

CREATIVE ECONOMY DEVELOPMENT FOR FORMER EAST TIMOR REFUGEES IN INDONESIA'S BORDER REGION: A CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK BASED ON LITERATURE AND POLICY ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT:

Despite receiving Indonesian citizenship in 2003, approximately 30,000 former East Timor conflict refugees in Belu Regency remain economically marginalized and face land insecurity and limited livelihood opportunities over two decades after displacement. Existing scholarship tends to examine refugee economic integration and creative economy development as separate domains, leaving a gap in understanding how creative industries might serve as systematic pathways for post-conflict integration in developing-country border regions with distinctive cultural assets. This study employs a qualitative, desk-based methodology integrating systematic literature review, policy document analysis from Indonesian government agencies and international organizations, and comparative case analysis of creative economy initiatives in post-conflict settings, including Colombia, Rwanda, Bangladesh, and Vietnam. The analysis identifies four complementary development pillars involving traditional crafts revival and market integration, cross-border cultural tourism, digital creative industries, and performing arts for social cohesion that structured into an integrated model tailored to Belu's specific context of shared Tetum cultural heritage, transborder kinship networks, and emerging bilateral cooperation with Timor-Leste. Comparative evidence indicates that creative economy initiatives achieve greatest effectiveness when designed with genuine community ownership, conflict sensitivity, and realistic market linkage strategies. The proposed framework addresses systemic barriers including infrastructure deficits, financing constraints, and land tenure insecurity, and offers policy recommendations for coordinated implementation by government agencies, international organizations, and community-based institutions.

Keywords: *Creative Economy, Former Refugee, East Timor, Post-conflict*

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1. INTRODUCTION

Twenty-five years after the 1999 East Timor independence crisis, tens of thousands of former refugees in Indonesia's border region remain economically marginalized despite legal citizenship, representing both a persistent humanitarian challenge and an untapped development opportunity. The significance extends beyond individual welfare to regional stability, cross-border cooperation, and Indonesia's commitment to inclusive development in disadvantaged border areas. The violence following East Timor's August 30, 1999 referendum displaced at least 75% of the population, an estimated 250,000-280,000 people fled to West Timor, particularly Belu Regency, with approximately 100,000 settling in this border district (Alkatiri, 2025). While large-scale repatriation succeeded in returning 220,000 individuals, 30,000-60,000 remained in Indonesia, primarily concentrated in Belu and Kupang districts (UNHCR Global Report, 2003). The backstory reveals a complex humanitarian situation: in 2003, Indonesia issued Presidential Decree No. 25/2003 converting refugee status to Indonesian citizenship for 90% of remaining refugees, effectively ending international protection frameworks but failing to ensure genuine socioeconomic integration (Alkatiri, 2025). Research documents that land

exclusion remains the primary challenge affecting the majority of former East Timorese in Belu, with families lacking formal land titles, facing constant eviction threats, and depending on local community goodwill for agricultural land access 15+ years after arrival (ResearchGate Land Exclusion Study, 2019).

The broader implications connect to Indonesia's border region development priorities, creative economy growth strategies contributing 7.44% to national GDP (BEKRAF, 2019), and emerging cross-border cooperation frameworks with Timor-Leste that saw bilateral trade increase 15.6% to US\$348.5 million in 2023. This research addresses a gap at the intersection of two separate bodies of scholarship. Studies of refugee economic integration rarely engage creative economy frameworks, while creative economy literature has given limited attention to post-conflict displaced populations in developing-country border regions where cultural assets and cross-border dynamics create distinctive conditions. The study pursues three objectives: (1) to examine the socioeconomic conditions, cultural assets, and institutional landscape of former East Timor refugee communities in Belu Regency within existing theoretical frameworks integrating creative economy and post-conflict reconstruction; (2) to evaluate empirical case studies of creative economy initiatives in comparable post-conflict and displacement settings; and (3) to propose and develop an integrated creative economy model with corresponding policy recommendations addressing Belu's specific challenges and opportunities.

2. METHOD

This research was conducted between March and December 2024, employing a qualitative, desk-based methodology integrating multiple data sources to develop a conceptual framework applicable to Belu Regency's specific context. The approach combines systematic literature review of academic publications from 2019-2024 on creative economy, post-conflict development, and refugee integration accessed through scholarly databases; analysis of policy documents from Indonesian government agencies (Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy, Statistics Indonesia), international organizations (UNCTAD, UNESCO, UNHCR, World Bank, Asian Development Bank), and bilateral cooperation agreements; examination of empirical case studies from comparable contexts using purposive sampling criteria including post-conflict settings, refugee or displaced populations, creative industry focus, documented outcomes, and preferably developing country or Southeast Asian contexts; and contextual analysis of Belu Regency utilizing demographic statistics, economic profiles, cultural heritage documentation, and border region studies.

Data triangulation across academic sources, policy documents, practitioner reports, and statistical data enhances validity. However, several limitations must be stated explicitly. This study relies entirely on secondary data; no primary fieldwork, interviews, or direct observation was conducted in Belu Regency. The analysis is, therefore, constrained by the scope, recency, and granularity of available documentation, which may not fully capture current community conditions, preferences, or dynamics on the ground. Belu-specific primary data remain scarce in the existing literature, and some contextual inferences are drawn from provincial and regional sources. Temporal constraints also apply, given rapidly evolving policy environments and ongoing bilateral negotiations between Indonesia and Timor-Leste. These boundaries position the study as a conceptual contribution that identifies frameworks and directions warranting subsequent empirical validation through community-based participatory research.

