

The Future of Malaysia’s Dependency on Indonesian Foreign Labors: Findings from Key Informants’ Interview

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Abstract

International migration has become major contemporary change in this era, especially in both developed and developing countries, including Malaysia and Indonesia. Malaysia’s transformation in preparing the country to become industrial based economy has shaped the country as one of the favorite countries in Southeast Asia region for foreign labors migration. The highest migration for job seeking came from neighboring country especially Indonesia. The migration of Indonesians not only drive by the job opportunities but supported by the history of community mobility, geographical proximity, existence of social networks and the similarities of languages, religions and cultures. The arrival of Indonesian labors to Malaysia is a constant necessity for both countries. This paper aims to predict Malaysia’s dependency on Indonesia’s foreign labors in the future. This paper employs qualitative approach in gathering data using five key informants from various authorities involve in the recruitment and management process of foreign labors in Malaysia. It is found that geographical location and job offers are among the pulling factors for the Indonesian foreign labors to choose Malaysia as working destination. Employers in Malaysia too prefer Indonesian foreign labors to reduce their operational cost. The weakness of Malaysian policies and law also does not help in reducing the number of Indonesian foreign labors. Thus, it can be concluded that it is a tough effort to make Malaysia reduce its dependency on Indonesian foreign labors in near future.

Keywords: Indonesian foreign labors, migration, policy

INTRODUCTION

International migration has become a major contemporary change in this era to both developed and developing countries. In Malaysia and Indonesia context, the migration of Indonesians’ labors to Malaysia is strongly driven by employment. In line with the views of Massey et al. (1993) on their Neoclassical Theory of Economics, the wage differences between countries cause individuals to migrate from lower-paid areas to higher-paid areas. Migration to other districts, states, or countries is one of the efforts to maximize earnings. Consequently, individual resides in lower wages or less job opportunities area are tend to get attracted and move to active demand and supply labors markets (O’reilly, 2015).

Malaysia’s transformation in preparing the country to become industrial based economy has shaped the country as one of the favorite countries in Southeast Asia region for foreign labors to seek employment. Economic development is a turning point for the influx of foreign labors in many countries. For example, in the 1960s until 1970s, the Netherlands hired thousands of foreign labors because of the reconstruction of the country as industrialization grew post World War 2 (Weijde, 2014). In Malaysia, the launching of economic policy in the early years after independence has prepared the country for a strong economic development such as New Economic Policy (NEP) (1971-1990). It then continued by National Development Policy (1991-2000), followed up by the National Vision Policy (2001-2010).

Implementing these policies has shaped our industrial sector, especially in manufacturing, trade, services and so on. Through these, many job opportunities have been created and causing domestic and international migration (Mahadi, 2014). International migration for job seeking came from neighboring country mainly Indonesia. The history of community mobility, geographical proximity, and existence of social networks and the similarities of languages, religions and cultures has been a strong motivator for the Indonesians to migrate for job's opportunities to Malaysia (Spaan & van Naerssen, 2018).

The arrival of Indonesian's labors to Malaysia is a constant necessity for both countries. In the mid-1970s, Malaysia needed labors to fill the needs of government land development projects after the implementation of NEP. Later, in the 1980s urbanization areas began to grow all over the country and needed a lot of labors in construction sector. As the economy of the people grows stronger, Indonesian foreign labors are needed in the domestic sector, such as domestic helpers, to meet the needs of Malaysian women that have gotten into formal employment sector (Wong, 2006; Saravanamuttu, 2013). The inflow of Indonesia's foreign labors to Malaysia has never stopped since then. According to statistics from Malaysian Immigration Department (2018), Indonesian foreign labors make up 40.1 percent from foreign labors altogether with second highest labors from Nepal with 21.8 percent. In fact, Malaysia is the biggest receiver of Indonesian foreign labors since this country paved the way for the entry of foreign labors.

However, the presence of Indonesian foreign labors in Malaysia raises concern for both countries. For Malaysia, as a receiving country, security issue is among the issue related to foreign labors. As for Indonesia, protection and welfare are issues that concern them the most. Most of the Indonesian foreign labors in Malaysia are often uneducated and unskilled, thus tends to get violated by their employee in term of their rights such as salary and leave day (Maryam Fauziyah, 2015). For instance, in 2009, the case of Siti Hajar that has been working as a maid was tortured and her salary was not paid for nearly three years has caught attention from both sides. In 2016, another Indonesian maid faced brutal torture from her employee leads to a note sent by the Indonesian Embassy to the Malaysian Ministry of Foreign Affairs to deliver a protest (Sa, 2019). The acts of mistreatment against Indonesian foreign labors in Malaysia affected bilateral relations between two countries. Jokowi government has imposed sanctions in sending Indonesian foreign labors to Malaysia in 2009 and in 2014 presidential election he again seen to be fighting the issue. It was announced through Indonesia's Minister of Employment that he hoped to stop sending domestic helpers overseas starting 2017 (Maksum, 2017).

