



# Migration and development dynamics in Boa Vista, Cabo Verde

International mobility has long sustained development in Boa Vista. For decades, the island relied heavily on migrant remittances. More recently, tourism has generated jobs and spurred in-migration. The economy has grown, but the development benefits are uneven.

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Virtually all surveyed young adults have family or friends abroad and almost half receive remittances.

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Inflows of migration are high. Almost two-thirds of young adults (60%) grew up elsewhere in Cabo Verde; and the remainder (6%) abroad.

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People are aware of the benefits of past migration. More than half (54%) of young adults in Boa Vista would prefer to leave Cabo Verde in the next five years.



Jørgen Carling  
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Photo: Jørgen Carling for MIGNEX.

Boa Vista is one of the nine inhabited islands of Cabo Verde, administered as a single municipality.

Throughout the 20th century, the population remained stable at between 3,000 and 4,000 people. The economy was based on livestock herding and fishing, as well as migrant remittances. In 2007, however, the island’s airfield was converted to an international airport under a strategy to increase tourism. In the following five years, the annual number of tourists swelled from 15,000 to over 200,000 visitors.

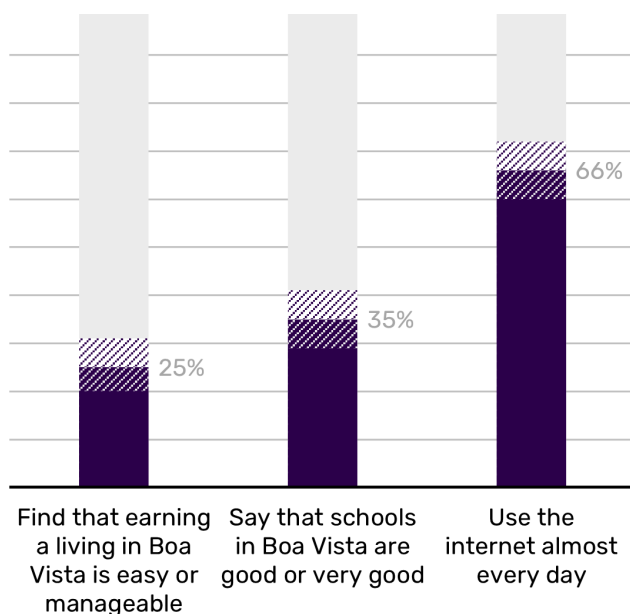
This tourism boom has been accompanied by large-scale labour in-migration from other Cabo Verdean islands and mainland West Africa. By 2010, the island’s population had more than doubled from a decade earlier. The population continued to grow until the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the collapse of tourism in 2020. By the 2021 Census, there were about 13,000 residents on the island.

Due to tourism – especially hotels – jobs have been readily available that provide a take-home salary of twice the minimum wage. Yet the cost of living is high and workers are on precarious and short-term seasonal contracts. Among surveyed young adults, 75% consider it difficult to earn a living and feed a family, and 85% say it is difficult to find a good job.

This case study brief is based on fieldwork and survey data. The MIGNEX team also conducted research in São Nicolau and carried out a review of migration-relevant policies in Cabo Verde.<sup>1</sup>

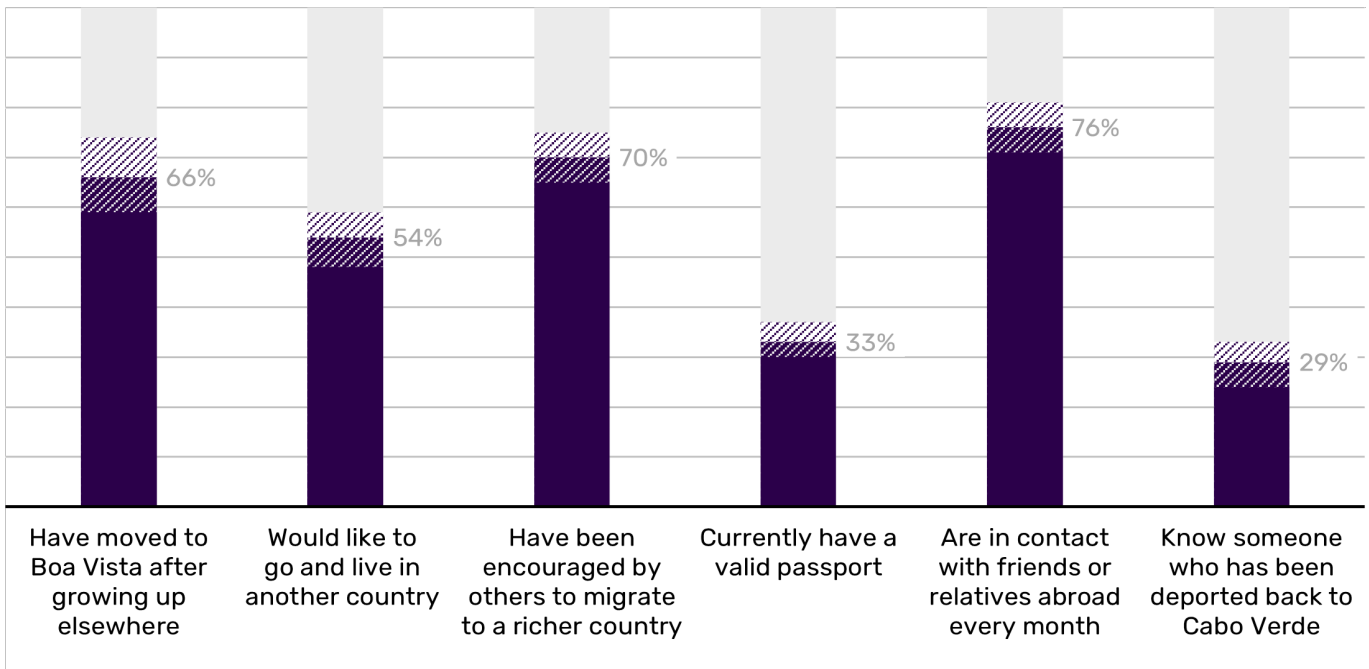
**Migration from Boa Vista**

Boa Vista has a long history of international out-migration. Outflows resemble those of other islands in the north of Cabo Verde: from the 1960s onwards, people left for work in a range of European countries. In Boa Vista, however, much larger numbers of women



**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.

emigrated, employed primarily as domestic workers in Italy, France and Portugal.