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. *The Belu Regency Context and Refugee Situation*

Belu Regency occupies a strategic position on Timor Island's northern side in East Nusa Tenggara Province, sharing a 149.1-kilometer land border with Timor-Leste and established December 20, 1958, with "Belu" meaning "friend" in the Tetum language spoken across the border region (Statistics of Belu Regency, 2024). The regency encompasses districts following the 2012 split creating Malaka Regency, with Atambua serving as the inland capital and Atapupu as the coastal port. The population comprises diverse ethnic groups predominantly speaking Belunese dialects of Tetum, sharing profound linguistic and cultural connections with Timor-Leste communities, creating unique transnational cultural spaces where traditional practices, family ties, and economic exchanges transcend political boundaries. The 1999 crisis fundamentally altered Belu's demographic composition when approximately 100,000 refugees from East Timor arrived, dispersed across multiple camps including Haliwen, Tenubot, and Tenukik areas, with the population comprising three distinct groups: militia members and relatives (approximately 6,000), pro-integration supporters, and pro-independence forced evacuees (Alkatiri, 2025).

Current socioeconomic conditions reveal persistent challenges despite citizenship conversion. The 2012 Bappenas data documented 4,762 households still lived in former camps, though true figures likely exceeded official statistics (Jakarta Post, 2014). Land exclusion constitutes the primary issue affecting the majority of former East Timorese, with resettlement programs providing insufficient land access, legitimation by social institutions creating barriers and conflicts between refugees and landlords, and many families lacking formal land titles 15+ years after arrival while depending on local landowners' generosity and facing constant eviction threats (ResearchGate Land Exclusion Study, 2019). Financial prospects remain stagnant since 1999, with limited access to sustainable livelihoods, skills mismatches with the local economy, and lack of capital for business development. Government approaches emphasized instant solutions—instant locations, houses, and communities with housing-focused, top-down approaches without refugee participation in design, and lack of trust in refugee agency; it failed to understand community-building as a time-requiring process (Jakarta Post, 2014).

Belu's economic base remains primarily agricultural, with maize cultivation as the central crop alongside rice production, various fruits, and subsistence farming dominating rural areas, complemented by cattle and goat farming through traditional animal husbandry practices and fishing activities in coastal districts. Poverty rates remain elevated across East Nusa Tenggara Province, classified as one of Indonesia's poorest provinces with a March 2025 poverty rate of 18.60%, though decreasing by 0.88 percentage points from March 2024. Infrastructure development has accelerated, particularly border infrastructure with the Eastern Red Belt road network connecting Belu to Malaka Regency fully completed by 2019 with a budget of IDR 1.6 trillion, and the Motaain Integrated National Border Post (PLBN) constructed with approximately IDR 82 billion handling daily border crossings of 700 people on weekdays and 1,000+ on weekends, with monthly export values through Motaain reaching Rp 82.05 billion in October 2023 (Kompas, 2024).

The cultural assets of Belu and broader Timor communities constitute the foundation for creative economy development potential. Tais weaving represents the most significant traditional craft, practiced throughout Timor Island including both Belu Regency and Timor-Leste as intricate textiles culturally significant to local communities (UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage). Traditional weaving techniques passed down through generations utilize back-strap loom technology, natural dyes from plants, roots, and insects, and cotton thread with cultural significance extending across ceremonies including births, marriages, and funerals, serving as welcome symbols for guests, expressions of cultural identity and social class, dowry and family ties, and Catholic Church ceremonial adoption in Timor-Leste (UNESCO documentation). Weaving functions exclusively as women's work with intergenerational knowledge transfer involving four generations, girls learning from age 4 from mothers, grandmothers, and aunts, while men assist with cotton growing, dyeing, and loom assembly, creating community gathering functions and forms of self-expression. Wood carving traditions also flourish, with approximately 60 carvers throughout Timor, the majority originating from Belu district of Central Timor, working as village/*kampung* activities using teak, red cedarwood, eucalyptus, palmwood, bamboo, coconut shell, and bone to create masks, guardian figures, ceremonial objects, doors, and furniture (Japingka Gallery, 2023).

Performing arts traditions include traditional dances with each ethnic group maintaining distinct styles, contemporary music scenes with dangdut music extremely popular across the border region, and ceremonial practices blending Catholicism and animism with 97-98% Catholic identification in Timor-Leste but animist beliefs remaining persuasive in daily life. Cross-border cultural connections create opportunities: the Kore Metan death ceremony involving release of black cloth after 12-month mourning practiced in marriages, traditional houses, and death ceremonies facilitates cross-border attendance; cross-border marriages are common; and family connections span the border region reflecting long histories of population movement across Timor Island with traditional kingdoms and tribal affiliations transcending modern borders.

These cultural assets such Tais weaving, wood carving, performing arts traditions, and transborder kinship networks represent significant but largely untapped creative economy resources for former refugee communities in Belu. Available secondary sources do not document the extent to which former refugees currently participate in these creative activities as economic producers. The Nusa Tenggara Association's work with women's weaving groups in nearby Maumere suggests a model of organized artisan activity, but comparable cooperative structures appear absent among Belu's former refugee populations. The persistent challenges documented above such as land insecurity, limited capital, skills mismatches, and infrastructure deficits—constrain the translation of cultural knowledge into economic livelihood. What the Belu context presents, then, is not an existing creative economy but the conditions under which one might be developed: strong cultural heritage, cross-border market potential, improving physical infrastructure, and a growing bilateral cooperation framework. The following sections examine theoretical and empirical foundations for such development.