Nonetheless, for home and host countries, the cessation of cooperation regarding foreign labors had a major impact especially on the economy. For Malaysia, the sectors that always filled by the Indonesian foreign labors such as plantation will be facing shortage of labors and affect the productions of the crops. Raghu (2014) reported that Malaysia will lose up five to ten percent export revenues from palm oil due to shortages of labors since less Indonesian labors filling the gap each year, while Indonesia will be facing reduction in remittances. As mentioned by Azizi (2018), remittances can lift budget constraints and increase household expenditure and create better opportunity for that family. Therefore, this paper aims to understand Malaysia's dependence on the presence of Indonesian foreign labors.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Migration of Indonesian foreign labors to Malaysia

Before prolonging the discussion on the trend of Indonesian foreign labors to Malaysia, this paper intends to explore early cooperation between Malaysia and Indonesia in this context. The exact time of migration of the Indonesian people to Malaya before the colonial era is unknown and difficult to determine since there are no official records of the details on their migration until the colonial era (Kunaseelan, 1996). According to Asgar (2012), the migration of Indonesian foreign labors to Malaysia dates back to the 19th century since the time of the Dutch East Indies around 1887 as laborers.

At that time, the Javanese people were the third largest foreign labors brought into Malaya after the Indian and Chinese as temporary and permanent labors (Mahadi, 2014). During Malaysia's independence year, there are more than two millions migrant from Indonesia. However, the number fluctuates due to the effects of world war and confrontation between Indonesia and Malaysia (Asgar, 2012; Maryam Fauziyah, 2015; Mahadi, 2014). As a result to the implementation of the NEP, Malaysia needs numerous labors in the plantation, construction and domestic sectors. Plantation sector is seen as the most demanding sector for Indonesian foreign labors as Malaysia prefers the Indonesian labors in this sector due to their culture and religion that are similar to the main ethnic groups in Malaysia. In addition, the Malay language factor and the consideration of poverty faced by the foreign labors in their own countries makes them less likely to escape from the farm (Kaur, 2014).

The never ending inflow of the Indonesian foreign labors to Malaysia is related to less jobs opportunities and economic instability in their country as their pushing factor. As mentioned by Bustami and Wekke (2016), high levels of unemployment and underemployment in Indonesia making them seek jobs opportunities in foreign country such as in Malaysia. This can be relate to Kassim (1997) which stated that the influx of nearly 1.9 million migrant labors in Malaysia after 1997 was linked to the economic crisis that plagued Southeast Asian countries in 1997 and had a high economic impact on Indonesia. This crisis then led to massive unemployment in Indonesia. Although Malaysia among the affected countries, however certain sectors especially involving 3D works (dirty, dangerous and difficult) still required large amount of labors.

Aware of the fact that both countries needed each other in sending and receiving foreign labors, efforts to managed and legalized labors migration made by Malaysia and Indonesia by signing bilateral Medan agreement of 1984. This agreement aimed to promote and regularized labors migration and counter illegal migration in order to keep peace for both countries (Spaan et al, 2018). Subsequently, in 2006, a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Indonesia's recruitment of domestic workers was signed. Although Malaysia-Indonesia relations were strained due to the maritime territorial disputes and cultural rights, another MoU was signed in 2011 regarding foreign workers' rights, particularly on payroll rates (Elias, 2013; Hassan, Omar & Abdullah, 2016). This indicates that both countries often prefer diplomacy approach to look after the welfare of Indonesian foreign labors in Malaysia.

Study on foreign labors dependency

Many studies have analyzed the dependency and the impact of foreign labors on the country in productivity and economic aspects. According to Palel, Ismail and Awang (2016), in long run, foreign labors bring positive impact on productivity growth and push the country towards achieving high-income nation by increase the total output. It cannot be denied that foreign labors help to improve the economy of a country as can be seen in Singapore's goal in their immigration policy which mainly to promote economic growth (Dodgson, 2018).

