

**CIRCULAR MIGRATION OF INDONESIAN LOW-  
SKILLED LABOUR MIGRANTS TO PENINSULAR  
MALAYSIA: PATTERNS, CAUSES AND  
CONSEQUENCES**

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## ABSTRACT

The flow of international low-skilled labour migrants to Malaysia, especially from Indonesia, is one of the world's most important migration corridors. With the increase in flow of undocumented migration, public resistance towards migrant workers, combined with the ongoing lack of pathways for gaining permanency and citizenship and the historical relationships and the geographical proximity of the two countries, Malaysia is facing added challenges in managing its migrant workers from Indonesia. Although Malaysia has become structurally dependent on low-skilled migrant workers it has not been able to develop policies that deliver 'win-win-win' outcomes to the host country, home country and to the migrants.

In the last decade, migration theorists and policy makers have proposed circular migration as a preferred migration pattern between a developing nation with a labour surplus and a more developed country with labour shortages. While Indonesians may have adopted a long-standing de-facto pattern of circularity between Indonesia and Malaysia, at times actively facilitated by employers, there are no national policies or bilateral agreements that facilitate this circular migration. In this study, circular migration is compared with permanent migration which is, up until now, the most researched form of migration. This migrant-centred study examines the patterns, causes and consequences of both circular and permanent migration as practiced by Indonesian labour migrants in two selected states in Peninsular Malaysia to identify culturally sensitive migration strategies that fulfil the needs of the migrants' home nation, the host nation and the needs of the migrants themselves.

The study reports on a field survey of 858 low-skilled Indonesian migrant workers who have arrived in Malaysia since 1980 and are employed in six labour sectors (agriculture, construction, domestic work, manufacturing, plantation and services). Respondents are classified as circular migrants, permanent migrants and undecided migrants on the basis of their mobility intentions. They are further differentiated as to whether they are documented, undocumented or permanent residents. In total there are then nine categories of respondents.

It is found that the circular migrants are more likely to be young single males while permanent migrants are more likely to be females with a working spouse in the host country. While circular migrants have stronger social linkages with their home country, permanent migrants have stronger linkages with the host country. However, circular migrants are more likely to have poorer living and working conditions. Their human capital is not seen as being transferable back to Indonesia. Circular migrants remitted more than permanent migrants and used their remittances for more than just consumption-related activities. While all migrants maintained some form of transnational mobility, permanent residents of all types faced fewer constraints than the documented and undocumented circular migrants in visiting home regularly.

It is possible that circular migration may work in this situation if Malaysia provides repeat labour market access through long-term multi-entry visas which are specific to industries but not to employers, thus allowing migrants to transfer employers. Malaysia and Indonesia should co-operate in developing skills that migrants can apply upon their return and enabling migrants to maintain stronger ties with the home country through annual returns.

When migration policies are too restrictive they seem to encourage undocumented migration. Transnational mobility need not challenge the sovereignty of nation-states. Rather, it can encourage co-operation and co-development. Migration policies need to be assessed for their management of human welfare. It is time now for migration theorists to move from a focus on economics and mobility to concern for human development.

## DECLARATION

I, Balambigai Balakrishnan certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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## LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ASEAN	Association of Southeast Asian Nations
ADB	Asian Development Bank
AFAS	Framework Agreement on Services
ACMW	Declaration on the Protection and Promotion of the Rights of Migrant Workers
BPS	Badan Pusat Statistik (Department of Statistics Indonesia)
BNP2TKI	National Agency for the Placement and Protection of Overseas Labour
CHAMPSEA	Child Health and Migrant Parents in Southeast Asia
DLFPM	Department of Labour Force Peninsular Malaysia
DOIM	Department of Immigration Malaysia
DOSM	Department of Statistics Malaysia
EU	European Union
FOMEMA	Foreign Workers Medical Examination Monitoring Agency
FMM	Federation of Malaysian Manufacturers
EPU	Economy Planning Unit
GCIM	Global Commission of International Migration
GDP	Gross Domestic Product Per Capita
GFMD	Global Forum on Migration and Development
NAKERTRANS	<i>Kementerian Tenaga Kerja Dan Transmigrasi Republik Indonesia</i> (Ministry of Labour Force and Transmigration Indonesia)
IFLS	Indonesia Family Life Survey
IMW	Indonesian Migrant Worker
IO	Immigration Ordinance
ILO	International Labour Organisation
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IOM	International Organization for Migration

MDG	Millennium Development Goals
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MOH	Ministry of Health
MPOA	Malaysian Palm Oil Association
MTUC	Malaysian Trade Union Congress
NDP	National Development Programme
NELM	New Economics of Labour Migration
NEP	National Economy Policy
NRD	National Registration Department
NUPW	National Union for Plantation Workers
PATI	<i>Pendatang Asing Tanpa Izin</i> (Foreign Visitors without Permission)
PASW/SPSS	Predictive Analysis Software
PELITA	<i>Perancangan Lima Tahun</i> (Five Year Development Plan)
POEA	Philippine Overseas Employment Agency
RELA	<i>Ikatan Relawan Rakyat Malaysia</i> or the People's Volunteer Corps
SAWP	Seasonal Agricultural Worker Programme
SUHAKAM	Human Rights Commission of Malaysia
UN	United Nations
UNHCR	United Nations Human Rights Convention
USA	The United States of America
VOA	Visa on Arrival
VPTE	Visit Pass for Temporary Employment