

São Tomé and Príncipe

Country Overview

Politics

São Tomé and Príncipe is the second smallest and second-least populous nation in Africa. It is a semi-presidential republic located in the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa. The island nation gained independence from Portugal in 1975 and has experienced five non-violent coup attempts since 1995, the latest in 2022.¹ The current prime minister, Patrice Trovoada, had his government brought down by a no-confidence vote in 2012 and a lost election in 2018, but was subsequently reinstated by legislative elections in 2014 and 2022. President Carlos Manuel Vila Nova (who shares a party affiliation with Prime Minister Trovoada) was elected in September 2021, though the opposition initially disputed the election's results.

São Tomé and Príncipe has a mixed legal system that is based on the Portuguese model and also recognizes civil and customary law. The legislative branch has a single body, the National Assembly, which is made up of 55 members directly elected to four-year terms.² The supreme court is comprised of five justices who are appointed by the National Assembly.

Over half the country is Roman Catholic, and the rest of the population is mostly protestant.

Economy

The World Bank classifies São Tomé and Príncipe as a lower-middle income country with a “fragile” economy that is “highly vulnerable” to external shocks. GDP per capita was USD 2,360.5 in 2021, having increased every year since 2015, with the exception of 2020 (discrepancies emerge here as to whether GDP per capita increased or declined).³ GDP has also grown during this span, but high inflation caused by international commodity shocks has slowed this growth rate. Agriculture has historically been the primary sector of the island nation's economy, and exports of cocoa, coffee and palm oil have been increasing in recent years.



With limited revenue sources, foreign investment comprises over 90 percent of São Tomé and Príncipe’s public investment budget.⁴ São Tomé and Príncipe has started to invest in agricultural products beyond exports of raw materials.⁵ Despite agricultural goods being São Tomé and Príncipe’s primary source of commodity exports, nearly three-quarters of the country’s registered workforce works in the services industry.⁶ Around 90 percent of São Toméan work in the country’s informal sector, which includes jobs like fishing, agriculture, some retail, manufacturing, and services such as beauty salons and taxis.⁷ Oil exploration began in 2012, and São Tomé and Príncipe opened its waters to foreign drilling in 2021.⁸

Social/Human Development

São Tomé and Príncipe is a small country of 220,372 people.⁹ The UN has given São Tomé and Príncipe a Human Development Index (HDI) score of 0.618, placing it in the medium human development category and ranking it 138th out of 191 countries. The UN also reports that 11.7 percent of São Toméans live in multidimensional poverty.¹⁰ The country’s primary language is Portuguese, with 98 percent of residents reporting on the 2012 census that they spoke the language, though 36.2 percent also spoke Forro (or Sãotomense).¹¹ The island’s primary ethnic groups today are the descendants of European settlers, Mestico and Angolares (the descendants of Angolan slaves), and Servicais (contract laborers from Africa and India).¹² The small island nation is also incredibly youthful, with over 60 percent of the population younger than 25.¹³ The majority of São Toméans are Catholic and the remaining portion of the population are a mix of Christian denominations and non-religious persons.

U.S. Department of State TIP Report Summary

São Tomé and Príncipe was not included in the 2022 Trafficking in Persons (TIP) Report. There were no confirmed reports in the past year that the country was a source, destination, or transit country for victims of human trafficking.¹⁴

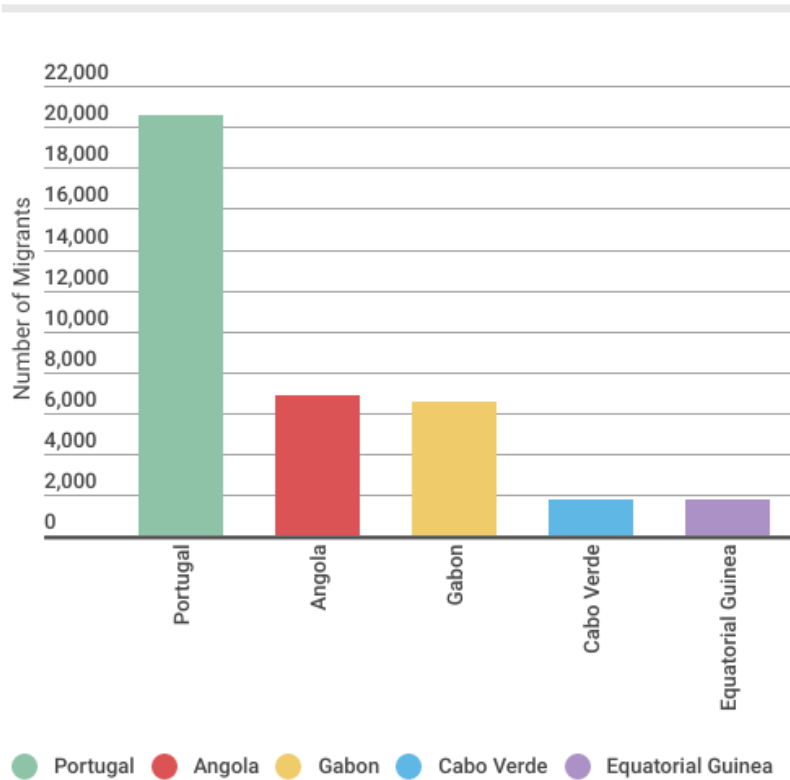
Migrant and Other Vulnerable Populations