3.2. Creative Economy as Post-Conflict Development Strategy

The creative economy has emerged as a significant development sector globally, with the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development documenting that creative services exports reached US\$1.4 trillion in 2022, representing a 29% increase since 2017, while creative goods exports made US\$713 billion (UNCTAD, 2024). The sector's economic contribution ranges from 0.5% to 7.3% of GDP and employs between 0.5% and 12.5% of the workforce across surveyed countries, demonstrating substantial variation but consistent significance. Theoretical frameworks define creative economy as evolving concepts building on the interplay between human creativity, ideas, intellectual property, knowledge, and technology, underpinning knowledge-based economic activities across creative industries (United Nations, 2021). The UNCTAD framework emphasizes digitalization, artificial intelligence integration, and sustainable business practices as contemporary drivers, while UNESCO's approach links culture, creativity, and sustainable development through the lens of inclusive local economic development connecting traditional producers to global markets (UNESCO, 2022).

Recent scholarship extends creative economy theory specifically to post-conflict settings, establishing conceptual foundations relevant to refugee integration. The European Commission's "Cultural Strategies for Peace" framework leverages cultural heritage, culture, and creativity to address fragmentation, polarization, and extremism, integrating culture into security and peacebuilding frameworks through bottom-up cultural peacebuilding practices (European Commission, 2021). British Council research examining Colombia, Rwanda, and Syria provides empirical evidence for arts and culture mitigating conflict impacts: Colombia's National Batuta Foundation served 18,000 young people affected by conflict through music education over 17 years, building resilience and reducing vulnerability to violence, criminal group recruitment, and drug addiction while expanding social networks and improving family interactions (British Council, 2019). Rwanda's Itorero Cultural Education Program, drawing on 17th-century shared cultural heritage between Tutsis and Hutus, fostered "Rwandanness" rather than divisive ethnic affiliations, changing minds through teaching unity and national reconciliation (British Council, 2019). These cases demonstrate that creative programs achieve greatest success when locally led, based on local cultural traditions, and designed with conflict sensitivity.

Regarding refugee economic integration specifically, theoretical frameworks emphasize multidimensional integration across economic, linguistic, political, social, navigational, and psychological domains (Harder et al., 2018). Brell et al.'s comprehensive analysis of refugee labor market integration in high-income countries identifies language skills, health, and social networks as critical factors, recommending policies facilitating early labor market attachment (Brell et al., 2020). However, creative industries offer distinctive advantages for displaced populations: Heilbrunn et al.'s multiple embeddedness framework identifies six entrepreneurial opportunity patterns for refugees, including value creation using homeland resources and integration facilitation through entrepreneurship, with creative innovation representing a critical pattern (Heilbrunn et al., 2019). Research on Afghan refugee entrepreneurship in Pakistan demonstrates that family social capital facilitates economic integration through three-stage processes developing horizontal and vertical social capital (Emerald Insight, 2021). The intersection of creative economy and refugee integration reveals that creative industries can simultaneously address economic needs, cultural preservation, social cohesion, and identity formation. For Belu's former refugee communities, this intersection is particularly salient that they retain cultural production knowledge (notably Tais weaving) shared with Timor-Leste but not yet systematically channeled into market-oriented creative activity, and they face the multidimensional integration deficits that the literature identifies as addressable through creative economy participation.

Traditional crafts and cultural tourism constitute relevant creative economy subsectors for communities with strong cultural heritage. A thematic review investigating traditional handicrafts research from 2002-2022 documents China's Traditional Crafts Revitalization Programme establishing 1,100+ intangible cultural asset workshops in poverty areas, creating employment and income generation through sustainable design, conceptual design, and branding approaches (Liu et al., 2023). Community-based tourism research in Vietnam's Ta Oi Indigenous community demonstrates cultural revitalization strategies integrating traditional weaving, culinary arts, and dance, though noting challenges of cultural appropriation and authenticity debates when external influences modify practices (Frontiers in Sustainable Tourism, 2025). The Community Capitals Framework applied to Ban Chiang World Heritage Site in Thailand shows creative tourism strategies successfully integrate environmental conservation, cultural preservation, and economic empowerment when designed participatively (MDPI, 2024). Cultural heritage tourism generates substantial economic value—40% of global tourism is cultural or historical, and providing pathways for sustainable development that respect and preserve local culture when communities maintain control over representation and benefit distribution (World Economic Forum, 2024).

Digital creative industries represent a fourth critical sector with particular relevance for underserved communities. Li's systematic literature review developing a holistic digital transformation framework for creative industries identifies portfolio business models as emerging trends, with digital technologies facilitating business model innovations serving as both cognitive instruments and planning tools (Li, 2020). Zhao et al.'s empirical analysis of 29 Chinese provinces from 2012-2019 demonstrates that innovation efficiency mediates the relationship between digital economy development and creative industries growth (Zhao et al., 2024). For refugee populations in particular, UNHCR's PROSPECTS program across eight countries focuses on digital livelihoods through creative industries, digital technologies, and professional services, recognizing these as high-growth opportunity sectors enabling remote work possibilities despite physical mobility constraints (UNHCR Innovation Service, 2023). The digital transformation of creative industries simultaneously reduces barriers to entry through lower costs for solo creators while expanding revenue opportunities and global market access, yet perpetuates risks of digital divides if marginalized communities lack affordable connectivity, devices, skills, and technical support (National Digital Inclusion Alliance, 2024). In Belu, the digital divide risk is concrete: border communities still face unreliable electricity and limited internet connectivity despite recent infrastructure investments. It means digital creative economy pathways require phased implementation contingent on continued infrastructure development.

