institutional reform and strengthening bureaucratic capacity as prerequisites for successful regional integration. In addition, ASEAN Integration offers a general framework and technical indicators regarding the readiness of candidate countries, which are highly relevant in assessing Timor-Leste's position and progress in the accession process.
2. Local research by Timorese academics such as [Limsiritong and Sookhakich \(2024\)](#) and [Alves \(2025\)](#) highlights the crucial role of civil society, media, and the education sector in strengthening the regional integration process through a bottom-up approach. ASEAN integration is not solely determined by elite political decisions or inter-state diplomacy, but also heavily depends on public awareness and active participation.
3. [Arisanto \(2020\)](#), "It Is in ASEAN's Strategic Interest to Admit Timor Leste Now" underscores that Timor-Leste's readiness as a prospective ASEAN member can be assessed through several indicators, particularly its relatively small population of around 1.3 million and its status as a lower-middle-income developing country. According to Article 6 of the ASEAN Charter, which requires that every acceding country must have "the ability to fulfill the obligations of ASEAN membership," Timor-Leste's demographic and economic characteristics are key considerations for its membership.
4. [Setiawan, Ahmad, Athalla, Hutasoit, and Indrawan \(2025\)](#), "The Challenges of Expansion: Timor-Leste and ASEAN" (Asia link). This study critiques Timor-Leste's economic and institutional preparedness for ASEAN accession, noting its heavy reliance on the petroleum sector and foreign aid, as well as weak domestic productive sectors, such as agriculture and manufacturing.
5. [Soares and Guterres \(2024\)](#), in the *Journal of Regional Studies*, examine the strategic and diplomatic aspects Timor-Leste must strengthen to overcome accession challenges and provide policy recommendations based on case studies of previous ASEAN member countries.
6. [Alves \(2025\)](#), "Timor-Leste's Diplomatic Strategy in Implementing the ASEAN Membership Roadmap Post-2023 Summit." The study notes that after the 2023 ASEAN Summit, Timor-Leste's diplomatic strategy shifted from a normative approach to a more pragmatic and structured one, focusing on fulfilling the membership roadmap agreed upon by the ASEAN member states.
7. [Limsiritong and Sookhakich \(2024\)](#), "The Obstacles of Timor-Leste to be a New Member of ASEAN under the Perspective of the ASEAN Charter." This study highlights legal issues as a

major concern in the accession process, particularly Article 6 of the Charter, which mandates that candidate countries must accept the Charter and be capable and willing to fulfill membership obligations, including active participation in all ASEAN mechanisms. Interpretations of this requirement often become a barrier to determining the extent to which Timor-Leste's administrative, economic, and legal readiness is considered sufficient.

8. [Freitas \(2024\)](#), "Timor-Leste's Interest in Joining ASEAN: Challenges and Benefits" (UIII Thesis). Freitas applies a constructivist approach, arguing that Timor-Leste's motivation to join ASEAN stems from internalized social identity and regional norms rather than purely geopolitical or economic calculations. Since 2011, Timor-Leste has consistently pursued membership to affirm its national identity, achieve political stability, and build international legitimacy. However, institutional limitations within ASEAN and skepticism among some members regarding Timor-Leste's capacity reflect the reality that norms and identity alone are insufficient without tangible institutional readiness.
9. [Lin, Seah, Suvannaphakdy, and Martinus \(2024\)](#), "Timor-Leste in ASEAN: Is It Ready to Join?" (ISEAS-Yusof Ishak Institute). The "in principle" approval granted to Timor-Leste on November 11, 2022, marked a milestone in its long accession journey into the ASEAN community.
10. [Soares and Guterres \(2024\)](#), "The Ambiguity of Timor-Leste's Relationship with ASEAN: Exploring Exclusionary Practices and Membership Process Challenges." This study highlights exclusionary practices that have indirectly delayed Timor-Leste's full integration into ASEAN, including prolonged technical and administrative evaluations despite the membership application being submitted in 2011.
11. [Zahran \(2024\)](#), "Timor-Leste's Upcoming Membership to ASEAN: Clearer Guidance Needed" (CIL NUS). Emphasizes the urgent need for a clear legal statement regarding Timor-Leste's accommodation of ASEAN legal instruments. Full membership is not merely symbolic but is legally binding, requiring the country to accept and implement various ASEAN agreements, protocols, and regional commitments.
12. [de Araújo Sarmiento and Tilman \(2025\)](#), "Uncertainty Clouds Timor-Leste's Admission to ASEAN" (East Asia Forum). Identifies three key areas of concern for ASEAN member states: economic weakness, geopolitical considerations, and internal ASEAN consensus mechanisms. Many member countries remain cautious about Timor-Leste's readiness because of its weak economic structure, heavy reliance on petroleum revenues, and low industrial and infrastructure capacity.