São Tomé and Príncipe has a high rate of out migration, with a current net migration rate of - 6.84 migrants/1,000 population.¹⁵ Migrants composed just over one percent of São Tomé and Príncipe’s population in 2015.¹⁶

The countries with the most migrants from São Tomé and Príncipe in 2020 were Portugal, Angola, Gabon, Cabo Verde, and Equatorial Guinea.¹⁷



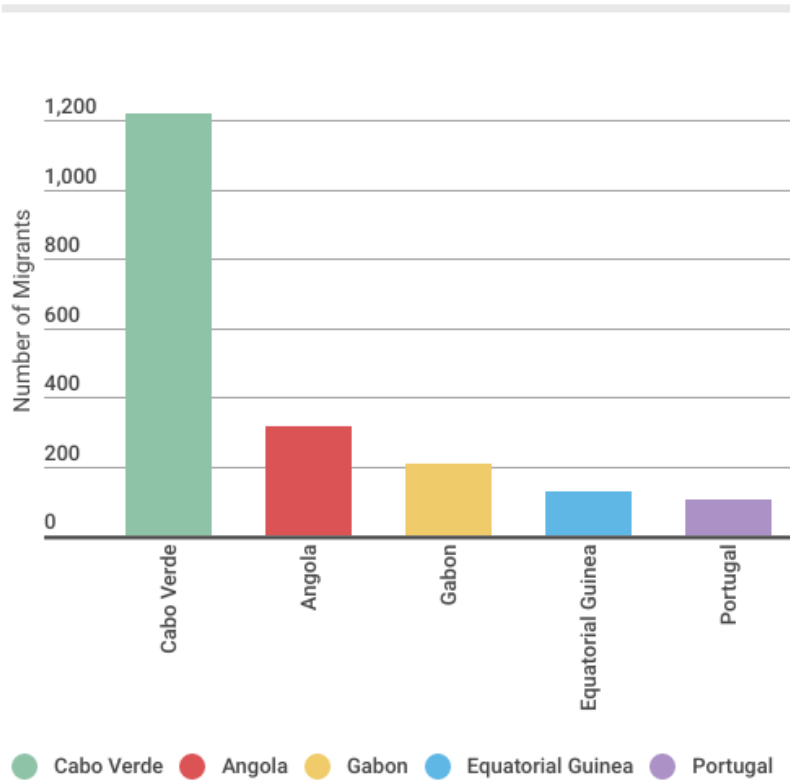
Migrants from São Tomé and Príncipe (2020)



The top countries of origin for migrants to São Tomé and Príncipe in 2020 were Cabo Verde, Angola, Gabon, Equatorial Guinea, and Portugal. There were no significant populations of refugees in the last reporting year.



Migrants to São Tomé and Príncipe (2020)