A study on foreign labors dependency among construction industry employees by Marhani, Adnan, Baharuddin, Esa and Hassan (2012) found that wages were the main factors that make them depends more on the foreign labors than the local. They added that the foreign labors are willing spend more hours working and always available even on the weekend, while the local labors hold higher education level and tend to quit working in construction field. In a study by Ismail and Yuliyusman (2014), they mentioned that although unskilled foreign labors in Malaysia contribute negatively to Malaysia's economic growth, the reliance on foreign labors is still cannot be avoided because of shortages of labors in certain sectors especially agriculture, construction and security. As Malaysian continue to stress on education levels, shortages of unskilled labors will attract foreign labors from neighboring countries especially Indonesia since differences in educational gap in their country is the pushing factor that will fill the unskilled vacancy in Malaysia (Del Carpio et al. 2015).

The employees will be more focus on the costing aspects, thus when the foreign wage decrease, firms will take advantage to cut production cost by hiring more foreign labors than the local. According to Jajri and Ismail (2010) this scenario can be reflected in heavy industry sector. They found that the influx

of foreign labors in this sector jeopardize job opportunity of the local. According to them, wage changes on foreign labors affect directly to the local in getting jobs as many employers do not obey wage policy that suggest equal pay to both local and foreign labors. Even if employers obey the wage policy set by the government in any country, there will still be shortage in certain industry especially in 3D sectors. According to a study by Ho (2016), the youngsters do not consider construction industry as their career priority due the wage level unequal to the risk taken working in the sector.

From financial aspect, even their wage rate is relatively low, they still able to transfer their wage back to their home town. As example, the Ukrainians labors in Poland earned a total of 1.8 billion euros per year, making Poland the main destination for them to work (Skoczynska-Prokopowicz, 2018). Migration of foreign labors to Malaysia either legally or illegally has a positive effect on their household economy. They earn around one million Rupiah per month working as a labor in Indonesia compared to five million Rupiah per month in Malaysia for the same job (Suyanto, Sugihartati, Sutinah & Hidayat, 2019). While Tan and Gibson (2010) have also shown that Indonesian female foreign labors in Malaysia are able to earn five times more income compared to in Indonesia. They also found that there was a difference in asset ownership between migrant and non-migrant households as migrant tend to have more asset ownership even only one person from the family migrate to be a foreign labor. According to few studies discussed, it will take strenuous efforts in discontinue foreign labors related cooperation due to positive impacts to the home and host countries especially on the economic aspect.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs qualitative approach in gathering data for the finding by doing in-depth interview with selected informants. According to Campbell (1955), "... the technique of the informant means that the social scientist obtains information about the group under study through a member who occupies such a role as to be well-informed but who at the same time speaks the social scientist's language." Phillips and Bagozzi (1986:313) added "the informants are chosen not on a random basis but because they possess special qualifications such as particular status, specialized knowledge, or accessibility to the researcher. Accordance with the objective of this study which aims to examine the extents of Malaysia's needs for Indonesian foreign labors, the selection of informants from Malaysian authorities is more appropriate.

The selection of key informants as respondents for this study also based on three reasons suggested by Crabtree and Miller (1999), which stated that data collection can be done efficiently because researcher gather information from the right person, getting right access on information that unavailable to researcher because of certain restriction and gain better understanding on certain information. It can be concluded that selecting key informants can ensure the richness of the data gathered in a limited time. This study selects five key informants from authorities that involve in the recruitment and management process of foreign labors in Malaysia. According to Kumar, Stern and Anderson (1993), multiple informants are rarely used by scholars due to lack of qualified people. Thus, these five selected informants are sufficient to represent important authorities that engage directly with the legal process of recruitment of the foreign labors. The five selected key informants' information is as below:

Table 1: List of Key Informant

No.	The role of agency	Key informant
1.	Cooperate with the government in formulating and implementing policies and regulations regarding to local and foreign manpower in Malaysia.	K1
2.	Promoting to improve the economic and social conditions of local and foreign workers, ensuring action taken by organization according to policies developed and provisioning for legislated Social Security measures.	K2

3.	Responsible on all aspects of workers in Malaysia including skills development, employment, safety and health, unions, social security and more.	K3
4.	Responsible for national security and one of the functions is to look after the country's borders.	K4
5.	Promotes and safeguards Malaysia's employers' rights and interest.	K5

The data obtained from the in -depth interviews were analyzed thematically. This study applied six phases suggested by Braun and Clarke's (2006) to derive the theme. The phases are; i) read the transcript, ii) identify the initial code, iii) construct the theme, iv) re -analyze the theme, v) identify and name the theme, vi) write the data report.

