Labour Migration in Asia Pacific

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In Malaysia, although the inflow of foreign labour began in the 70s following the expansion of land development, the estate sector, and expansion of infrastructure and services following the implementation of the Second Malaysia Plan (1970-1975), it was only in the early 80s when the action was taken to put into effect a policy on immigrant workers. Of the two types of foreign workers, the unskilled/semi-skilled category is more problematic in terms of recruitment and employment. Thus, the policy makers concentrate more on this group, establishing institutions and procedures for their legal recruitment and employment.

The selection of source countries is reviewed from time to time based on economic, social, or political considerations. Employers in the country prefer to have a work contract with immigrant workers through contractors for labour services as this keeps labour costs low. The illegal traffic of migrant workers is therefore a lucrative business.

The hiring of foreign workers has contributed positively to Malaysia's economic development. While it is crucial to the country's economic development, their presence, however, has on many occasions also been indicted for criminal activities. In Malaysia, media reports on such matters that often influence the society's perception of the migrant workers. Therefore, it is important for us to report fairly and not to sensationalize such issues as to protect bilateral relations between Malaysia and the countries where those problematic workers come from.

There seems to be a consensus that Malaysia (and other labour receiving countries) need not and should not depend too much on foreign workers to sustain its economic growth. Based on the need to reduce the number of migrant workers, the recommended alternative for Malaysia is to develop its own local human resource base to fulfill the needs of industry. To this end, Malaysia has undertaken various measures such as expanding the domestic labour supply with the aim of increasing productivity and efficiency.