3. Research Methodology

This study used a qualitative descriptive approach with library research and policy analysis methods. The data sources include official documents from the Timor-Leste government, ASEAN reports, academic publications, and interviews with relevant policy actors. The analysis describes the diplomatic process, institutional readiness, and regional dynamics influencing the accession process. Primary data are complemented by semi-structured interviews with relevant policy actors, including government officials, diplomats, and experts involved in regional cooperation. Interview participants were selected purposively based on their direct involvement or expertise in ASEAN-related policy processes, ensuring that the data reflected informed perspectives ([Fadillah, 2025](#)). The study focuses on:

1. The Accession Process of Timor-Leste to ASEAN
2. Challenges Faced
3. National Development Opportunities Through Accession

4. Result and Discussion

4.1 The Accession Process of Timor-Leste to ASEAN

According to [Freitas \(2024\)](#), the ASEAN accession process is an interaction between identity motivations, structural challenges, and strategic opportunities for national development. The accession process began in 2011, when Timor-Leste officially submitted its membership application. Since then, various steps have been taken, including the crucial alignment of national policies with the ASEAN Charter, which is a vital step for any country aspiring to become a full member of the organization, including Timor-Leste. The ASEAN Charter establishes fundamental principles such as respect for state

sovereignty, peaceful resolution of disputes, non-intervention, and commitment to democracy, the rule of law, and human rights. In 2022 and 2023, ASEAN approved Timor-Leste's accession as the 11th member in principle, with several technical and administrative readiness conditions still to be fulfilled.

Public transportation. Timor-Leste must match its road-building progress with the development of safe, accessible, and efficient public transport systems. In Dili, small buses (*mikrolet*) and taxis remain the most common modes of public transport; however, their small capacity limits their ability to meet growing mobility needs, and poor oversight contributes significantly to congestion and safety risks. Sexual harassment is also commonly reported by women who take taxis alone. To address these challenges, the government should work with the private sector to modernize and better regulate bus and taxi services, expand bus networks, and explore complementary options such as ride-sharing platforms like Uber while improving traffic enforcement, road signage, and driver training and licensing ([Pojani & Stead, 2015](#)).

The process of becoming an ASEAN member is an official stage that a Southeast Asian country must undergo to join fully by fulfilling geographical criteria, agreeing to the ASEAN Charter, and being able to carry out membership obligations. To meet these standards, Timor-Leste must review and adjust various national regulations to align with the principles and norms stipulated in the ASEAN Charter. This includes harmonizing laws in sectors such as the economy, trade, investment, environmental protection and security. Moreover, countries are required to demonstrate a commitment to good governance, transparency, and effective public administration. This adjustment process demands policy revisions, institutional reforms, and enhancements in the technical capacity of the state apparatus. Without adequate adjustments, Timor-Leste's integration into ASEAN's institutional structure will face serious legal, technical and political obstacles ([Guterres, 2025](#)).

The establishment of diplomatic missions in ASEAN member countries is a crucial effort and must be prioritized, as it represents a strategic and symbolic step reflecting Timor-Leste's political commitment to the accession process to ASEAN. Having embassies or diplomatic representatives in each member country enables intensive and ongoing bilateral communication and facilitates coordination on various regional issues. Through these diplomatic missions, Timor-Leste can strengthen its political, economic, and socio-cultural relations with other member states while closely monitoring ASEAN policy developments.

