

## Round Robin Reflection – Barriers in Cost of Living in Bocas del Toro

Mia, Holly, Sydney, and Anna C.

Bocas del Toro is a culturally rich and diverse area, representing numerous groups of people from varying backgrounds, ethnicities, nationalities, and more. In the last few decades, the economy has shifted from agricultural exports to relying on tourism and the service industry to support the island. Six local individuals were invited to discuss the barriers of living in Bocas del Toro due to the rise in tourism in the area. When asked if living in Bocas is expensive, all six participants said yes, especially food and clothing. Lillian Brown stated, “Bocas peoples are rich peoples,” discussing that the local people have become accustomed to the high prices and the need to travel to mainland to purchase necessities. Spalding (2020) expresses the concerns of other interviewed locals regarding the cost of existing goods and services at “foreigner-led inflated prices.”

The individuals we interviewed also expressed how economic challenges can impact their education and career paths. Hector, a 19-year-old man from Bocas, shared how he had to leave his studies at university in Panama City because of financial struggles at home. In Bocas, it is difficult for local community members to be successful in their entrepreneurship due to the laws and tax incentives that have been placed by the government to encourage foreign investors (Bourque, 2018). This, in conjunction with the neo-liberal model that the Panamanian government is pushing, suppresses the ability for future advancement for many local community members. Hector having to sacrifice his further education to help his father with their boat-taxi business in order to help support their family is just one example of the socioeconomic impact of

rapid tourism. This also perpetuates the neo-colonialism of the global north on the global south, keeping the rich foreigners in the positions of power while the local people have to make sacrifices in order to make ends meet.

For residents who are not heavily involved in the tourism industry, the effects of tourists are felt much heavier. An example are Amas de casa, or women who stay at home to tend to their families. The cost of living in Bocas has increased drastically since the beginning of the tourism boom in the 1990s, where expat websites say the cost of living now is about 2,000 USD a month (Wood, 2025). However, minimum wage in Panama remains \$340 per month (Bishop, 2024). This vast disparity can be felt in the prices of food and other goods on the island. Many participants discussed travelling to Almirante, Chiriqui, or even Panama City when buying goods such as clothes and items for the house. Lillian discussed her trips to Panama City, which involve a 10-hour bus ride during the night. This is deemed as more feasible than paying the “foreigner- led inflated prices.”

The transformation of Bocas del Toro into a tourism destination has profoundly affected the archipelago’s indigenous communities. Since the early 2000s, this region has experienced an influx of “residential tourism”, referring to the process of retirees, commonly from the Global North who immigrate often living in condominiums, gated communities, and large estates. This development led to a “rush to grab as much land as possible” by transnational real estate companies and private realtors (Thampy, 2014). This land conflict has caused a multitude of economic, social, and cultural challenges for the indigenous Ngöbe, Afro-Caribbeans, and mestizo communities. Residential tourism has not only reshaped the local economy but also deepened the socio-economic challenges faced by indigenous communities. Venessa Milton, a

38-year-old member of the Ngöbe tribe, stated that while indigenous people may have enough money to buy food, they often cannot afford education or other necessities. She emphasizes that the lack of educational opportunities significantly effecting their prospects for future employment and overall economic advancement.

From the brief interviews conducted with Bocas del Toro locals, there are barriers in cost of living in Bocas. Foreign-led prices from tourism cause harm to the local peoples by making the cost of living too high to be sustainable. Not being able to afford food, clothing, education, housing, and healthcare is detrimental to Bocas populations, especially indigenous communities.

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## References

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