

Economic Imperatives Amidst a Global Pandemic: The Resilience of Kangean Migrant Workers in Pursuing Employment Opportunities in Malaysia

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Submitted: 06 May 2023; Revised: 18 December 2023 ; Accepted: 30 December 2023

Abstrak

Pandemi COVID-19 telah membawa era transformatif terhadap dunia global, yang sangat berdampak pada kehidupan dan aspirasi para pekerja migran Kangean yang mencari pekerjaan di Malaysia. Meskipun terdapat ketidakpastian global, para pekerja migran Kangean tetap teguh dan bertekad untuk tetap mendapatkan kesempatan kerja di Malaysia. Penelitian ini berupaya mengungkap faktor-faktor utama yang memicu aspirasi para pekerja migran Kangean untuk bertahan menghadapi rintangan berat dalam upaya mereka untuk bekerja di Malaysia selama pandemi COVID-19. Dengan menggunakan metodologi penelitian kualitatif, penelitian ini menggunakan pengumpulan data primer melalui wawancara dan observasi terhadap warga Kangean yang pernah, sedang, atau berencana bekerja di Malaysia. Selain itu, data sekunder dikumpulkan melalui analisis ekstensif terhadap literatur yang bersumber dari jurnal, buku, artikel, dan situs web imigrasi terkemuka seperti Badan Perlindungan Pekerja Migran Indonesia (BP2MI), Dinas Tenaga Kerja (DISNAKER), dan DATABOKS Tenaga Kerja Indonesia (TKI). Untuk mendukung analisis kami, penelitian ini mengadopsi Teori Ketergantungan, yang menyoroti tingkat ketergantungan yang ditunjukkan oleh pekerja migran Kangean terhadap Malaysia. Temuan penelitian ini menggarisbawahi bahwa faktor ekonomi sebagai pendorong utama yang mendorong calon pekerja migran Kangean mencari pekerjaan di Malaysia. Lebih jauh lagi, penelitian ini menyoroti dua pendekatan berbeda yang digunakan oleh para pekerja ini dalam upaya mereka untuk masuk ke Malaysia, yaitu jalur legal dan ilegal. Namun demikian, karena ketatnya peraturan perjalanan internasional yang diberlakukan selama pandemi, upaya-upaya ini menghadapi hambatan yang signifikan. Oleh karena itu, penelitian di masa depan harus fokus tidak hanya pada peningkatan pemahaman kita tentang pola migrasi internasional yang dilakukan oleh penduduk Kangean, namun juga mengeksplorasi implikasi yang lebih luas dari tren migrasi tersebut, tidak hanya Malaysia tetapi juga mencakup negara-negara lain.

Kata Kunci: Pekerja Migran Kangean, faktor ekonomi, migrasi internasional, Pandemi COVID-19, teori ketergantungan.

Abstract

The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in a transformative era in global affairs, profoundly impacting the lives and aspirations of Kangean migrant workers seeking employment in Malaysia. Despite the prevailing global uncertainties, these Kangean migrant workers remain steadfast in their determination to secure employment opportunities in Malaysia. This research seeks to uncover the predominant factors fueling the aspirations of Kangean migrant workers to persevere against formidable odds in their quest to work in Malaysia during the COVID-19 pandemic. Employing a qualitative research method, this study engaged in primary data collection through interviews and observations with Kangean residents who had worked, have been working, or plan to work in Malaysia. Additionally, secondary data were gathered through an extensive analysis of literature sourced from reputable journals, books, articles, and immigration websites, such as the Indonesian Migrant Worker Protection Agency (BP2MI), Labor Office (DISNAKER), and Indonesian Migrant Worker (TKI) Databoks. To underpin the analysis, this research adopted the dependency theory, shedding light on the degree of reliance exhibited by Kangean migrant workers in Malaysia. The findings of this study underscored economic factors as the principal driving force compelling prospective Kangean migrant workers to seek employment in Malaysia. Furthermore, this research discovered two distinct approaches these workers employed in their pursuit of entry into Malaysia: legal and illicit channels. Nevertheless, these efforts have faced significant impediments due to the stringent international travel

regulations imposed during the pandemic. Consequently, future research should focus not only on enhancing the understanding of the international migration patterns undertaken by Kangean residents but also on exploring the broader implications of such migration trends, extending beyond Malaysia to encompass other countries.

Keywords: Kangean migrant workers, economic factors, international migration, COVID-19 pandemic, dependency theory.