RESULTS

Malaysia is a popular country for receiving foreign labors due to the geographical factors, political stability and economic development (Mohd Na'eim, 2015). Table below shows eight major countries of foreign labors in Malaysia. Indonesia is the top country for sending foreign labors to Malaysia amongst eight other major sending countries. (Devadason & Meng, 2014; Fauziyah, 2015).

Table 1: Foreign Labors Statistic in Malaysia until 2019

Country	2010	2012	2015	2017	2019
Indonesia	792, 809	746, 063	703, 521	720, 46	704,175
Nepal	251, 416	304, 717	493, 435	388, 84	316,102
Bangladesh	319, 020	132, 350	234, 769	271, 1	568,929
India	95, 112	93, 761	94, 997	117, 31	117,733
Myanmar	160, 504	129, 506	132, 075	114. 51	125,795
Pakistan	28, 922	31, 249	48, 806	58, 51	61,689
Philippines	35, 338	44, 919	62, 339	55, 18	52,410
Thailand	17, 209	7, 251	9, 658	16, 18	14,691

Sources: Immigration Department Malaysia (2021); Ministry of Higher Education (2017)

Pulling factor from Malaysia

This study focuses on Malaysia's reliance on the foreign labors from Indonesia. The increasing number of Indonesian foreign labors each year shows no sign that the number will be decreased in the future. Among the reasons stated by key informants is the pulling factor from Malaysia that affects the influx of foreign labors from Indonesia.

“Due to geographical factor, it is easy for the Indonesians to enter Malaysia. Furthermore, Malaysia lacks of labors in the 3D sector (dirty, difficult and dangerous) as it is not favored by Malaysian, but we need the labors.” - (K1)

“Even if we do not want them, our plantation industry needs them as this sector failed to be filled with our people” - (K2)

“Our country is moving forward and being able to create many jobs opportunities that make our people have more choice. So, many job sectors are in vacuum because our people can easily switch jobs if they feel not suitable with current job.” - (K3)

The shortage of labors in Malaysia is due to the attitude of Malaysian that reluctant to work in certain sectors especially that involved with dirt, dangerous and difficult task. To support this statement, a study conducted by Suziana, Ibrahim, Siti Rahyla and Razlini (2017) found that job in palm oil plantation is less desirable to local youth. In fact, the plantation owner preferred the Indonesian labors than the local, Bangladeshi and Nepalese because they are more resilient and able to work in hot weather.

Employer's preference

Other than labor shortages in certain sectors because of local citizen are not interested, employers' preference also contribute to the arrival of foreign labors. There is demand from the employers in home country, therefore the influx of foreign labors hardly stops.

“Employers prefer foreign labors because they (foreign labors) have no other commitment. They are very committed in working because they are here to earn money and they are also easy to be exploited.” – (K3)

“They (foreign labors) are not cheap (in terms of wage). But the employers want liability, zero absenteeism and willingness to work. Our people are lack of these for 3D works especially.” – (K5)

It can be seen that in plantation sector, the foreign labors are more preferred by the owners as stated in Suziana et al (2017) study. Owners of oil palm plantations in Johor admitted that the Indonesian foreign labors are more durable and able to work in hotter conditions than the local and other foreign labors from Bangladesh and Nepal. While industrial and manufacturing sectors also are more likely to hire foreign labors than the local because of the increasing wages for the local unskilled labors. To drive this sector, manufacturers need sufficient manpower while maximize their profits (Bachtiar, Fahmy & Ismail, 2015).

Weaknesses on policies and law

The existing policies and laws on foreign labors in a country serve as a guide to stakeholders in making decisions. However, the weaknesses of both elements have led to poor management of foreign labors. This is also acknowledged by the informant who has been interviewed.

Among other issues mentioned by informants is no clear implementation of the law, the implementation of existing laws is weak and the responsible party does not take the law seriously. This can be concluded from the K2 and K5 interview:

“The influx of Indonesian foreign labors must have been uncontrollable because there are 2.1 million registered while the unregistered persons could not be determined. No one can provide accurate numbers. I believe that the enforcement is weak and there is no seriousness by the authorities to regulate foreign labors properly, especially Indonesian labors.” – K2

“In terms of policy implementation it depends on the knee-jerk reaction. When people are angry about the foreign labors in our country, the government freezes their entry. When employers need labors, the government opens it back. Many systems were introduced but most did not meet the real goals.” – K5

DISCUSSION

Based on the result, it can be concluded that in years to come, the employers in Malaysia are expected to choose foreign labors over the local as it will reduce their cost burden. As mentioned by K1, 3D sector is not preferred by the local not only because of the working condition, but due to the wage level. Unlike the foreign labors, they have less job opportunities in Malaysia, therefore they will be working in one sector for a long time regardless the wage amount. In 2016, Malaysia Ministry of Youth and

Sports explained some areas of employment such as construction, plantation and manufacturing offer relatively low wages with heavy workloads. He added “I believe such industries cannot afford to offer high salaries, so we have no choice but to hire foreign labors” (Mstar, 2016). According to the Polish employers, the reason they choose the foreign labors typically from Ukraine over the local mainly because of the willingness to work overtime and lower wage expectations among the foreign labors (Kubiciel-Lodzinska & Maj, 2017). This shows that the cost consideration occurs in other countries as well. Moreover, according to past research, situation in Indonesia also contribute to the migration foreign labors to Malaysia.