This out-migration has been a significant source of development in Boa Vista. In the mid-1990s, almost a quarter of remittances sent to Boa Vista came from Italy, followed by France, Germany, the Netherlands and Switzerland.

Virtually all (99.6%) young adults surveyed have family members, relatives or friends abroad. Most commonly, they live in Portugal (87%), France (65%), the United States (40%) and Italy (34%). Given in-migration to Boa Vista from other islands, however, these transnational connections partly reflect emigration from other parts of Cabo Verde.

There is general awareness that emigration is difficult. For instance, more than a quarter (29%) of young adults know of someone who has been deported – or have themselves been deported. Still, international out-migration is perceived as a possibility. For some young people in Boa Vista, tourism has provided the connections that make migration feasible.

**Migration aspirations**

Despite the local opportunities that have attracted thousands of people to Boa Vista, migration aspirations are widespread. People are aware of the benefits that past migration has brought. Nearly all surveyed young adults

(92%) think their family would approve if they migrated to a richer country.

More than half (54%) of young adults in Boa Vista would prefer to leave Cabo Verde, while 36% say that this is something they have seriously considered during the past year. The same proportion of young adults have seriously considered *internal* migration. For many, this would mean returning to the island where they grew up. Some of the young people born on other islands made it clear that they were in Boa Vista out of necessity.

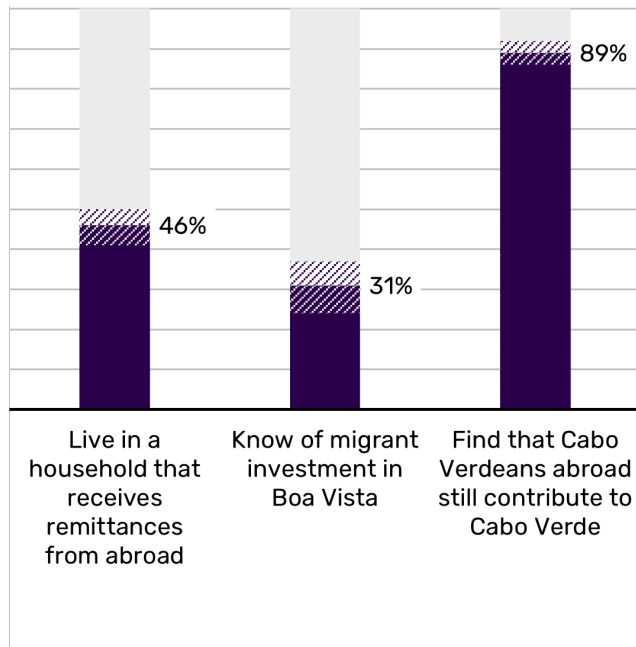
**In-migration**

Boa Vista has been shaped by high levels of internal and international in-migration over the past decades. Among surveyed young adults, one-third (34%) grew up on the island; close to two-thirds (60%) grew up elsewhere in Cabo Verde; and the remainder (6%) abroad.

*Our grandfathers lived abroad and didn't raise our mothers. Our mothers live abroad and didn't raise us. So, we were brought up with that idea that we will also go.*

Focus group participant





**Figure 3. Migration-development interactions**

Source: MIGNEX Survey. Hatched area: confidence interval.

Immigrants come primarily from Senegal, Guinea-Bissau and Nigeria, with smaller numbers coming from Guinea and Ghana. Citizens of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) can travel to Cabo Verde without a visa and stay for up to 90 days, provided they have the means to sustain themselves or have a local guarantor.

Such in-migration has dramatically changed the island's capital, Sal-Rei, in particular. The urban area has grown, and an informal settlement on the outskirts of the city – Bairro de Boa Esperança – has developed into a large and dense neighbourhood populated by inhabitants from other islands and the West African mainland. The neighbourhood is notorious throughout Cabo Verde for crime but valued by many of its residents.

Public services in areas such as health, education and sanitation have not kept pace

with population growth. Just one third (35%) of respondents say that schools on the island are good. And a few kilometres from the beaches, the island's landfill is surrounded by waste that covers an area four times the size of the landfill itself.

### Links between migration and development

Boa Vista was a typical emigration society a couple of decades ago, where many families were sustained by remittances alongside local income

Still today, almost half (46%) of young adult households with a migrant family member, relative or friend received remittances – but only 2% say it is the largest source of income. Some small-scale investors in tourism are from the diaspora. Nearly one-third (31%) of young adults know of migrant investment in Boa Vista. However, the tourism profits are concentrated around a handful of all-inclusive resorts owned by foreign companies.

In the wake of the tourism boom, it is now in-migration rather than out-migration that is most closely intertwined with the development of Boa Vista. This growth has brought many opportunities, but it has also strained resources and transformed the society. Many people who grew up on the island before mass tourism express nostalgia for the Boa Vista that once was.

### Notes

1. Fieldwork consisting of key informant interviews, focus group discussions and observations was carried out by Jørgen Carling in February–March 2020. A face-to-face survey of 500 randomly selected residents (aged 18–39 years) was conducted by PD Consult, MGF Research and ODI in November–December 2020.

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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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