INTRODUCTION

The rapid population expansion remains a pressing issue in several countries, including Indonesia. The substantial prevalence of unemployment and limited avenues for gainful employment have engendered poverty and pronounced social inequality within society. Nuanced demographic challenges, such as the expanding labor force resulting from swift population growth, further exacerbate the social disparity due to the considerable pool of jobless individuals stemming from an imbalance in employment opportunities. Consequently, the inadequate absorption of the labor force propels individuals to seek opportunities abroad or migrate in pursuit of a more prosperous life. Given Indonesia's elevated unemployment rate, international labor migration emerges as a viable recourse to address this conundrum (Reni et al., 2016). Hence, it is unsurprising that a substantial contingent of Indonesians opt to become migrant laborers. As per Law No. 18 of 2007, Indonesian migrant laborers are defined as every Indonesian citizen who currently, formerly, or will work for wages outside the territorial bounds of the Republic of Indonesia. Additionally, international migration entails the intricate process of relocating individuals from one nation to another (Solimano, 2001).

Madura, a region within Indonesia, is renowned for its populace's predilection for migration. The Kangean Islands are integral to the Madura region and share the Madurese ethnic identity. The Madurese are celebrated for their propensity for migratory patterns, a trait notably echoed among the inhabitants of the Kangean Islands, who are an integral part of the Madurese ethnic milieu. This migratory inclination transcends regional confines, with Madurese populations dispersing across numerous nations, encompassing European countries, Saudi Arabia, and, notably, Malaysia. Consequently, the Madurese community has garnered recognition as a

pivotal source of migrant labor within Indonesia (Wahyudi, 2017). Furthermore, the proclivity for migration among Madurese populations can be attributed to various factors. These factors encompass conditions prevailing within Madura itself (push factors) and inducements inherent to destinations favored by Madurese migrants (pull factors). Push factors for migration encompass inhospitable living conditions and a dearth of employment opportunities. Conversely, pull factors lure Madurese migrants to destinations that offer accessible employment prospects (Rahayuningsih, 2018).

In the 21st century, the world was jolted by a pandemic later identified as the Coronavirus Disease-2019 (COVID-19). The COVID-19 pandemic rapidly disseminated to various regions worldwide, including Indonesia, profoundly altering the global community's way of life and activities. Nations across the globe swiftly implemented new regulations to curb the spread of COVID-19. Common preventive measures included travel restrictions, lockdowns, and the closure of national borders, encompassing all immigration points, such as seaports and airports (Al Jazeera, 2020). Malaysia enacted a lockdown, resulting in the temporary suspension of various non-essential socio-economic activities. This decision compelled Malaysia to institute a policy of repatriating a substantial number of migrant workers to their countries of origin, including Indonesian migrant workers (Nugrahaningsih et al., 2022).

Indirectly, Indonesia's efforts to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 led to reduced consumer demand, resulting in decreased income. From an economic and social stability perspective, the global pandemic significantly impacted Indonesian migrant workers worldwide (Nugrahaningsih et al., 2022). The economic downturn from social restrictions diminished the demand for migrant workers from host countries. This decline translated into a surge in prospective Indonesian

migrant workers unable to embark on their journeys and an increased number of workers facing job terminations and returning to Indonesia (Witono, 2021). This situation also affected Indonesian migrant workers from the Kangean Islands, a region under the jurisdiction of the Sumenep District and a part of the Madurese ethnic group. The Kangean Islands are among the primary contributors of both legal and illegal Madurese migrant workers. Concurrently, the unstable global conditions due to the pandemic indirectly influenced the migration patterns of the Kangean population to Malaysia.

Interestingly, despite the ongoing COVID-19 turmoil, the Kangean people's determination and desire to resume work in Malaysia remain robust. Several factors influence this phenomenon, underscoring the intricate interdependence between Kangean migrant workers and Malaysia. Primarily, economic factors act as the chief push and pull factors. Malaysia's economic prosperity entices Kangean migrant workers to leave their homeland and flock to Malaysia for improved livelihoods. Thus, this research aims to elucidate the efforts made by Kangean migrant workers to secure employment in Malaysia amidst the volatile global conditions precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The migration of the Kangean people to Malaysia has been an enduring practice, fostering a robust relationship between the Kangean community and Malaysia. Data released by Bank Indonesia (BI) reveal that Malaysia is the foremost destination for Indonesian migrant workers, hosting approximately 1,620,000 workers in 2022, equivalent to 48.7% of the total Indonesian migrant workers during that period. Following closely is Saudi Arabia with 833,810 workers, Taiwan with 294,460 workers, and Hong Kong with 290,430 workers (Kusnandar, 2022a). This dynamic underscores the profound reliance of the Kangean people on their ability to return to work in Malaysia amidst the global instability caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Consequently, various endeavors were undertaken to facilitate re-entry into Malaysia despite the stringent regulations implemented by Indonesia and Malaysia.

In a related vein, Djafar and Hassan's research (2012) delves into the same issue, providing a more comprehensive exploration of the "Dynamics of Push and Pull Factors of Migrant Workers in Developing Countries: The Case of Indonesian Workers in Malaysia." The findings elucidate that low incomes and high unemployment rates in labor-sending countries, coupled with high incomes and low unemployment rates in labor-receiving countries, have frequently motivated migrants to seek employment abroad. This observation aligns with the results of their study, highlighting income and unemployment as predominant determinants of Indonesian migrant workers' decisions to work in Malaysia (Djafar & Hassan, 2012).

