



Migration and development dynamics in São Nicolau, Cabo Verde

São Nicolau is an island at risk of marginalisation, surpassed by growth in other parts of the country. Emigrants help sustain a decent standard of living for most residents, but the flow of remittances is shrinking.

São Nicolau is a tranquil island that residents express affection for, whether they are able to stay or have to seek work elsewhere.

Nearly everyone on São Nicolau has family, relatives or friends abroad and the majority of such households receive remittances.

Locals reminisce about the time when emigrants were visiting in greater numbers. Statistics on remittances also suggest that ties with the diaspora are weakening.



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Photo: Jørgen Carling for MIGNEX.

São Nicolau is one of Cabo Verde's nine inhabited islands. It is mountainous and arid, with agriculture in the areas that receive more rain. Since Cabo Verde's independence in 1975 São Nicolau has become increasingly marginalised and has lost about a third of its population. Decades of infrequent and unreliable inter-island transport have contributed to the island's isolation.

São Nicolau has about 12,000 inhabitants spread out across two towns, a dozen villages and dispersed rural settlements.

The mountainous terrain adds to the fragmentation. For instance, the two main towns are just 8 km apart, but the road between them winds through the mountains for 27 km.

Although São Nicolau struggles with stagnation and marginalisation, there is an atmosphere of tranquillity and friendliness that many inhabitants cherish, and acute poverty is rare. Among our survey respondents, 91% say that no-one in their household had gone to bed hungry during the past month. Asked about their financial situation, only 5% say they are finding it difficult to get by.

This case study brief is based on fieldwork and survey data. The MIGNEX team also did research on the island of Boa Vista and carried out a review of migration-relevant policies in Cabo Verde.¹

Migration from São Nicolau

Since the 1970s people from São Nicolau have been leaving to go abroad in large numbers. Among the first migrants were women who went to work as domestic workers in Italy, helped by Italian missionaries. In parallel, many men migrated to work as seafarers out of Rotterdam, and a large number eventually settled there. More recent out-migration is less clearly gendered. After five decades of emigration, nearly everyone on São Nicolau

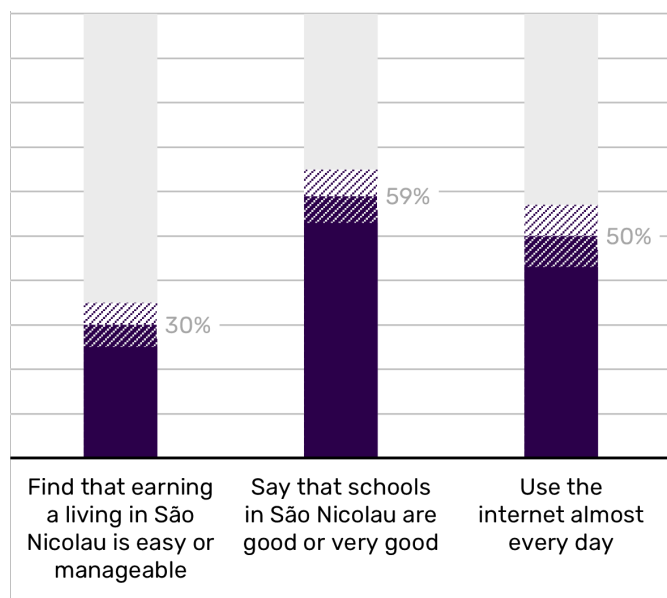


Figure 1. Indicators of development

Source: MIGNEX Survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.