3.3. Integrating Post-Conflict Reconstruction with Creative Economy Development

A robust theoretical framework for creative economy development in post-conflict refugee settings requires synthesizing multiple conceptual traditions. This research proposes an integrated model combining: (1) social entrepreneurship theory defining three-component frameworks—identifying stable but unjust equilibrium, developing social value propositions, and forging new stable equilibria (Martin & Osberg, 2007); (2) community-based development emphasizing community consciousness, empowerment strategies, and supportive structures (Wilkinson & Quarter, 1995); (3) post-conflict peacebuilding through arts recognizing creative processes as fulcrums of conflict resolution via "moral imagination" (Lederach & Appleby, 2020); and (4) multiple embeddedness frameworks acknowledging refugees navigate multiple contexts simultaneously requiring nuanced support across homeland connections, host community integration, and transnational networks (Heilbrunn et al., 2019). Applied to Belu, each component of this framework addresses identifiable conditions. The social entrepreneurship lens foregrounds the unjust equilibrium of former refugees who hold citizenship but remain economically excluded. Community-based development principles speak directly to the critique of government instant solutions (Jakarta Post, 2014), where housing-focused, top-down approaches failed precisely because they bypassed community consciousness and empowerment. Post-conflict peacebuilding through arts finds its object in the ongoing need for social cohesion between former refugee and host communities, where land conflicts and resource competition generate friction that collaborative cultural activities could help mediate. In addition, the multiple embeddedness framework captures the transnational reality of former refugees who maintain kinship, cultural, and economic ties across the Indonesia-Timor Leste border.

The synthesized framework positions creative economy development not merely as economic activity but as transformative process addressing interconnected dimensions of post-conflict recovery. At the individual level, creative economy participation rebuilds economic security, skills, and agency while providing psychological benefits through creative expression and identity affirmation. Research on art therapy with Syrian refugee children demonstrates creative activities improve well-being, social skills, and trauma processing while reducing vulnerability to exploitation (British Council, 2019). At the community level, collective creative activities strengthen social capital, bridge divides between refugee and host populations, and revitalize cultural practices that provide continuity despite displacement. The Rohingya Cultural Memory Center in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, serving nearly one million refugees, addresses the "identity crisis" affecting 75% of refugees through documenting cultural practices, artists-in-residence programs, and traditional crafts including embroidery, pottery, basketry, and woodworking, explicitly strengthening collective identity while creating skills development opportunities (International Organization for Migration, 2021). At the systemic level, creative economy development can shift power dynamics, create sustainable markets, and establish institutional frameworks enabling ongoing integration.

Participatory development approaches constitute essential methodological foundations. The UNHCR-Migration Policy Group toolkit "Effective Inclusion of Refugees: Participatory Approaches for Practitioners at the Local Level" emphasizes that refugee participation in decision-making builds confidence, fosters belonging, and creates trust in host communities, with participatory approaches leading to smarter policies and more inclusive outcomes across housing, documentation, social inclusion, economic inclusion, service access, and community integration domains (UNHCR, 2024). World Bank evidence identifies three mechanisms

explaining participatory effectiveness in forced displacement contexts: refugee-host interactions during everyday activities improve perceptions; displaced populations exhibit high social capital that participatory approaches leverage; and trained facilitators promote empathy through perspective-getting exercises (World Bank, 2023). Asset-based community development approaches focusing on existing strengths, emphasizing cultural asset mapping, capabilities-based frameworks, and community organizing mobilizing distributed resources (Americans for the Arts, 2023).

Value chain development and market access frameworks address the critical challenge of economic sustainability. The International Fund for Agricultural Development's pro-poor value chain development guidelines emphasize improving physical access through infrastructure, strengthening entire chains from production to marketing, enabling smallholders to produce the right products to the right standards, and providing reliable market access for quality produce at higher prices (IFAD, 2024). Fair trade approaches specifically benefit marginalized artisans by providing fair wages and prices, accessing international markets, preserving traditional crafts and cultural heritage, supporting women's economic empowerment, and protecting from exploitative intermediaries (FasterCapital, Fair Trade Analysis). However, research documents significant barriers: Indian artisan studies reveal precarious labor conditions, fundamental production process changes required for global markets, survival-driven entrepreneurship necessities, and intense competition in neoliberal environments (Scrase, 2009). Cooperative and collective business models offer alternatives, with cooperatives demonstrating only 10% failure rates after the first year compared to 60-80% for traditional businesses, while providing democratic governance, community empowerment, and social inclusion mechanisms (ILO data, Johnston Birchall).

3.4. Proposed Creative Economy Model for Belu Regency

Drawing on the theoretical frameworks discussed above and the empirical evidence reviewed in the following section, this research proposes an integrated creative economy model structured around four complementary pillars (see Figure 1). Each pillar addresses distinct but interconnected dimensions of sustainable development for former refugee communities while benefiting broader Belu populations. The model is designed to work within the specific constraints documented earlier.

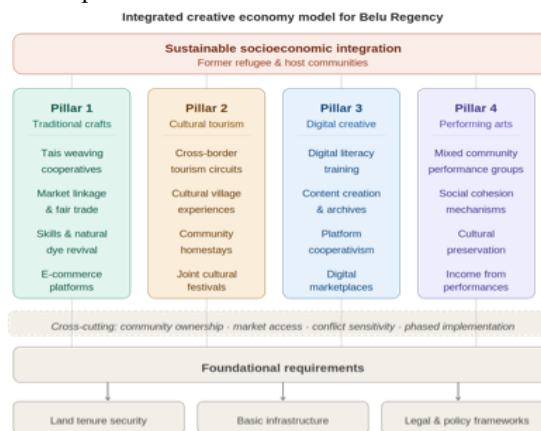


Figure 1. Integrated Creative Economy Model for Former Refugee Communities in Belu