Moreover, Suyanto (2018) has conducted further research concerning the dependency of Indonesian migrant workers, albeit with a more limited focus on the utilization of economic remittances and the propensity of migrants to return to work abroad. Several factors, including accessibility to the destination country, limited job opportunities in the country of origin, high wages, and abundant employment prospects in the host country, have driven the inclination to pursue employment overseas. Additionally, remittance funds primarily cover daily expenses, education costs, housing, and other necessities (Suyanto, 2018).

However, the COVID-19 pandemic has profoundly impacted the resilience and vulnerability of Indonesian migrant workers. The implementation of the Movement Control Order (MCO) and the temporary suspension of sending Indonesian migrant workers to Malaysia have exacerbated vulnerabilities and diminished resilience among this demographic. These developments are consistent with research conducted by Munarni Aswindo, Margaretha Hanita, and Arthur Josias Simon (2021), aimed at assessing the impact of MCO and the temporary suspension of sending Indonesian migrant workers on their vulnerability and resilience in Malaysia. Their findings disclosed the far-reaching consequences of these measures, including their impact on the Indonesian migrant worker market from both the supply and demand sides (Aswindo et al., 2021).

The intersection of Kangean migrant workers and Malaysia is a pivotal nexus within the domain of international migration studies. This connection is not happenstance; instead, it reflects the reality that, with a significant portion of its population engaged as migrant workers in Malaysia, Kangean regards Malaysia as a second home where they sustain their livelihoods. The Kangean Islands' economy is intensely influenced by the remittances sent back by Kangean migrant workers in Malaysia. Economic integration and the intricate linkages among various economic sectors dictate that alterations in any segment of the economy or any country can reverberate across other economic sectors worldwide (Doctrine & Doctrine, 2020). This reliance has evolved because the employment opportunities available in Kangean are insufficient to meet the needs of its people, prompting migration to Malaysia, which is perceived as a land of abundant job opportunities.

The dependence of Kangean migrant workers on Malaysia aligns with the tenets of the dependency theory, which examines development issues from the perspective of third-world or developing countries like Indonesia. This theory, originating in Latin America during the 1960s and 1970s, was formulated by scholars such as Raul Prebisch, Theotonio dos Santos, Walter Rodney, and Andre Gunder Frank (Kufakurinani et al., 2017). In this context, dependency signifies a scenario in which one country's economic trajectory is influenced by the development and expansion of another country's economic activity (Namkoong, 1999). Analyzing the Kangean people's dependence on Malaysia, where most of the regional economic influence hinges on Malaysia's economic conditions, offers insight into how regional subordination in developing countries can take shape. In the lens of underdevelopment, dependency theory asserts that foreign and political influences can shape local development conditions (Namkoong, 1999).

Dependency theory delineates three forms: colonial dependency, financial dependency, and technology-industry dependency (Santos, 1970). In this context, the Kangean Islands are posited as a region still in development, marked by economic instability dictated by external regions, particularly Malaysia. Malaysia serves as the linchpin of the

Kangean people's economy, crystallizing their dependency into a form of financial reliance. The advent of COVID-19 has metamorphosed into a global systemic economic risk, impacting economies on both the macro and micro scales (Ramirez, 2021). Within this framework, dependency theory offers a lens to scrutinize Malaysia's significance as a realm for Kangean migrant workers to secure income. It delves into the depth of their reliance on the Malaysian state, exemplified through their efforts to work in Malaysia amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, dependency theory serves as an analytical framework to comprehend Malaysia's attractiveness as a destination of choice for the Kangean people. The theory elucidates how income disparities between Indonesia and Malaysia underpin the pronounced dependence of the Kangean community on Malaysia's robust economy.

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employed a qualitative descriptive approach to provide an intricate portrayal of the dependence of Kangean migrant workers on continuing their employment in Malaysia amidst the COVID-19 pandemic. This endeavor addresses the research question of primary data amassed through interviews and direct observations, while bibliographical data analysis was executed to assemble secondary data fortified by the framework of dependency theory.

The interviews took place within the Kangean Islands, engaging research subjects from the Kangean community as migrant workers in Malaysia. It encompassed individuals who have repatriated to Kangean, those preparing to embark on journeys to Malaysia, and Kangean migrant workers currently situated in Malaysia. Interviews were conducted via electronic media to bridge geographical constraints. The secondary data were culled from a variety of sources, including journals, books, articles, and immigration websites such as the Indonesian Migrant Worker Protection Agency (*BP2MI*), Labor Office (*DISNAKER*), and Indonesian Migrant Worker (*TKI*) Databoks.