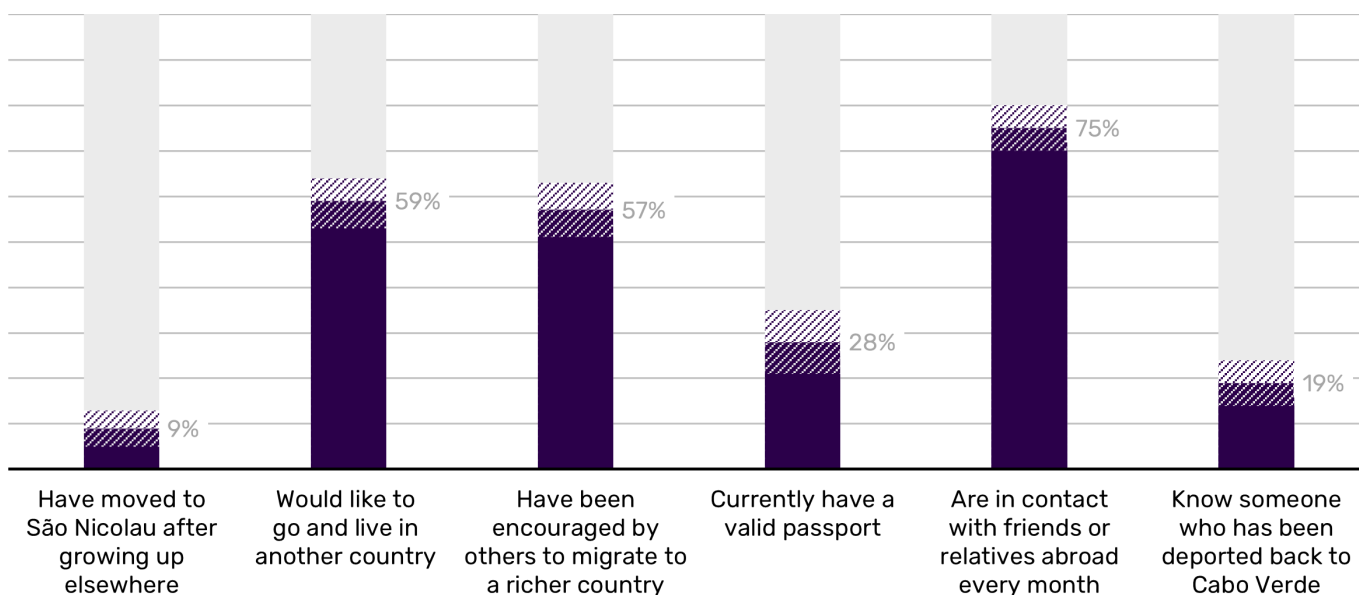


Figure 2. Indicators of migration dynamics

Source: MIGNEX survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.

(98%) has relatives or friends abroad. The majority of emigrants from São Nicolau live in Europe, but there is also long-standing migration to the United States.

While emigration has become more difficult, new opportunities have emerged within Cabo Verde. In particular, many people from São Nicolau have found work on the neighbouring island Sal, which is the country's major tourism hub. Among the survey respondents, 61% say they know at least ten people who have moved to other islands in recent years.

Many people voice concern about the continued out-migration of young people. Close to 90% of students in São Nicolau proceed to secondary school and a large proportion seek university-level education. It is rare for students to return to São Nicolau after completing their degrees.

Migration aspirations

More than half of young adults in São Nicolau (55%) would prefer to leave Cabo Verde in the near future. An even greater share (79%) would seize the opportunity if they were offered the necessary papers. However, there is widespread awareness of obstacles to international migration. Almost 90% of respondents say that migrating to a richer

country is difficult or very difficult. It is telling that while 58% have had a passport at some point, only 11% have ever been to another country.

Among the young adults who want to migrate, the preferred destinations are Portugal (39%), the United States (28%), The Netherlands (11%) and Italy (11%).

In-migration and return migration

The vast majority of young adults (91%) on São Nicolau are born and raised on the island, and most have parents who are, too. Newcomers include professionals from other islands and a handful of Europeans, mainland West Africans, and Chinese shopkeepers.

While immigrants are few, there are many emigrants who have returned to their island of origin. Every fifth survey respondent has a family member, relative or friend who has

All of us young people want to leave. I mean, we think we must go, and that maybe when we come back, São Nicolau will be developed and then we can stay. We think like this, and we don't realise that for the island to develop, we must give our contribution.