3.4.1 Traditional crafts revival and market integration (Pillar 1)

This pillar establishes cooperative structures for women weavers and artisans, building on existing Tais weaving traditions while addressing market access barriers. The implementation strategies include two key components. First, forming artisan cooperatives provides collective bargaining power, quality control mechanisms, bulk purchasing of raw materials to reduce costs, shared equipment and workspace, and democratic governance structures. Second, establishing a regional creative hub in Atambua offers exhibition space for displaying and selling products, workshop facilities for production and skills training, business development services including bookkeeping, marketing, and legal support, digital connectivity for e-commerce, and meeting spaces for cooperative governance. Skills development programs would revive traditional natural dyeing techniques, introduce contemporary design applications integrating traditional motifs with modern aesthetics, provide business management training covering production cost, pricing, marketing, and fiscal management, facilitate fair trade certification processes, and develop English language skills for international market engagement.

Market linkage strategies connect producers to national and international markets through: developing e-commerce platforms specifically for Belu traditional crafts with secure payment systems and logistics support; establishing partnerships with Indonesian fashion designers and retailers integrating Tais textiles into contemporary collections, following successful models like the Sepatokimin-Prabu collaboration creating eco-friendly "Simpul" collections; targeting diaspora markets among Indonesian and Timorese communities abroad; accessing fair trade networks providing premium prices for certified products; and developing geographic indication protection for "Tais Belu" establishing brand recognition and legal protection. The Nusa Tenggara Association model demonstrates effectiveness: supporting multiple women's weaving groups in Maumere, Flores, providing skill and business training, raw materials, and marketing support, focusing on natural dyeing techniques revival, enabling collective selling at fairer prices, and providing crucial income during dry seasons when farming ceases (Nusa Tenggara Association documentation).

3.4.2 *Cross-border cultural tourism development (Pillar 2)*

This pillar leverages Belu's unique position as a border region with shared Tetum cultural heritage, creating tourism products that generate income while preserving cultural practices. Core components include: developing cultural village experiences where visitors learn traditional weaving techniques, participate in food preparation using traditional methods, attend cultural performances, and stay in community-managed homestays with overnight accommodations providing higher revenue than day visits; establishing cultural festivals rotating between Belu communities and partnering with Timor-Leste for joint events, featuring traditional dance competitions, craft exhibitions, culinary showcases, and musical performances attracting domestic and international tourists while strengthening cross-border ties; creating border tourism circuits integrating Belu with broader NTT destinations particularly Labuan Bajo/Komodo National Park identified as Indonesia's Super Priority Destination; and coordinating with Timor-Leste tourism authorities for combined itineraries capitalizing on the 2016 discussions of tourism paths connecting Bali-Darwin via Flores and Timor.

Community-based tourism principles ensure local control and benefit distribution through: establishing community tourism enterprises legally structured as cooperatives or community-owned businesses with transparent accounting and profit-sharing mechanisms; implementing comprehensive training programs in hospitality skills, guiding and interpretation, food safety and hygiene, cultural heritage preservation, and environmental sustainability; creating quality standards and certification systems ensuring consistent visitor experiences while maintaining authenticity; and developing multilingual promotional materials in Indonesian, English, Tetum, and Portuguese. Infrastructure requirements that implementation partners must address include improving rural road conditions connecting cultural villages to main transport routes; expanding homestay facilities meeting basic safety and comfort standards; establishing visitor information centers at Motaain border post and Atambua; and enhancing digital connectivity enabling online bookings and digital payments.

3.4.3 *Digital creative industries and content creation (Pillar 3)*

This pillar addresses digital transformation opportunities while acknowledging infrastructure constraints requiring phased implementation. Initial focus establishes foundational digital infrastructure and literacy through: creating digital literacy training centers in Atambua offering free courses in basic computer skills, internet navigation, social media marketing, digital content creation, and online business management; providing subsidized internet access and device loan programs targeting former refugee households and marginalized communities; establishing co-working spaces with reliable electricity, high-speed internet, computers, and software for graphic design, video editing, and digital marketing; and developing partnerships with Indonesian telecommunications providers for affordable connectivity packages in border regions.

Content creation initiatives leverage cultural assets through training young people in photography and videography documenting traditional practices, cultural events, and daily life, creating digital archives preserving intangible cultural heritage while generating content for marketing and education; developing social media strategies for artisan cooperatives and cultural tourism enterprises using platforms like Instagram, Facebook, and TikTok to showcase products and experiences directly to consumers; creating online courses teaching Tetum language and traditional crafts to diaspora and international audiences generating revenue while preserving cultural knowledge; and establishing digital marketplaces specifically for NTT creative products with integrated payment, logistics, and customer service. The Amarthia model serving twenty-six million borrowers in Indonesia demonstrates that digitally enabled financial solutions can effectively serve microentrepreneurs including women-led businesses in underserved regions when designed appropriately (Amartha documentation, Accion Digital Transformation Fund).

Platform cooperativism offers alternatives to extractive digital economy models, with refugee and migrant cooperative examples documented globally including Italy's Auxilium managing migration reception centers, Spain's Top Manta cooperative of undocumented migrant street vendors, and India's Self-Employed Women's

Association supporting women in the informal sector (Platform Cooperativism Consortium, 2025). Belu could pioneer platform cooperatives in Indonesia providing democratic ownership and governance for digital creative workers, ensuring equitable value distribution, maintaining cultural authenticity and control, and building collective bargaining power with international platforms.