Additionally, these missions play an important role in advocating Timor-Leste's national interests in ASEAN forums and accelerating integration through information exchange, technical cooperation, and policy negotiations. However, the main challenge in establishing diplomatic missions is the limitation of resources, both in terms of budget and professional diplomatic personnel availability. Therefore, a targeted strategy and strong institutional support are required to ensure that Timor-Leste's diplomatic presence in ASEAN countries is not only symbolic, but also substantive and functional in strengthening Timor-Leste's position in the regional arena ([Yeimo, Lewerissa, & Suripatty, 2025](#)).

At the 45th ASEAN Summit held in Labuan Bajo, Indonesia, with Indonesia serving as the Chair of the Summit, ASEAN members unanimously agreed and officially recognized the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (RDTL) as an ASEAN member with observer status. Since then, Timor-Leste has actively participated in ASEAN meetings as an observer member. This active participation marks an important stage in the accession and regional integration processes. Since being granted observer status, Timor-Leste has consistently attended various high-level meetings, including the ASEAN Summit, ASEAN Ministerial Meetings, and other sectoral meetings covering areas such as the economy, education, health, and security ([Zahrán, 2024](#)).

This participation provides Timor-Leste with the opportunity to understand ASEAN's internal dynamics, decision-making mechanisms, and ongoing regional cooperation. Furthermore, active involvement as an observer allows Timor-Leste to build diplomatic networks, increase its visibility among member states, and prepare itself technically and institutionally to become a full member. More than just a formal presence, active participation means making constructive contributions in discussions,

expressing national views, and demonstrating political and administrative readiness to act as a responsible member. Therefore, this participation not only strengthens national capacity but also builds political trust from ASEAN member states in Timor-Leste's sincerity to fully join the regional community ([Auliyani & Putri, 2024](#)).

Enhancing institutional capacity and human resources in the foreign affairs sector is an essential prerequisite for Timor-Leste to strengthen its diplomatic role, especially in the context of its integration into ASEAN. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Cooperation of Timor-Leste plays a central role in leading the accession process, establishing bilateral and multilateral relations, and representing the national interest in regional forums. However, challenges include a shortage of professional diplomats with technical expertise in ASEAN's working mechanisms, limited ongoing diplomatic training, and suboptimal coordination systems within the ministry and with other relevant institutions.

Therefore, a structured capacity-building program is needed, including technical training, foreign language proficiency, and enhanced knowledge of international law and regional policy. Additionally, foreign affairs institutions must be strengthened institutionally, including improvements in management systems, information technology, and logistical support for overseas missions ([Heriamsal & Jekaisa, 2024](#)). By comprehensively enhancing the capacity of the foreign affairs sector, Timor-Leste will not only be better prepared to play an active role in ASEAN but also more effectively advocate its national interests in the regional and global diplomatic arenas.

Table 1. Table of process Timor Leste accession to ASEAN

Year	Event Description
2011	Official Submission of Application of ASEAN Membership
2012 - 2016	Initial Evaluation by ASEAN
2017 - 2019	Limited Participation
2019 - 2021	Finalization of Technical Evaluation
2022	Accepted "In Principle"
2023	Preparation & Implementation of Roadmap
2023 - 2024	Reform and Integration
2024	Ongoing Evaluation and Pre-Accession

4.2 Challenges Faced

[Nye \(2019\)](#) argues that the challenge for membership lies in the ability of small states to build legitimacy and influence in a multilateral environment dominated by larger countries. Institutional capacity is a key factor in the success of regional integration; however, many government institutions in Timor-Leste still face serious challenges in this area. These capacity weaknesses include a lack of trained human resources, budget constraints, and weak interagency coordination systems. In the context of Timor-Leste's accession efforts to ASEAN, state institutions must adopt, implement, and monitor various regional policies and standards set by ASEAN. However, many ministries and technical agencies are not yet fully prepared to carry out these responsibilities effectively. Additionally, the institutional infrastructure to support legal harmonization processes, data collection, and regular reporting is minimal. Therefore, strengthening government institutions is crucial for Timor-Leste to meet ASEAN membership commitments and actively contribute to decision-making and regional policy implementation.