Focus group participant

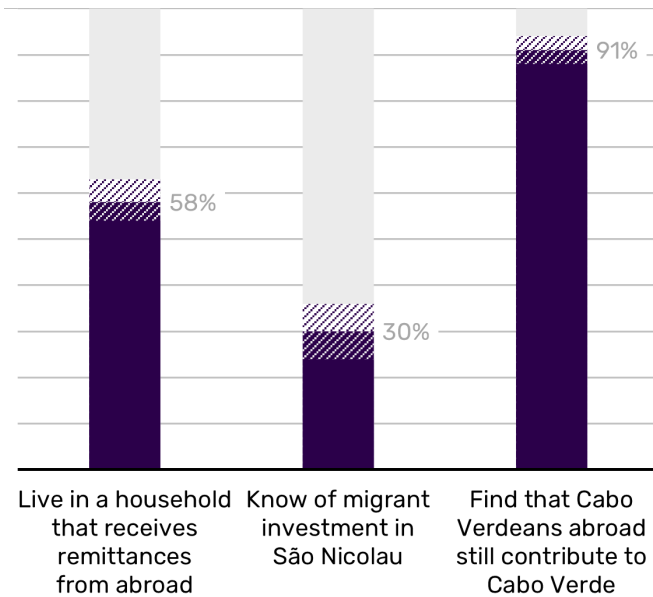


Figure 3. Migration–development interactions

Source: MIGNEX Survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.

returned from abroad. The archetypical return migrants in São Nicolau are individuals who spent many years working abroad (especially in Europe) and move back when they retire.

Links between migration and development

International migration is, to some extent, seen as a thing of the past. Going to work in Europe or the United States has not only become more difficult but is also a more uncertain prospect. In particular, the hardships of migrants during the 2007–2014 crisis in the Portuguese economy raised concerns in São Nicolau, where three quarters of young adults have relatives in Portugal.

Still, there is a strong awareness that São Nicolau is an island of emigrants. Each of the two towns has a street called *Emigrants' Street* and the big houses of emigrants that dot the island are a reminder of the salience of

emigration. Almost everyone (96%) agrees that when people emigrate, they support their family members. In fact, nearly six out of ten households on São Nicolau receive remittances. Officially registered remittances amount to €125 per household per month, which is more than the minimum wage for a private-sector worker.²

Collective remittances have not had a transformative effect on São Nicolau in the way that family remittances have. People appreciate smaller-scale initiatives such as diaspora donations of equipment to schools and sports clubs, but there is only one well-known development investment funded by migrants – a bridge connecting the two parts of the village Ribeira da Prata.

It remains uncertain how money from emigrants will support São Nicolau in the years to come, as those who leave increasingly find work on other islands rather than abroad. Remittance inflows remain substantial, but they were halved from 2014 to 2020.³

Beyond the issue of remittances, people in São Nicolau reminisce about the greater number of visiting emigrants in the past. In the summer, especially, the island was buzzing as emigrants filled the beaches and discos and treated their relatives and friends.

Notes

1. Fieldwork consisting of key informant interviews, focus group discussions and observations was carried out by Jørgen Carling, assisted by Celina Abreu in February 2020. A face-to-face survey of 500 randomly selected residents (aged 18–39) was conducted by PD Consult, MGF Research and ODI in November–December 2020.
2. Based on data from the Bank of Cape Verde.
3. The decline is unlikely to only reflect changes in the share of remittances officially registered, since recorded inflows to the country as a whole grew substantially in the same period.

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MIGNEX – Aligning Migration Management and the Migration–Development Nexus – is a five-year research project (2018–2023) with the core ambition of creating new knowledge on migration, development and policy. It is carried out by a consortium of nine partners: The Peace Research Institute Oslo (coordinator), Danube University Krems, the University of Ghana, Koç University, Lahore University of Management Sciences, Maastricht University, ODI, the University of Oxford and Samuel Hall.

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