

Study Brief

International Migration for Work: migrants contrasting perspectives



Background Nearly 4% of the Indonesian workforce are international migrant workers. Most go to Malaysia or Saudi Arabia and the majority are women. Estimates vary but they are regarded as contributing more than US \$ 8 billion to the Indonesian economy through remittances each year.

Reality Check Approach

This is a qualitative approach to research which has been used in several countries since 2007. This study was conducted in April-May 2015 and involved the study team members living in the homes of 18 migrant workers or ex migrant workers and using this opportunity to have many informal conversations and interactions with all the members of the household, their neighbours and others. The study involved interactions with over 1340 people. The research approach emphasis is on informality in people's own space and with least disruption to their everyday lives. This 'hanging out' without note-taking and formal structure provides the best possible conditions for trust building and openness.

RCA
Reality Check Approach

Contrasting perspectives

West Kalimantan study area

- Waning interest in migrating for work. Less than 1 in 20 households now have migrant workers.
- Long tradition of working in Malaysia (mostly men plantation workers but increasingly women in retail and hospitality sectors and men in shipping and construction).
- Local work opportunities more readily available than the past.

'When I worked in Malaysia, I always had cash in my pocket, but not here in Indonesia',

Man, West Kalimantan

Why we want to migrate for work?

Ease cash flow and save towards modest house improvements.

Because, in Malaysia, *'jobs are plentiful'* unskilled work pays better and has better conditions (less work hours, opportunity for long term contracts, more regular pay)

Small number of young unskilled men disaffected through lack of networks and ability to get work in Indonesia seek both adventure and waged work.

Hauling timber in W. Kalimantan is very strenuous, poorly paid and not a good alternative to migrant work



Good experiences

The main way to migrate for work is considered *'easy'* and involves crossing the border to Malaysia with the Pas Lintas Batas (Border Crossing Pass). Costs are minimal as no agents are used, only information and contacts through family and ethnicity based networks.

The best experiences were in Singapore, where wages and conditions are good and people get to keep their passports.

PLB known as "red passport" issued to those living near borders in West Kalimantan



Why fewer of us migrate for work now?

Local earning opportunities have opened up, especially in the district town and cross border trade, so fewer people want to migrate for work. Young people have aspirations for higher education and securing good jobs especially in the civil service (exposure to role models).

People more concerned about the risks, especially going without adequate documentation.

'University is the answer to not to going to Malaysia',

Woman, West Kalimantan Peri Urban

Bad experiences

More bad experiences of international migration were shared in W. Kalimantan than in E. Lombok and these were generally related to the lack of documentation. Without work permits, migrant workers face fear of arrest, police harassment, cheating employers and poor living conditions without recourse. Many parents shared that they now discourage their children from migrating to Malaysia in this way.

Savings from wages earned abroad are small and insufficient to invest in other income earning ventures.

Activities and experiences



East Lombok study area

- Desire to migrate for work as high now as it has ever been. Almost every household has migrant work experience either currently or the recent past.
- Long and trusted relationship with Saudi Arabian employers since E. Lombok was first targeted for workers in the 80s. (mostly women domestic workers).
- People say they are not interested in local work opportunities, although available.

'This is what people do here... this is how we earn. Our rice fields are away in Malaysia and Saudi'.

Woman, rural E. Lombok



"The beautiful house"; an example of house construction from money raised by working in Saudi Arabia. We were told it cost IDR 250 million

Why we want to migrate for work?

'To build the beautiful house' is the overriding ambition and represents an important status symbol.

Wages abroad are many times higher than work available in their locality, including 4 time higher civil service work which requires their investment in higher education.

Different lifestyle and opportunities to go on Haji or Umroh.

Why a few don't want to migrate for work?

Motivation for overseas work remains very high but mostly for a short period of work (2-5 yrs) often before marrying and starting a family.

Uncertainty regarding the new moratorium (2015) but finding ways round this.

Good experiences

Most of the migrants for work from E. Lombok had had very good experiences and said they were *'very happy'*. Some said their working life was *'easy'*, especially if working with other staff in a family home. Their employers, they said, looked after them with *nice facilities*, food, phone credit, medical help and gifts including paid trips for Haji. Families regard Saudi as a safe destination because *'women have to be accompanied when they go out of the house'*.

The best migrant work experiences for men were as drivers, painters in Saudi and factory work in Japan and Korea. Where new skills were learned people felt this was the best kind of migrant experience.

The majority are facilitated through *'PT Agents'*, whom they know well and trust.



The importance of Haji demonstrated by re-turnees posting banners on their houses

Bad experiences

Women mostly indicated that they think that bad experiences in the destination countries have been exaggerated and they are actually rare. Women told us that they know how to handle any advances made by male employers and worry more about problems with the employers' wives (jealousy and bad temper).

There is a high rate of divorce, affairs and polygamy among migrant workers and people shared that some had been divorced many times.

In both locations, people said migration for work was their own choice and was not forced. They also said they were well aware of the risks and made careful decisions based on information from their networks of contacts and past migrants. Widows and divorced women made their decisions to go as good opportunities to earn for their children. Some unskilled young men felt this was their only opportunity.

Migrant workers also talked about fellow workers who 'play the system'. Women sometimes purposely 'flirt' with their bosses in order to earn favours, gifts and additional money. They may use this against the employer if the relationship sours. Some women deliberately run away from their employers to avail work at higher salaries (without the agent cut) or to be arrested so that they can be repatriated for free. Men migrant workers told how colleagues had deliberately staged work accidents to force insurance pay-outs from factories in Korea and Japan.

What's the problem with work in Indonesia?

In both locations, people told us that without networks and paying bribes it is difficult to secure full time work in their locality. Often the only unskilled work available is day waged and irregular.

Ex-migrants in both locations said they did not want to invest in their own businesses because of the competition, small profits and demands made on them to provide goods and services on credit to family and neighbours. Some shared bitter experience of this.

Agricultural investment is considered risky, costly and increasingly unpredictable. Students categorically say they do not want to be farmers and family investment in education is not intended for this end.

There was no evidence to suggest that the motivation to work abroad included a desire for re-integration into work on their return. In E. Lombok, the migrant work mantle is passed from generation to generation and in W. Kalimantan people work abroad until they feel they want to stop.

Policy implications

As migration for work has been embedded for several generations and is a very important livelihood option, continuation should be ensured, especially as wage and work conditions parity in Indonesia cannot be easily achieved. Moratoria are unhelpful and rather people would prefer opening up of more opportunities and destinations.

The services provided by migrant work agents are difficult for clients to assess, since the relationship is built on trust and lump sum payments. More accountability needs to be demanded by regulatory bodies rather devolving this to the migrant worker clients. Similarly, instead of penalising migrant workers for poor documentation, more emphasis needs to be given to penalising rogue employers.

People are not looking for re-integration into work following return from migration.

Some special groups such as young disaffected unskilled men and divorced and widowed women may have less choice than others about seeking work abroad and special provisions for providing local work opportunities might be considered.

“Policy needs to take into account the very different contexts for migration for work in order for it to support good migration and limit risky migration practices”.

For full report download on www.reality-check-approach.com

For further information, please contact RCA+ project: info.rca@thepalladiumgroup.com