How to Do Things with International Law highlights that limitations include various forms of domestic political constraints, insufficient institutional capacity, and failures to align national norms with the international norms of the organization. Infrastructure and connectivity limitations are among the main obstacles to Timor-Leste's efforts toward economic integration within the ASEAN region. Limited and inadequate road access, especially in remote and border areas, hinders the smooth flow of goods and human mobility. Similarly, ports and airports that have not yet developed modern and efficient standards reduce logistical competitiveness and increase cross-border trade costs ([de Araújo Sarmiento](#)

[& Tilman, 2025](#)). Furthermore, access to Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in many areas remains low, impacting participation in the digital economy and technology-based market integration. Physical and digital connectivity are key elements supporting regional connectivity, which is a top priority within the ASEAN Economic Community (AEC) framework. Without adequate infrastructure and integrated connectivity systems, Timor-Leste will struggle to optimally leverage regional economic opportunities, including attracting foreign investment, boosting exports, and constructing regional supply chains. Therefore, improving the quality and coverage of infrastructure and accelerating digital transformation are strategic agendas that must be prioritized to support Timor-Leste's readiness for ASEAN accession and integration.

Regulatory harmonization is a significant challenge in Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession process because it requires considerable time, effort, and resources to align national laws and policies with agreements and standards applied at the regional level. ASEAN has various legal frameworks and agreements governing multiple sectors, such as trade, investment, environment, labor, and consumer protection. To become a full member, Timor-Leste must adjust its national legislation to comply with these commitments, which means revising, repealing, or adopting new laws in accordance with the principles of regional integration ([Tahar & Prasetyawati, 2018](#)).

This process demands cross-sectoral and inter-agency coordination, as well as a deep understanding of ASEAN norms and standards, which are often technical and complex in nature. However, limitations in the capacity of legislative institutions, legal human resources, and oversight systems also hinder the acceleration of this harmonization. Without aligned regulations, Timor-Leste will face difficulties in accessing various ASEAN cooperation mechanisms and risk legal inconsistencies that could undermine regional partners' trust. Therefore, regulatory harmonization must be a strategic priority, supported by strong technical and political backing, to ensure that the integration process proceeds effectively and sustainably ([Putra, Ramadhany, & Salsabila, 2021](#)).

[Alter and Helfer \(2022\)](#) state in their book, *Legal Integration in Global Institutions*, that regulatory harmonization is both a technical and political process, requiring convergence not only in legal texts but also in enforcement mechanisms, administrative practices, and institutional cultures. Regulatory harmonization is a crucial process in Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN because the organization has a set of agreements, protocols, and regional standards governing nearly all aspects of cooperation among member states, ranging from trade, investment, environment, health, education, and human rights protection. To become a full member, Timor-Leste must align its national laws and policies with the provisions of the agreement.

This harmonization process requires not only a technical understanding of the ASEAN legal framework but also a long timeframe, cross-sector coordination, and adequate human and financial resources. Additionally, Timor-Leste must build institutional mechanisms capable of interpreting, implementing, and monitoring harmonized regulations. Another challenge arises from the fact that several legal sectors in Timor-Leste are still under development, making immediate alignment with ASEAN's standards impossible. Without adequate regulatory harmonization, Timor-Leste's participation in ASEAN cooperation mechanisms could be hindered legally and in terms of effective policy implementation. Therefore, regulatory harmonization must be made a national priority, supported by medium- and long-term strategies involving all relevant state stakeholders ([Anwar & Nepri, 2025](#)).

[Freitas \(2024\)](#) *Timor-Leste's Interest in Joining ASEAN* identifies one of the core obstacles for Timor-Leste's accession as the shortage of trained personnel across sectors, including legal drafting, regional diplomacy, and sectoral implementation of ASEAN frameworks. The lack of skilled human resources, especially in diplomacy and international cooperation, is a significant barrier to Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession process. Integration into a regional community like ASEAN requires professionals who not only master foreign languages, particularly English, but also have a deep understanding of ASEAN's working mechanisms, international law, multilateral negotiations, and regional geopolitical and economic issues.