The study features nine samples of Kangean migrant workers, comprising four female and five male informants. The interviews spanned from March 2022 to May 2023 and involved native Kangean migrant workers

employed in diverse roles, such as construction workers, restaurant servers, cleaning services, work heads, Tekong, and former Kangean migrant workers. Both face-to-face interviews with migrants residing in Kangean and electronic media interviews with those presently in Malaysia were conducted.

In analyzing the accumulated data, the data interactive analysis model devised by Miles and Huberman was adopted, unfolding in stages encompassing data collection, data reduction, data presentation, and conclusion (Sugiyono, 2018). Post-data collection, the information was systematically categorized and refined in alignment with the study's focal points. Subsequently, the field data analysis results, coupled with insights derived from the literature review, were presented through tables and descriptive explanations. These findings served as the foundation for addressing and concluding the research question originally posited at the study's outset.

RESULT AND ANALYSIS

This section delves into the three prevailing factors that have shaped and impacted the international migration patterns of Kangean migrant workers amidst the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. It further presents the outcomes and insights garnered from the research inquiries, shedding light on the determined endeavors of Kangean migrant workers to secure employment in Malaysia amid the challenges posed by the pandemic.

ECONOMIC FACTORS AS A REPRESENTATION OF THE EMERGENCE OF DEPENDENCE OF KANGEAN MIGRANT WORKERS ON MALAYSIA DURING THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC

Migration from the Kangean Islands to Malaysia has been a longstanding and deeply ingrained practice spanning generations. This movement is a key avenue to success, particularly in the economic realm. The people of the Kangean Islands, who share ancestral ties with the Madurese ethnic group known for their strong work ethic, have established the Kangean Islands as one of the primary sources of migrants in Madura and East Java, both through

legal and illegal channels. The Indonesian Migrant Worker Protection Agency (BP2MI) recorded 72,624 Indonesian migrant workers in 2021, with a significant portion originating from East Java, constituting 39.6% of the total (Dihni, 2022).

The selection of Malaysia as the primary destination for Kangean migrant workers was not arbitrary. Geographically, Malaysia stands as Indonesia's closest neighbor, facilitating this migration decision. The geographical proximity renders transportation to Malaysia relatively easier, faster, and more cost-effective compared to other countries. When questioned about the rationale behind selecting Malaysia for employment, a female informant working as a restaurant waitress articulated the following.

"I work in Malaysia because of my family, and most of the Kangean people work there. Besides, there are more job opportunities in Malaysia than in Kangean" (interview with Samsiya, May 18th, 2023).

Furthermore, the cultural, historical, ethnic, and linguistic affinities shared with Malaysia have presented attractive facets enabling Indonesian migrant workers to swiftly adapt and communicate effectively (Reni et al., 2016). These factors, coupled with the cost-effectiveness and shorter travel duration compared to other destinations, such as Saudi Arabia, have solidified Malaysia's status as a primary destination for Kangean migrant workers. While Malaysia and Saudi Arabia are the predominant destination countries for Indonesian migrant workers nationwide, the Kangean community's inclination toward Malaysia remains distinctive (Maksum & Surwandono, 2017).

The World Health Organization (WHO) reported, as of August 19th, 2022, that there were 591,683,619 confirmed cases of COVID-19 globally, with 6,443,306 recorded deaths (WHO, 2022). These data underscore that the foremost issue at the forefront is the global public health crisis. Consequently, matters related to human mobility across various sectors are not isolated concerns but hold profound implications, extending beyond the health sector.

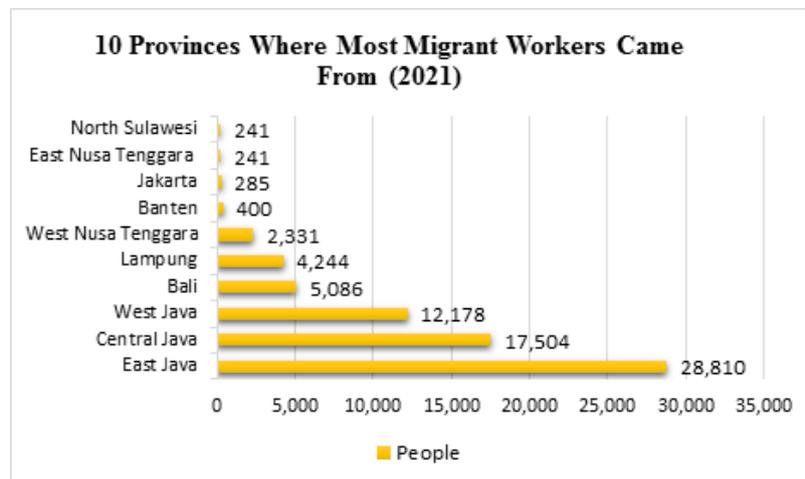


Figure 1. Provinces of Origin of Most Migrant Workers (Dihni, 2021)

The ramifications of COVID-19 have extended beyond health concerns, permeating into livelihoods across numerous countries simultaneously (Delanova & Yani, 2021). The pandemic has wrought havoc upon various sectors, reshaping the global community's way of life and curtailing interactions on a global scale, resulting in stagnation in progress across multiple domains. The escalating spread of COVID-19 has posed an unprecedented threat not merely to the global economy but to lives and livelihoods alike (Feng et al., 2020).