3.4.4 Performing arts for social cohesion and income generation (Pillar 4)

This pillar recognizes performing arts' dual functions: strengthening social cohesion between former refugee and host communities while creating income through cultural performances. The implementation includes: establishing community performance groups in multiple Belu districts with regular rehearsal schedules, equipment provision including musical instruments and traditional costumes, and intergenerational participation structures ensuring knowledge transfer from elders to youth; developing repertoires combining traditional Tetum dances and music with contemporary interpretations reflecting hybrid identities and lived experiences of displacement and integration; creating performance opportunities at cultural festivals, tourist sites, community events, schools, and border post ceremonies, with payment structures ensuring performers receive fair compensation; and producing recordings and videos of performances for sale to tourists, distribution through digital platforms, and archival preservation.

Social cohesion mechanisms embedded in performing arts initiatives include: deliberately composing performance groups with mixed membership of former refugees and host community members; using participatory creation processes where group members collectively develop new works addressing shared experiences; organizing community performances free to local audiences strengthening community identity and pride; and facilitating youth exchanges with Timor-Leste performance groups building cross-border understanding. The Colombia National Batuta Foundation model serving 18,000 young people affected by conflict demonstrates that music education builds resilience, protects against recruitment by armed groups, expands social networks, improves family interactions, and creates mutual understanding among participants from diverse backgrounds. These specific outcomes directly relevant to Belu's context of ongoing integration between former refugee and host communities (British Council, 2019).

3.5 Learning from Comparative Contexts

The following section compares the cases of Rohingya Cultural Memory Center in Bangladesh, Rwanda's post-genocide cultural programs, Vietnam's Ta Oi community tourism, and UNHCR digital livelihood initiatives across multiple countries operating at national or large-camp scales considerably larger than a single Indonesian regency. The comparison does not assume equivalence of scale, political context, or administrative capacity between these settings and Belu. Instead, the comparative analysis focuses on transferable design principles such as what made specific creative economy interventions effective or ineffective for displaced or post-conflict populations, and which success factors are portable across scales and settings.

The Rohingya Cultural Memory Center in Cox's Bazar, Bangladesh, serves nearly one million refugees through a multidisciplinary initiative combining online space, interactive gallery, digital archive, and web-based exhibition documenting cultural practices from Rakhine State, Myanmar (International Organization for Migration, 2021). The Center's artists-in-residence program, psychosocial support through art therapy, and traditional crafts activities including embroidery, pottery, basketry, woodwork, and visual arts addressed the identity crisis affecting 75% of refugees while strengthening collective identity and creating skills development opportunities through exploring new materials and processes. The planned construction of an integrated multi-service hall for exhibitions and workshops fully managed by the Rohingya community demonstrates progression toward community ownership and sustainability. The Rohingya model's direct applicability to Belu includes documentation of displaced populations' cultural practices preventing erasure, creative activities serving therapeutic functions addressing trauma, skills development creating economic opportunities, and community management ensuring cultural authenticity and local control.

Rwanda's post-genocide recovery provides instructive examples of performing arts for reconciliation. The Itorero Cultural Education Program, government-led citizenship and cultural education targeting ages 18-35, deliberately draws on 17th-century cultural and civic schools representing shared heritage between Tutsis and Hutus, teaching unity and national reconciliation while promoting integrity, hard work, and self-reliance (British Council, 2019). Never Again Rwanda employed films, discussion, group work, storytelling, theatre, poetry, and drama drawing on Rwandan culture and values to develop critical thinking, rights, and democratic principles, with documented impacts on participants' trauma recovery. The annual Kwibuka Genocide Commemoration includes a Flame of Remembrance touring communities accompanied by performances of theatre, music, and poetry focused on remembrance, reconciliation, and rebuilding, providing a recognized framework for conflict resolution. Rwanda demonstrates that performing arts achieve greatest impact when

rooted in shared cultural heritage, explicitly designed to strengthen common identities transcending divisions, integrated into national commemorative practices creating collective meaning, and combined with civic education developing critical thinking and rights awareness.

Vietnam's Ta Oi indigenous community cultural revitalization illustrates both opportunities and risks in tourism-based creative economy development. The grounded theory documents traditional weaving, culinary arts, architecture, and dance revitalization supporting community-based tourism while raising concerns about external influences from Kinh people, cultural appropriation, and authenticity debates when industrial materials replace hand-grown cotton in traditional Dzung weaving (Frontiers in Sustainable Tourism, 2025). The case demonstrates tensions between preserving authentic cultural practices and adapting to tourist demands and market realities. Lessons for Belu include necessity of strong community governance over cultural representation preventing appropriation, documentation, and protection of traditional knowledge before commercialization, careful negotiation of authenticity versus market adaptation, and ensuring economic benefits justify cultural modifications.

Digital creative industries initiatives for refugees provide models for Pillar 3 implementation. UNHCR's PROSPECTS program across Kenya, Uganda, Ethiopia, Sudan, Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq focuses on digital livelihoods recognizing creative industries, digital technologies, and professional services as high-growth sectors enabling remote work despite mobility constraints (UNHCR Innovation Service, 2023). Ethiopia's Gebeya Digital Labour Platform created a customized platform connecting businesses to refugee and host community talent with bespoke training and mentorship, creating an inclusive digital economy. Egypt's program focused on digital skills enhancement through community learning centers, English-language training and certification, and digital risk awareness campaigns led by refugee organizations using creative methods. Critical success factors include customized integration of language training with technical skills, community-based delivery through trusted organizations, explicit attention to digital risks and safety, and progressive skill building from digital literacy to market-driven technical competencies.