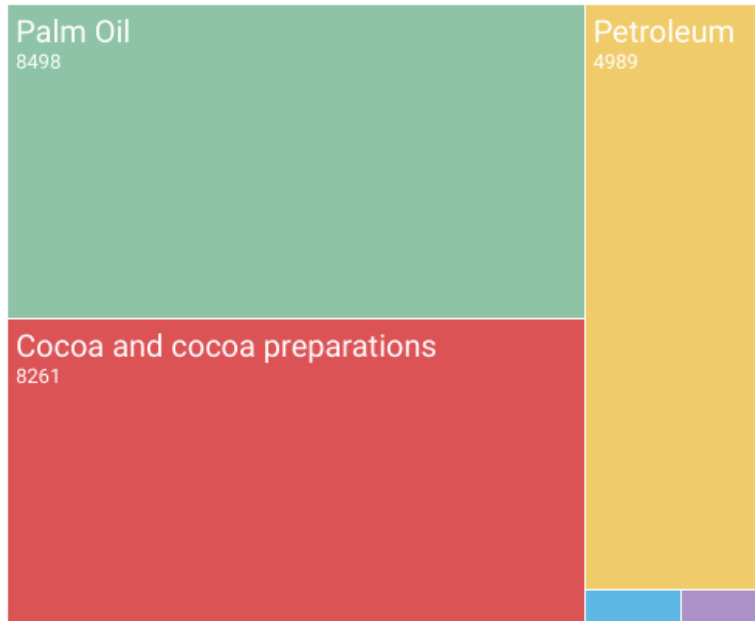


Exports and Trade

São Tomé and Príncipe's remoteness and isolation from other countries increase import and export costs. Due to higher transportation costs when shipping goods to and from the island, São Toméan imports are more expensive, and exports are less competitive on the global market. São Tomé and Príncipe's primary export commodities in 2022 were palm oil, cocoa products, petroleum, crushed pepper, and motorcycle parts.¹⁸



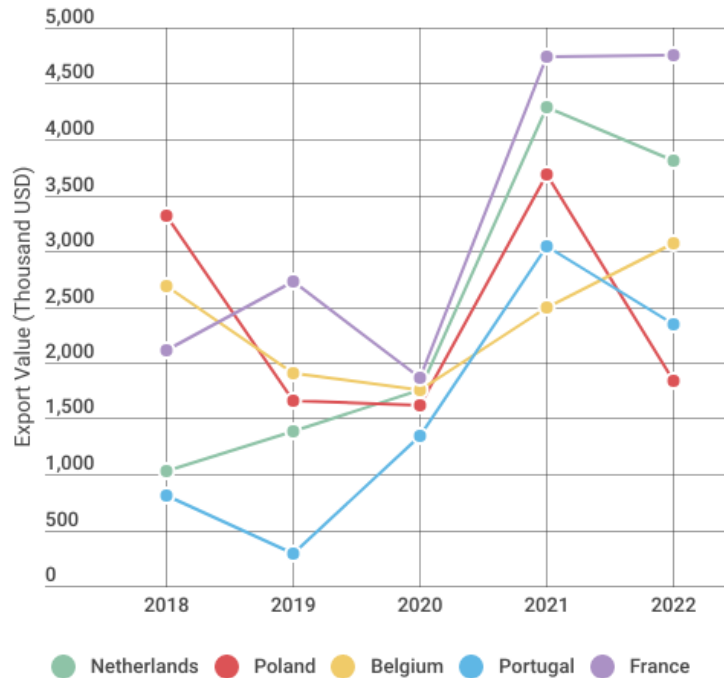
São Tomé and Príncipe Commodity Exports 2022
(Thousand USD)



In 2022, São Tomé and Príncipe’s principal export partners were France, Belgium, Portugal, Poland, and the Netherlands.



São Tomé and Príncipe Export Partners (2022)



Trafficking in Persons Risk Factors Analysis

Legal/Policy Risk Factors

Level of Legal Protection for Civil Liberties and Workers’ Rights

Freedom of Association

The law in São Toméan and Príncipe protects workers’ rights to form and join unions, bargain collectively (though there are no regulations governing this right), and conduct strikes.¹⁹ In practice, however, the government places many restrictions around workers’ right to strike, including requiring a majority of workers to agree to strike beforehand and having no restrictions on the hiring of replacement workers. Workers in some public sector jobs, such as the military and police, do not have the right to bargain collectively. The law does not prohibit anti-union discrimination by employers or retaliation against strikers. The government generally enforces laws guaranteeing the right of workers to partake in collective actions, but the government remains the country’s largest formal-sector employer.²⁰ Because of the government’s central role in strike arbitration and the economy as a whole, striking and collective bargaining are rare.²¹



Working Conditions

The minimum wage in São Tomé and Príncipe varies by sector, though the wage is above the poverty line in all sectors.²² The minimum wage in the public sector is STN 2,500 (USD 110) a month.²³ The legal workweek is 40 hours with two mandatory days off per week, but working two jobs is a common practice. Overtime pay is compulsory for those working in excess of 40 hours.²⁴ Workers have the right to remove themselves from potentially dangerous working conditions. In both the fishing and construction industries, workers were under-protected against workplace hazards and accidents were rarely reported.²⁵ The government has not been able to effectively enforce labor laws in the country, as there are only six labor inspectors currently employed.²⁶ There are no labor laws governing the sprawling informal sector in the country, and workers in the palm oil and cocoa farming sectors are particularly vulnerable to abuse.²⁷ However, informal sector workers have formed unions and can receive some government benefits.