The economic instability precipitated by the pandemic has created a cascade of challenges. This reality on the ground has been inextricably linked to the economic shifts triggered by COVID-19, engendering a plethora of interconnected issues. Widespread economic stagnation and the paralysis of global trade activities have led to income declines in each country, compounding the scarcity of opportunities and jobs. Regrettably, it has exacerbated social inequalities between different segments of society (bourgeois and proletariat). A notable repercussion of COVID-19 is the surge in unemployment, the weakening of economic and income-generating activities, and a reduction in investments.

The pandemic has compelled countries worldwide to implement measures such as border closures, restrictions on economic activities, repatriation of migrants to their home countries, social distancing, and other preventive actions to curb the spread of COVID-19

(Podra et al., 2021). Consequently, issues of inequality and injustice have emerged in society, with migrant workers bearing a significant brunt (Wibisono, 2021). For migrant workers, particularly those with lower education and skills, COVID-19 has precipitated a decline in their welfare and prospects for overseas employment (Wibisono, 2021). The impact of COVID-19 was acutely felt by Kangean migrant workers.

Policies curtailing human mobility in Indonesia and Malaysia have obstructed the access of Kangean migrant workers intending to work in Malaysia. The enforcement of such policies in both countries, aimed at containing the spread of COVID-19, has disrupted international migration flows, thereby closing off opportunities for Kangean migrant workers seeking employment in Malaysia. Despite the global economic paralysis, the Kangean community remains determined to access Malaysia as they perceive it as the primary avenue to secure employment that meets their expectations. It emphasizes that, for the Kangean community, economic concerns have outweighed the fear of COVID-19. Consequently, the economic hardships these underserved communities face have compelled them to prioritize income for survival, often at the expense of health considerations. These are arduous choices confronted by migrants, as articulated by one Kangean migrant worker when asked about the reasons for wanting to return to work in Malaysia.

“I am returning to Kangean because I miss my family, but if I do not return to Malaysia, I cannot support my children and family. I truly desire to go to Malaysia, and despite the ongoing COVID-19 situation, I am still unable to travel with my Tekong” (interview with Misrani, March 21st, 2022).

The COVID-19 pandemic has ushered in a transformation in the global economic landscape. It is undeniable that one of the primary drivers for unlicensed foreign migrants to seek opportunities in Malaysia is economic factors (Rahim & Lyndon, 2021). This economic impetus has, in turn, become the driving force behind the migration flow of the Kangean Islands community toward Malaysia. Malaysia has frequently emerged as a favored destination for migration due to its superior economic conditions compared to Kangean.

Economic considerations are not limited to mere labor; they also influence profound decisions, such as one migrant worker’s choice to settle down and acquire Malaysian citizenship while relocating their family to live there. Beyond economic motives, other factors, including the duration of their employment in Malaysia, their comfort with the living conditions, and marital ties with a native Malaysian citizen, further influenced the choice. Consequently, it is unsurprising that a significant flow of international labor migration could be observed from countries with slower economic development and lower wage levels to countries experiencing more rapid economic growth and offering higher salaries (Noveria & Romdiati, 2022).

Examining this through the lens of dependency theory, it is apt to recognize that dependency arises from economic disparities between regions. In this context, the Kangean Islands symbolize a region heavily reliant on Malaysia, a nation characterized by significantly more advanced economic development. This dependence has endured even though most Kangean migrant workers in Malaysia engage in labor-intensive roles, often involving construction and other demanding tasks (Noveria & Romdiati, 2022).

As a consequence of this dependence on migrant labor, many critical sectors of the country’s economy were dominated by foreign workers. Their presence was

facilitated by their willingness to engage in labor-intensive roles, often labeled as the “5D sector” (dirty, demeaning, dangerous, demanding, and difficult), typically offering lower wages than those available to residents (Dollah & Abdullah, 2017). The common occupations among Kangean migrant workers in Malaysia encompassed construction labor, restaurant services, cleaning services, and active involvement in various entrepreneurial ventures, particularly in construction projects.

EFFORTS TO REACH MALAYSIA THROUGH LEGAL AND ILLEGAL ROUTES

An intriguing aspect to emphasize is the determination of Kangean migrant workers to persist in pursuing opportunities in Malaysia despite the global challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic. This health crisis has been a pivotal factor in altering the dynamics of departure patterns, encompassing both legal and illegal routes.