UNHCR Innovation Fund projects demonstrate creative industries potential: in Kenya's Kakuma Refugee Camp, 300 young refugees and host community members received training in digital content creation, marketing, entrepreneurship, and employability skills through FilmAid Kenya and Kakuma Ventures partnerships, accessing cameras and editing software for skills development in expanding digital media markets (UNHCR Innovation Service, 2024). Ecuador's Creative Digital Hub by Fundación MUEVE provided Venezuelan refugees with 3D printing/scanning, design, and digital manufacturing training promoting socioeconomic integration through innovation ecosystems. France's *Espero* haute couture upcycling program engaged twenty refugees with sewing skills in vocational workshops covering design and sewing techniques while networking with the fashion industry, achieving 58% of participants earning over \$2/day, the World Bank poverty threshold and changing narratives around refugees combating prejudice. The common thread across successful digital and creative initiatives includes addressing both technical skills and business/marketing capabilities, creating networks with established industries providing market access, using creative work to shift narratives and combat prejudice, and measuring success through income generation demonstrating economic viability.

3.6 Policy Recommendations for Implementation

Successful implementation of this proposed creative economy model requires coordinated action across multiple stakeholder levels. National government agencies, particularly the Ministry of Tourism and Creative Economy established in October 2024 (Presidential Decree No. 199/2024), should designate Belu Regency as a creative economy pilot zone for border regions, providing technical assistance, capacity building for local government officials, access to national creative economy financing programs, and integration into national promotional campaigns. The Ministry should extend existing programs supporting outer islands and women entrepreneurs specifically to former refugee communities, following models like the three hundred women weavers in East Flores exporting to Europe through government-facilitated trade missions connecting entrepreneurs to UK buyers (UN Indonesia, 2024).

Infrastructure ministries must prioritize critical gaps undermining all economic development efforts: the clean water crisis affecting border post communities requires urgent investment, healthcare facilities must be established within reasonable distances than requiring two-hour travel to Atambua, and reliable electricity access must reach cultural villages and production centers enabling digital creative industries and modern equipment use. The completed Eastern Red Belt road network and Motaain PLBN represent significant achievements, yet local communities lack basic services, creating paradoxes of grand infrastructure coexisting with fundamental deprivation (Kompas, 2023). The Ministry of Public Works and the Ministry of Villages,

Development of Disadvantaged Regions and Transmigration should coordinate integrated infrastructure development ensuring creative economy facilities receive necessary utilities.

Provincial and regency governments in East Nusa Tenggara and Belu must allocate resources for creative economy development in annual budgets, establish Creative Economy Task Forces with representation from former refugee communities to ensure genuine participation, develop local regulations supporting artisan cooperatives and social enterprises through streamlined registration, tax incentives, and land access, and coordinate with Timor-Leste counterparts through proposed technical teams for economic cooperation focusing on agriculture, livestock, trade, and industry with explicit creative economy components (ANTARA News, 2025). Belu's strategic advantage includes operational border crossings, established trade relationships evidenced by monthly export values of Rp 82.05 billion through Motaain, and cultural continuity across borders, creating natural markets and collaboration opportunities.

International development organizations should provide catalytic financing, technical expertise, and knowledge transfer. The Asian Development Bank's 2019 memorandum with Indonesia and Timor-Leste focused on reducing barriers to cross-border transportation, harmonizing border procedures, reducing livestock trade barriers, and joint tourism promotion, with the US\$1 million grant successfully validating technical assistance (Asian Development Bank, 2019). Future ADB and World Bank initiatives should explicitly include creative economy components in border development programs, provide matching grants for artisan cooperative formation and equipment purchase, fund skills training programs in traditional crafts, digital literacy, business management, and English language, and support development of regional creative industry hubs with exhibition, production, and training facilities. UNESCO's expertise in intangible cultural heritage protection should inform documentation and safeguarding efforts for Tais weaving and traditional performing arts, potentially leading to UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage listing providing international recognition and tourism appeal.

Financial sector innovations must address capital access barriers facing marginalized producers. The Amartha model of digitally enabled financial solutions serving microentrepreneurs, particularly women-led businesses, demonstrates feasibility in Indonesian contexts (Accion Digital Transformation Fund documentation). Banks should develop creative economy-specific loan products with lower collateral requirements recognizing intellectual property and cultural knowledge as assets, longer grace periods acknowledging production cycles for handcrafted goods, group lending models through cooperatives spreading risk, and technical assistance components ensuring business viability. The Eastern Indonesia Financial Innovation Lab launched by Indonesia's Financial Services Authority enables Regional Development Banks to collaborate with fintech sectors, map customer needs, develop new financial products, and digitize operations—a model applicable to creative economy financing in Belu (OJK documentation). Indonesia's financial inclusion increases from 49% in 2014 to 83% in 2023 demonstrates rapid progress, yet specific products targeting creative entrepreneurs in disadvantaged border regions require intentional design.

Private sector engagement opportunities span four areas. First, Indonesian fashion and design companies can build ethical sourcing relationships with Belu artisan cooperatives, offering design consulting, technical assistance, and premium pricing for traditional textiles used in contemporary collections. Second, tourism operators can develop packages linking Labuan Bajo with Belu cultural tourism to generate viable visitor flows. Third, telecommunications companies can extend affordable connectivity and subsidized devices to creative economy participants as Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives that yield positive publicity. Last, e-commerce platforms can create dedicated artisan sections with reduced commission rates and marketing support. The UK experience shows 77% of large London businesses indicated likelihood of hiring refugees in the future, with 65% of businesses employing refugees doing so to provide support, demonstrating private sector willingness to engage when facilitated appropriately (UNHCR Innovation Service, 2024).