However, the number of diplomats and technical officials in Timor-Leste with these competencies remains limited. Furthermore, the suboptimal system for ongoing training and capacity development slows down the improvement of human resource quality. This results in ineffective representation in ASEAN forums, limitations in formulating national positions during negotiations, and delayed responses to regional strategic issues. Therefore, investing in education, diplomatic training, and strengthening capacity development institutions is crucial for Timor-Leste to prepare professional cadres capable of playing strategic roles at the regional level and ensuring that national interests are optimally advocated within the ASEAN framework ([Heriamsal & Jekaisa, 2024](#)).

4.3 National Development Opportunities through Accession

[Nye \(2019\)](#) in *Power and Interdependence in the Global Era*, Opportunity in joining international organizations refers to the strategic access a state gains to political influence, economic integration, and norm-setting platforms that can enhance its global and regional standing. Accession to ASEAN opens various strategic opportunities for Timor-Leste's national development. Integration into the ASEAN market presents a strategic opportunity to enhance investment and trade, which can significantly drive national economic growth. By becoming an ASEAN member, Timor-Leste will gain broader access to a regional market comprising over 600 million consumers and benefit from the free movement of goods, services, capital, and labor among member states through various free trade agreements and economic cooperation frameworks. This will make Timor-Leste a more attractive destination for foreign investors seeking to leverage the large and integrated ASEAN market.

Additionally, access to technology, capital, and new markets can strengthen domestic economic sectors, such as agribusiness, manufacturing, and services. However, to maximize these benefits, Timor-Leste must enhance its infrastructure, increase its production capacity, and align its national trade policies with ASEAN standards and regulations. With these measures, integration into the ASEAN market will not only expand export and investment opportunities, but also support economic diversification and job creation, thereby accelerating the national development process sustainably ([Jatmika, 2023](#)).

Timor-Leste's accession to the ASEAN market opens up significant opportunities to boost investment and expand trade, which can accelerate national economic development. By becoming part of the integrated ASEAN economic region, Timor-Leste has the potential to attract more foreign investors interested in taking advantage of easy access to a regional market comprising hundreds of millions of consumers. Free trade policies and tariff reductions among ASEAN member states will facilitate the flow of goods and services, making Timor-Leste's products more accessible and competitive in the regional market. Furthermore, this integration offers local businesses the opportunity to form partnerships with companies from other ASEAN countries, enhancing technology transfer and expanding distribution networks. However, to realize these opportunities, Timor-Leste must strengthen its supporting infrastructure, improve product quality, and align its national regulations with ASEAN standards. Thus, accession to the ASEAN market not only provides broader market access but also drives economic growth through increased and sustainable investment and trade ([Soares & Guterres, 2024](#)).

Cooperation under the ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan framework represents a strategic opportunity for Timor-Leste to advance its development and enhance the infrastructure crucial for supporting regional integration. The ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan emphasizes the importance of developing physical, institutional, and people-to-people connectivity among member states to strengthen comprehensive regional linkages ([Kartini et al., 2020](#)). Through active participation in this initiative, Timor-Leste can gain access to financing sources, technology, and technical expertise from ASEAN partners and international donors to develop transportation infrastructure, such as roads, ports, and airports, as well as adequate digital infrastructure. Improved physical connectivity will facilitate the flow of goods and services, reduce logistics costs, and increase the competitiveness of national products in the regional markets. Simultaneously, the development of digital and institutional connectivity can enhance coordination among government institutions and support cross-sectoral information exchange and cooperation. Thus, accession to ASEAN will provide a strategic opportunity for Timor-Leste to strengthen its diplomatic position at both the regional and international levels.