The impact of COVID-19 was conspicuous in transforming these departure patterns, both through authorized and unauthorized channels. The East Java Manpower, Transmigration, and Population Service (Disnakertransduk) identified four districts on Madura Island, including Bangkalan, Sampang, Pamekasan, and Sumenep Regencies, as major sources of Indonesian migrant workers departing via illegal routes. Since 2010, the Kangean Islands have gained recognition as a prominent hub for sending illegal migrant workers (Illouz & Grange, 2013). Notably, a significant presence of Kangean migrant workers pursuing the dream of migration could be discovered in Malaysia, with many engaging in construction work (Sufyan & Pribadi, 2021).

In the intricate journey of prospective Kangean migrant workers destined for Malaysia, two distinct departure routes existed: legal and illegal. Based on insights gleaned from interviews and field observations, these pathways exhibited marked disparities in costs, regulations, and associated risks, serving as critical benchmarks and considerations for prospective migrants. Intriguingly, within Kangean itself, the official departure routes were not widely preferred. Prospective migrants were deterred by the lengthy and costly permit

processing, rendering the illegal routes more attractive. The proliferation of illegal channels could be attributed to the involvement of intermediaries commonly referred to as “Tekong”. Despite the significantly heightened risks associated with this illicit route, it remained a highly sought-after option due to its cost-effectiveness, simplified licensing process, and relatively quicker turnaround time. This trend aligns with the findings of Sulaksono (2018), who asserted that the high expenses and bureaucratic complexities associated with obtaining migration permits for Malaysia have led the Kangean people aspiring to become migrant workers to opt for the illegal route with the assistance of Tekong services. This phenomenon is not unique to Kangean but extends to several other regions in Indonesia (Sulaksono, 2018).

Before entering Malaysia, prospective Indonesian migrant workers must fulfill various document-related requirements, including an Identity Card, Family Card, and Birth Certificate, which are prerequisites for obtaining a passport. The acquisition of these documents varied, involving both legitimate and illegitimate means. Many individuals lacked complete documentation, while others resorted to using counterfeit identities. Obtaining these documents often entailed clandestine payments to officials through intermediaries (Wahyudi, 2017). These intermediaries, known as Tekong, subsequently became the employers or heads of work for Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. Tekong oversees the intricate process of facilitating the safe entry of these migrant worker candidates into Malaysia. The Tekong affiliated with migrants was connected to a central Tekong figure in Batam, responsible for coordinating all migrant entries into Malaysia. To secure passage, illegal migrant workers were required to make payments to the Batam-based Tekong, who then disbursed these funds to immigration officers, facilitating the entry of prospective migrant workers into Malaysia.

Generally, Kangean migrant workers employed various methods when opting for illegal routes. Firstly, Indonesian migrant workers were considered illegal when they lacked the necessary permits to enter another country. Secondly, some Indonesian migrant workers entered foreign countries using tourist visas but proceeded to work upon arrival. Thirdly, they initially

entered with the appropriate documentation, but when the validity of these documents expired, they failed to renew them. For illegal Indonesian migrant workers, the first method often involved entering another country without proper documentation, taking clandestine routes known as “back routes” or “rat routes” (jalur tikus). For instance, there have been several reported cases of illegal Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia who used covert routes in the vicinity of Batam (Sulaksono, 2018). The decision of prospective migrant workers to engage in illegal migration was typically driven by their desires and decisions, influenced by various factors, with unemployment being a major push factor. Among these factors were the complexities, impracticalities, costs, and time required to pursue the legal migration route. Although the legal route has been generally safer, prospective migrants might perceive the illegal route as more profitable, faster, cheaper, practical, and efficient (Bustami et al., 2021).

The process of illegal departure for Kangean migrant workers was primarily shaped by two main factors: economic and bureaucratic considerations. Economic factors played a pivotal role as prospective migrants weighed the substantial operational costs associated with the official route. Additionally, the bureaucratic complexities of obtaining necessary documents could be daunting for prospective Indonesian migrant workers seeking quick employment, particularly when faced with immediate family financial responsibilities. These considerations formed the foundation for the decision-making of prospective Kangean migrant workers when opting for the illegal migration route. Interviews with Kangean informants shed light on their motivations for selecting the illegal route, as illustrated in the following excerpts.

“I chose the illegal route because it was cost-effective, and the paperwork required for departure was not complicated, thanks to my assistant (Tekong), who helped me. Furthermore, I have had significant debts, and taking the official route would have incurred even greater costs, making it impossible for me to repay my debts later” (interview with Asrawi, July 12, 2022).