Discrimination

Labor law in São Tomé and Príncipe prohibits discrimination based on race, sex, religious belief, political affiliation, social origin, and/or philosophical conviction. However, these laws are not generally enforced in practice and cases of discrimination are rarely investigated or penalized.²⁸ The constitution and general law do not explicitly prohibit employment discrimination on the basis of color, age, disability, language, sexual orientation, gender identity, and/or HIV-positive status.²⁹ Women often experience societal discrimination, which can hamper their access to education and employment opportunities.³⁰ The law does not differentiate between migrant workers and citizens in terms of anti-discrimination laws.³¹

Forced Labor

The law prohibits forced labor of every kind (including child labor). The country does not sufficiently enforce forced labor statutes, particularly in the informal sector. The U.S. Department of State reports that there were no reported cases of forced labor on the small island nation in the year 2022.³²

Child Labor

The minimum age for non-hazardous work in São Tomé and Príncipe is 14, and the minimum age for work in hazardous occupations is 18. Employers in the formal sectors of the economy were reported to have generally respected laws governing child labor, but in the informal sector children labor in domestic work and have been documented working as street vendors in larger urban areas.³³ Children have been found working in hazardous agricultural jobs. There are also reports of child sexual exploitation.³⁴ Data on the informal sector, which composes the majority of São Tomé and Príncipe's workforce, are poor. In 2021, São Tomé and Príncipe invested an additional USD 8 million into combatting child labor.³⁵

Civil Society Organizations



There were only a handful of civil society organizations operating in São Tomé and Príncipe over the course of last year as they have trouble funding their operations. Those that did operate were not impeded by the government and authorities acknowledged and accepted many of their recommendations.³⁶

Use of Special Economic Zones (SEZs)

São Tomé and Príncipe guarantees equal treatment for all investment in national territory. However, in 2020, the government finalized the creation of several free trade zones throughout the country, in which businesses can receive exclusive access to trade and tariff incentives.³⁷

Ratification of ILO Conventions Related to Human Trafficking or Rights of Workers and Migrants

Conventions	Status
ILO 29 Forced Labor	In force
ILO 87 Freedom of Association and Protection of the Right to Organize	In force
ILO 98 Right to Organize and Collective Bargaining	In force
ILO 100 Equal Remuneration	In force
ILO 105 Abolition of Forced Labor	In force
ILO 111 Discrimination	In force
ILO 138 Minimum Age	In force
ILO 181 Private Employment Agencies	Not ratified
ILO 182 Worst Forms of Child Labor	In force
ILO 97 Migration for Employment	Not ratified

Political Risk Factors

Level of Corruption

The Transparency International Corruption Perception Index scores São Tomé and Príncipe as a 45 out of 100, where 0 signals “highly corrupt” and 100 signals “very clean.” São Tomé and Príncipe ranks 65 out of 180 countries on that index.³⁸ The government has made tackling corruption one of its top priorities and has passed several anti-corruption measures over the past decade.³⁹ Despite this, over half the country believed that corruption had increased over the past 12 months. Just over 1 in 6 São Toméan reported paying a bribe in the past year.⁴⁰

Level of Crime and Violence

The U.S. Department of State reports that the crime level in São Tomé and Príncipe is “low.”⁴¹ However, the U.S. Department of State warned of several extrajudicial killings and a lack of investigation into assault and other crimes⁴²



Political Instability or Conflict

São Tomé and Príncipe scores a 72.1 in the 2016 Fragile States Index (FSI), placing it firmly in the “alert” category and ranking the country 97th out of 178 countries. Multiple military coups, two of which succeeded, add a sense of instability to the otherwise functioning multiparty democracy. The FSI scale goes from 0 (indicating a “sustainable” political system) to 120 (indicating a political system on “high alert”).⁴³

Socio-Economic Factors

Level of National Economic Development

The UN gave São Tomé and Príncipe a Human Development Index (HDI) score of 0.618 in 2021, placing it into the medium human development category and ranking it 138th out of 191 countries. When adjusted for inequality, São Tomé and Príncipe’s HDI value falls to 0.503.⁴⁴ The small island nation is home to one of the smallest economies in all of Africa due to its size. Agriculture and tourism drive the economy.⁴⁵ In recent years exports of coffee, cocoa, and palm oil have increased. The country is also heavily reliant on imports, and its geographical remoteness, which drives up import costs, raises food prices and increases vulnerability to supply shocks. Inflation was nearly 15 percent in 2022.⁴⁶ São Tomé and Príncipe recorded a trade deficit of USD 133 million in 2021, though total exports have been increasing.⁴⁷