By becoming a full member, Timor-Leste will not only gain voting rights in various ASEAN forums and decision-making mechanisms, but will also be able to actively participate in dialogues and cooperation initiatives addressing key issues such as regional security, climate change, economic development, and sociocultural cooperation. This participation enables Timor-Leste to voice its national interests and build alliances and strategic partnerships with other member states. In addition, Timor-Leste's diplomatic position will be strengthened through ASEAN membership, enhancing its credibility and influence on the global stage. This opens up opportunities for broader access to international forums and strengthens the diplomatic network. Therefore, ASEAN membership is not only a symbol of regional integration but also an important instrument for enhancing Timor-Leste's diplomatic capacity and strengthening sovereignty and national development through more effective and structured foreign relations ([Heriamsal & Jekaisa, 2024](#)).

Timor-Leste's participation in the ASEAN community presents an important opportunity to strengthen regional identity and promote sociocultural integration among member states. Through various ASEAN-facilitated programs and initiatives, such as student exchanges, cultural festivals, and cooperation in arts and tourism, Timor-Leste can showcase its rich national culture and heritage to the regional public while also learning from the experiences of other member countries. Active engagement in this sociocultural community not only strengthens ties between ASEAN citizens but also fosters a sense of togetherness and solidarity as part of an inclusive regional identity. Furthermore, sociocultural integration contributes to regional political and security stability by fostering cross-cultural understanding and reducing the potential for conflict caused by cultural differences. Thus, strengthening identity and sociocultural integration through ASEAN membership will solidify Timor-Leste's position as an integral part of the regional community, while also enriching the cultural dynamics and cooperation across Southeast Asia ([Concepcion, 2025](#)).

5. Conclusions

5.1 Conclusion

Timor-Leste's accession to ASEAN faces substantial challenges related to institutional capacity, human resources, regulatory harmonization, and infrastructure readiness. These structural constraints indicate that Timor-Leste remains in a preparatory stage that requires comprehensive internal strengthening to ensure effective, sustainable regional integration. Despite these challenges, ASEAN membership offers significant opportunities, including increased investment, expanded trade access, enhanced regional connectivity, and strengthened diplomatic and sociocultural engagement. Timor-Leste has demonstrated strong political commitment to accession, and with a clear national strategy, improved institutional capacity, and sustained support from ASEAN member states, the accession process can serve as a catalyst for long-term national development. To achieve meaningful integration, the government must prioritize policy harmonization, infrastructure development, and building human resource capacity. Consistent engagement with ASEAN mechanisms will enable Timor-Leste to play a more active and constructive role within the regional framework.

5.2 Research Limitations

This study is limited by its reliance on descriptive secondary data covering a specific period, which may not reflect the most recent developments in Timor-Leste's ASEAN accession process. The absence of primary data and direct stakeholder interviews constrains the depth of the institutional and technical analyses. Additionally, the broad scope of the discussion limits the detailed examination of specific policy sectors related to accession readiness.

5.3 Suggestions and Directions for Future Research

Future research should adopt a more focused and empirical approach by incorporating primary data, including interviews with policymakers, ASEAN representatives and sectoral stakeholders. Further studies should examine specific dimensions of ASEAN integration, such as trade liberalization, labor mobility, regulatory convergence, and institutional governance. Such approaches will contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of Timor-Leste's preparedness and potential role in ASEAN.

Acknowledgement

The author expresses heartfelt gratitude to all parties who provided support and assistance during the preparation of this journal. Special thanks are extended to the informants, fellow students at Ngurah Rai University, and the institutions that provided valuable data and information. Additionally, sincere thanks go to my beloved family, especially my wife and children, and my colleagues for their continuous encouragement and motivation until this journal was completed. It is hoped that the results of this research will contribute positively to the advancement of knowledge and the process of Timor-Leste's integration into the ASEAN.

Author Contributions

RX contributed to the conceptualization of the study, the design of the research methodology, and the drafting of the manuscript. He was responsible for the analysis and interpretation of the data, as well as reviewing and editing the manuscript. PETD was responsible in the data collection process, ensuring the quality of the gathered data, and contributed to the analysis and discussion sections of the manuscript. Both authors participated in the final approval of the version to be published and have agreed to be accountable for all aspects of the research.

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