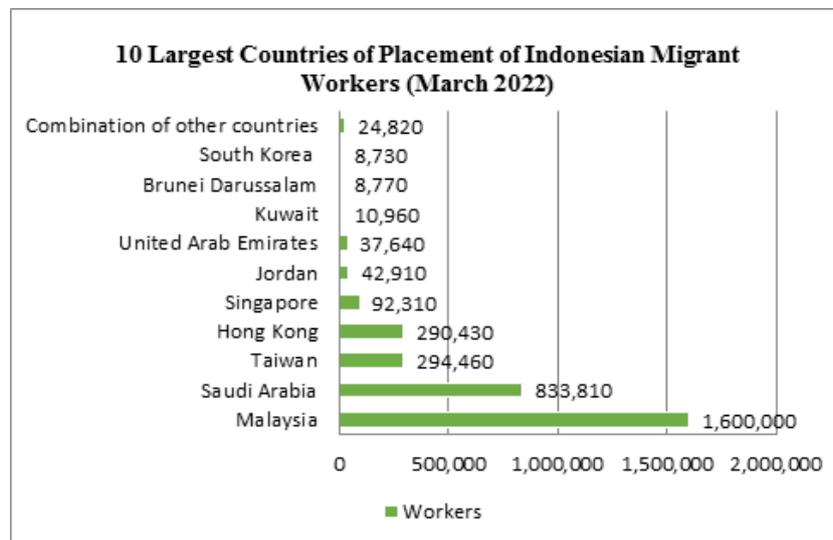


Figure 2. Countries with the Largest Placement of Indonesian Migrant Workers (Kusnandar, 2022a)

Conversely, informants who followed the official channel expressed the following.

“Despite the high costs, I want to work without disturbances from the Malaysian authorities. I am determined to obtain the necessary permit (official document for Indonesian migrant workers working abroad)” (interview with Masna, June 25th, 2022).

Within the realm of departures, two pivotal factors emerged prominently: costs and documentation requirements for traveling to Malaysia, both for legal and illegal migrants, both experienced migrants and new arrivals. These factors serve as vital indicators, illustrating the significance of adhering to a series of regulations as the primary prerequisite before embarking on the journey to Malaysia. Furthermore, they underscored why both official and unofficial routes were preferred.

As of March 2022, Malaysia remained the primary destination for Indonesian migrant placement.

Data released by Bank Indonesia (BI) unveiled that Malaysia has become the leading destination, hosting 1,620,000 Indonesian migrant workers in 2022, equivalent to 48.7% of the total Indonesian migrant workers during that period. Following Malaysia, Saudi Arabia ranks second with 833,810 workers, followed by Taiwan with 294,460 workers, and Hong Kong with 290,430 workers (Kusnandar, 2022a). These data depict

Malaysia’s continued popularity among Indonesian migrant workers, including those from Kangean.

However, as the number of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia has increased, several challenges have arisen. Notably, a growing number of Indonesian migrant workers have acquired illegal status, referred to in Malaysia as “illegal immigrants” or “foreign migrants without permission”. These numbers are alarmingly high (Maksum & Surwandono, 2018). In Madura, four districts have been known for supplying unofficial Indonesian migrant workers: Bangkalan, Sampang, Pamekasan, and Sumenep. The issue of illegal Indonesian migrant workers in Sumenep has persisted for decades, with individuals often using sea routes as an alternative to evading authorities. This situation was influenced by financiers or brokers who profited from the illicit business of sending illegal Indonesian migrant workers to Malaysia (Madura Zone, 2017).

In the archipelagic areas of Madura, such as Arjasa District, Kangean District, and Sapeken District (three districts in the Kangean Islands), many deported individuals from Malaysia found themselves. Despite being relatively small compared to the island region, these land areas have played a significant role in accommodating deportees (Supriyatno, 2015). Illegal migration usually involves prospective Kangean migrants

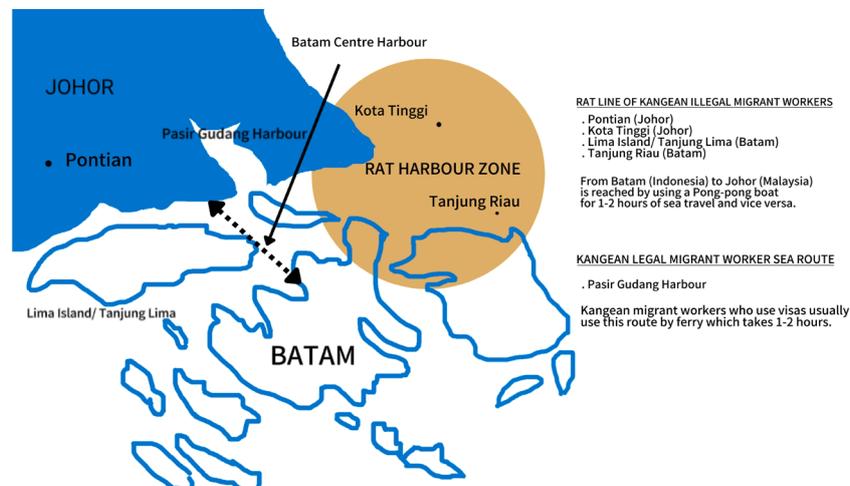


Figure 3. Illegal and Legal Kangean Migrant Workers Sea Route
(Processed by Authors, 2023)

entering through covert routes, commonly called the “jalur tikus” or “rat route.” Based on information gathered from interviews with informants, including former Tekong Kangean, and online interviews with Kangean work leaders in Malaysia, the following description outlines the extent to which unofficial channels were accessed by prospective Kangean migrants.