Civil society organizations and NGOs play irreplaceable roles as trusted intermediaries, capacity builders, and advocates. Organizations currently operating in NTT including the Nusa Tenggara Association supporting women's weaving groups, Good Shepherd Services providing anti-trafficking and empowerment programs, and Jesuit Refugee Service offering services in multiple locations should expand creative economy programming. International NGOs should focus on participatory action research to document traditional cultural practices and create digital archives, facilitation of cooperative formation with democratic governance structures, advocacy for former refugee communities' land rights as a foundation for all economic development, and monitoring and evaluation frameworks that document outcomes and impacts, thereby enabling evidence-based policy adjustments. The Rohingya Cultural Memory Center's progression toward full community management by refugees themselves demonstrates that NGO-initiated programs must explicitly plan for transitions to community ownership to ensure sustainability beyond project funding cycles (International Organization for Migration, 2021).

Cross-border coordination mechanisms between Indonesia and Timor-Leste require institutionalization beyond ad hoc agreements. The proposed Bilateral Investment Treaty and joint free-trade zone between Oecusse district and East Nusa Tenggara Province under negotiation for 2024-2025 completion should include specific creative economy provisions: mutual recognition of artisan certifications and geographic indications, visa facilitation for cultural performers and craftspeople to enable joint festivals and markets, harmonized tourism regulations to allow seamless cross-border itineraries, joint cultural heritage documentation and preservation initiatives, and coordinated marketing to promote the border region as a single cultural tourism destination. Strengthening bilateral relations evidenced by multiple 2024 agreements on infrastructure, communications, human resources development, clean energy, and digital transformation create favorable political conditions for creative economy cooperation (Government of Timor-Leste, 2024).

Land tenure security constitutes a foundational requirement without which all other interventions face limited effectiveness. Existing research unequivocally identifies land exclusion as the primary challenge affecting the majority of former East Timorese, with families lacking formal land titles, facing constant eviction threats, and depending on local landowners' generosity 15+ years after arrival (ResearchGate Land Exclusion Study, 2019). The Indonesian government must establish comprehensive land titling programs for former refugee communities to ensure legal security, mechanisms resolving land conflicts between refugees and landlords through mediation and clear legal frameworks, allocation of government land for cooperative production facilities and cultural centers, and protection against eviction while creative economy investments are being made. International precedents demonstrate that economic integration programs fail when legal status and security remain precarious, regardless of skills training or market access improvements.

4. CONCLUSION

This study sets out to develop a conceptual framework for creative economy development as a pathway to socioeconomic integration of former East Timor refugees in Belu Regency. The analysis yields the following findings in response to the stated research objectives. Regarding the socioeconomic conditions and cultural assets of former refugee communities (Objective 1), the analysis confirms that despite citizenship conversion in 2003, former refugees in Belu face persistent land insecurity, limited capital access, and economic stagnation. At the same time, Belu possesses significant cultural assets, Tais weaving traditions, wood carving, performing arts, and transborder kinship networks, which constitute untapped resources for creative economy development. The gap between cultural knowledge and economic opportunity defines the challenge. The theoretical synthesis (Objective 1, continued) demonstrates that integrating social entrepreneurship, community-based development, post-conflict peacebuilding through arts, and multiple embeddedness frameworks produces a lens suited to the complexity of Belu's situation, where economic marginalization, social fragmentation, cultural displacement, and transnational ties intersect. Each theoretical tradition addresses a dimension that the others leave incomplete. Comparative case analysis (Objective 2) reveals consistent success factors across creative economy initiatives for displaced populations: community ownership, grounding in local cultural traditions, conflict sensitivity that addresses power dynamics and historical grievances, realistic market linkage strategies, and phased implementation that allows time for capacity development. Cases from Bangladesh, Rwanda, Vietnam, and UNHCR digital livelihood programs demonstrate both the potential and the risks, particularly of cultural appropriation, authenticity erosion, and digital exclusion—that must inform design. The proposed four-pillar model (Objective 3) structures creative economy development around traditional crafts, cultural tourism, digital creative industries, and performing arts as complementary. The model is explicitly designed for Belu's constraints; it presupposes foundational investments in land tenure security, basic infrastructure, and legal frameworks for cooperatives as preconditions. Policy recommendations identify coordinated roles for national, provincial, and regency government; international development organizations; the financial sector; the private sector; civil society; and cross-border institutional mechanisms.

Several limitations bound these findings. The study relies entirely on secondary data, and Belu-specific primary evidence on former refugees' current creative economy participation remains thin. The model is conceptual and untested; its viability depends on empirical validation through participatory research with the communities it concerns. The comparative cases, while instructive in design principles, operate at scales and in political contexts different from a single Indonesian regency. Notwithstanding these limitations, the study contributes a structured framework for a context that has received little scholarly attention at the intersection of creative economy development and post-conflict refugee integration. Future research priorities include household-level surveys documenting current economic conditions and aspirations among former refugees in Belu; participatory action research with artisan groups and cultural performers; longitudinal tracking of any creative economy initiatives that emerge; and comparative analysis across Indonesian border regions.

Twenty-five years after displacement, former East Timor refugees in Belu Regency deserve more than legal citizenship without genuine integration. The creative economy offers pathways transforming marginalization into meaningful participation, cultural assets into sustainable livelihoods, and historical divisions into collaborative futures. The conditions are increasingly favorable: Indonesia's creative economy momentum, strengthening bilateral relations with Timor-Leste, infrastructure investments, and growing recognition of border regions' strategic importance. Whether this potential translates into transformed lives depends on choices made by policymakers, development practitioners, community leaders, and former refugee communities themselves. The foundations exist, the architecture is designed, and the construction awaits.

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