Level and Extent of Poverty

São Tomé and Príncipe scored 0.217 on the United Nations’ 2019 Multidimensional Poverty Index (MPI), and according to the same organization 2.1 percent of São Toméans are living in severe multidimensional poverty. An additional 24 percent of the population live below the income poverty line but do not dip below the UN multidimensional poverty threshold.⁴⁸ Two-thirds of the population lives on less than USD 3.20 a day.⁴⁹ Data on poverty change over time are incomplete, but poverty seems to have decreased over the past two decades.⁵⁰ Despite the downward trend in poverty rates, São Tomé and Príncipe lacks the basic infrastructure needed to lift many of its citizens out of poverty. A poor tax base hinders the expansion of infrastructure networks.⁵¹

Degree of Gender Inequality



The law in São Tomé and Príncipe provides for equal rights regardless of gender, but in practice women often face discrimination that limits access to education and work.⁵² Less than a quarter of parliamentary seats are held by women. A large gender pay gap persists in São Tomé and Príncipe’s formal sector.⁵³

Environmental Factors

Despite efforts by São Tomé and Príncipe to fight pollution domestically, the country’s vulnerability to climate change poses significant challenges. The government has implemented infrastructure and relocation programs to counter mudslides and coastal flooding.⁵⁴ Widespread deforestation and illegal logging hamper the government’s efforts to protect the environment.⁵⁵ As an island nation, São Tomé and Príncipe faces a constant threat from sea level rise. Two of São Tomé and Príncipe’s largest sectors, agriculture and fishing, are highly vulnerable to climate change.⁵⁶ Fishing, which employs 20 percent of São Toméan, is threatened by storms and coastline erosion, which damage the habitat of many fish. Drought, soil erosion, and flooding threaten agriculture. In December 2022, São Tomé and Príncipe lost seven percent of its GDP to heavy rainfall.⁵⁷

Documented Trafficking Risk in Key Supply Chains

Cocoa

Cocoa Overview

Cocoa production has expanded since the early 1990s, when the price of the commodity took a severe downturn on the international market. Now, with the introduction of a processing plant on the islands and a drastic increase in production, the crop has become the most important facet of São Tomé and Príncipe’s export economy.⁵⁸ Unlike many other cocoa producing countries, cocoa is often grown on larger-scale plantations as a remnant of colonial agricultural practices.⁵⁹ The government has begun to invest in vertical integration techniques, seeking to increase the production of chocolate from bean to bar rather than just exporting raw cocoa.⁶⁰

Documented TIP Risks in Cocoa

There is limited evidence that child labor and trafficking of children for the purposes of forced labor occur in agriculture more broadly in São Tomé and Príncipe, although cocoa is not noted specifically.⁶¹

Fishing

Fishing Overview



São Tomé and Príncipe has an Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of 160,000 square kilometers of water, or approximately 160 times the country's landmass, with a catch capacity of 29,000 tons of fish a year.⁶² Fish catches have increased over the past 20 years, bringing an income of USD 30 million per year to the islands as of 2017.⁶³ Around 20 percent of São Tomé and Príncipe's population works in fishing. Fishing is one of the most dangerous sectors of São Tomé and Príncipe's economy, and workplace accidents are common but underreported.⁶⁴

Documented TIP Risks in Fishing

The U.S. Department of Labor found that child labor was common in the fishing industry, and that children were sometimes subjected to hazardous conditions.⁶⁵ There are no documented cases of human trafficking in São Tomé and Príncipe. However, illegal fishing remains a large problem in São Tomé and Príncipe's waters.⁶⁶ Illegal fishing often employs trafficked persons in other countries and is difficult to track due to the vessels' constant movement and the industry's illicit nature.⁶⁷



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- ⁴ U.S. Department of State. 2022 Investment Climate Statements: Sao Tome and Principe. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-investment-climate-statements/sao-tome-and-principe/>
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- ¹³ Central Intelligence Agency. *The World Factbook: São Tomé and Príncipe*. <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/sao-tome-and-principe/>
- ¹⁴ U.S. Department of State. Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor. *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2022: São Tomé and Príncipe*. <https://www.state.gov/reports/2022-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/sao-tome-and-principe/>
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- ¹⁶ World Bank. World Bank Development Indicators: Sao Tome and Principe. 2022. <https://data.worldbank.org/country/sao-tome-and-principe>
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- ¹⁸ Trade Map: São Tomé and Príncipe. 2022. <https://www.trademap.org/Index.aspx>
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- ²³ WageIndicator.org Minimum Wage – Sao Tome and Principe. <https://wageindicator.org/salary/minimum-wage/sao-tome-and-principe>



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