Ruhanas (2009) stated, the willingness of the Indonesian labors to migrate to Malaysia caused by the instability of Indonesia in terms of economic and social. In addition, the economic and political situation in Indonesia is making them unable to provide employment to the entire citizen that leads to high unemployment. Besides that, supports from Indonesian leaders are also one of the factors pushing the migration of Indonesian labors to Malaysia. In considering best way to reduce unemployment and strengthen the economy, the Indonesian government sees the sending of Indonesian labors as a way to improve their economy through foreign exchange (Mei, 2006; Handayani, Hadiawan & Dwijono, 2015).

Foreign labors especially Indonesian labors are more preferred by employers because local labors themselves are less interested in working in the 3D sectors (Bachtiar, Fahmy & Ismail, 2015). In April 2021, there are almost 400,000 jobs still unfilled in the fields of plantation, agriculture, manufacturing and construction although those sectors are open to locals (Bernama, 2021). The vacancies are due to Malaysia is currently freezing on bringing in foreign labors due to the Covid-19 (Berita Harian, 2021). In 2016, Malaysia has faced financial losses due to the freeze of foreign labors that was estimated about RM24 billions of losses (Anderson, 2021). This led the Malaysia Cabinet to withdraw the directive temporary hold the recruitment of foreign labors in four sectors (The Star, 2016). The highly dependent on foreign labors especially on unskilled labor can also be seen in Taiwan. Finding of the study by Nakahara (2017) on the recruitment of foreign labors in Taiwan found that although it is not cheap to hire foreign labor as the employers have to bear the taxes, fees, provide accommodation and food, but they fill the unskilled labors shortage. They added, foreign labors also keep the optimal operation in Taiwan. When the cost of labors is taken into account, employers still prefer foreign labors due to demands of certain sector.

Moreover, the weaknesses on policies and law are making it hard for Malaysia to stops receiving mass of foreign labors arrival each year, be it legally or illegally. This fact is legit and can be supported by several previous studies. Elements of legal inefficiency are a barrier in reducing legal or illegal entry of foreign labors. Even the government imposes to tighten border controls, complicated visa policy, reform interior enforcement measures, stricter penalties against employers who employ illegal foreign labors, or even deported them back to their home country, this phenomenon of foreign labors entry cannot be eradicated (Triandafyllidou & Maroukis, 2012; Massey, Durand & Pren, 2015). Thus, government can only enhance their efforts in enforce existing laws to be more effective in dealing with the surplus of registered foreign labors.

CONCLUSION

Based on the discussion above, there are several remarks can be highlighted in this study. It can be concluded that Malaysia relies on the presence of Indonesian foreign labors to strengthen certain sectors at the moment and probably in the future. The foreign labors are needed in developing the country and to fulfill the needs of employers in Malaysia while the weaknesses of policies and laws are making their number uncontrollable. The presence of massive labors can accelerate the process of Malaysia in achieving developed country status in the context of modern infrastructure development. However, the local are unable to fill those sectors in needs such as construction. This is even more convincing when the minister himself acknowledged that Malaysia needs foreign labors because of the low cost but high return in terms of commitment. Even if the employers need to pay the foreign labors higher salary, they

get liability, zero absenteeism and their willingness to work hard. Due to this factor, it is recorded employers in Taiwan willing to spent more cost on taxes, fees, accommodation and food for foreign labors because due to the resilience of foreign labors. Lastly, the weaknesses on policies and law are making it hard for Malaysia to stops receiving mass of foreign labors arrival each year, be it legally or illegally. Globalization is making the movement of people from place to another easier, but without proper control, the government will be at disadvantages due to the presence of too many foreign labors in the country. This study found that Malaysia is facing difficulty in reducing its reliance on foreign labors especially from Indonesia. If the recruitment of Indonesia foreign labors is beneficial to both Malaysia and Indonesia, it should be continued with more structured cooperation between two countries.

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