“Most Kangean people, when leaving or returning as ‘empty people’ (a term for unofficial Kangean migrant workers), typically opt for the ‘rat route’ or ‘jalur tikus’. Commonly used routes include Mata Ikan Bay, Pontian, Kota Tinggi, Tanjung Lima, and Tanjung Riau. There used to be individuals passing through the Tanjung Uban area (Sumatra), but now very few use that route” (Interview with Jamaluddin, October 25th, 2022).

Based on data collected from field research and interviews with Kangean informants experiencing both unofficial and official channels, unofficial journeys of Kangean migrant workers primarily involved sea routes, while legal travelers had the option of both land and sea routes.

One of the informants, a head of work in Malaysia, provided insights into the travel routes typically favored by documented migrant workers. Additionally, this informant highlighted the significant demand from prospective Kangean migrant workers to seek

employment in Malaysia, even amid the uncertainty of the global situation. Here is an excerpt from the interview.

“Generally, there are two pathways for Kangean migrant workers who opt for the official route. First, they obtain permission using official documents, and secondly, they start with a visa. Initially, they may not intend to extend it, but most end up becoming illegal migrant workers because they do not extend it. Typically, those involved in this process depart from Kangean and take a flight from Djuanda Surabaya to Kuala Lumpur airport, or alternatively, they take a flight from Djuanda Surabaya to Batam and then a ship to enter Malaysia. During the era of the coronavirus, there was a high demand from the Kangean people to go to Malaysia, both through unofficial (‘empty’) routes and with permits. However, due to the ongoing pandemic, many could not fulfill their plans” (Interview with Subhan, May 27th, 2022).

Table 1 displays the data gathered through field research and interviews with multiple informants.

The situation before and during the pandemic presented a distinct narrative for the world of labor, particularly for migrant workers and prospective Kangean migrants. According to data released by Bank Indonesia (BI), the COVID-19 pandemic led to a decline in

Table 1. Kangean Migrant Worker Migration Routes from Kangean to Malaysia

No	Legal Route	Illegal Route
1.	Via Air Batuguluk Harbor (Kangean)→ Kalianget port (Sumenep)→ Djuanda International Airport (Surabaya)→ Kuala Lumpur International Airport (Malaysia)	Via Air
2.	Via Sea Batuguluk Harbour (Kangean)→ Kalianget port (Sumenep) → Djuanda International Airport (Surabaya)→ Batam→ Pasir Gudang Johor Port (Malaysia)	Via Sea via the Tikus harbor using the <i>Pompong</i> boat Batuguluk harbor (Kangean)→ Kalianget port (Sumenep)→ Djuanda International Airport (Surabaya)→ Hang Nadim Airport (Batam) → Tanjung Lima/ Tanjung Riau (Batam) → Pontianak/ Kota Tinggi (Johor)

Source: Processed by Authors, 2023.

Indonesian migrant workers. In the first quarter of 2022, Indonesian migrant workers in neighboring countries constituted 49.7% of the total working abroad, totaling 3,270,000 individuals (Kusnandar, 2022b). This decrease was attributed to the tightened regulations implemented by both Indonesia and Malaysia. These regulatory changes have also affected prospective Kangean migrant workers intending to work in Malaysia. Remarkably, despite the reduced number of migrant workers, the demand for employment in Malaysia remained high in the Kangean Islands. Nonetheless, access and mobility restrictions, enforced as a response to the global mobilization halt, have limited the movement of Kangean people planning to work in Malaysia, both through legal and illegal avenues. Consequently, these measures have posed challenges to Kangean migrants' prospects for labor abroad.

CONCLUSION

Kangean migrant workers have shared a profound and symbiotic connection with Malaysia, the preferred destination for most Kangean residents seeking employment opportunities. However, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic has wrought significant disruptions in the lives and endeavors of global Kangean migrant workers, encompassing those already employed in Malaysia and those aspiring to do so. The economic domain stood out prominently among the sectors grievously affected by this global crisis.

The economic impact of the pandemic has been particularly pronounced in Kangean, primarily sustained by the remittances sent by their migrant workers in Malaysia. The community has grappled with a decline in economic well-being, characterized by stagnant production and reduced consumption. Consequently, Kangean residents, driven by economic necessity, have persevered in pursuing opportunities in Malaysia despite the formidable challenges posed by the pandemic's tightening of global regulations.

These workers' resilience and determination amid adversity have testified to their unwavering commitment to improving their economic prospects. The dependency dynamics at play have been illustrated by their relentless efforts to reach Malaysia, employing both official or legal and unofficial or illegal channels. However, these efforts encountered insurmountable obstacles due to the stringent COVID-19 regulations enforced by both Indonesia and Malaysia.

The global policy impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has extended beyond individual workers, encompassing a broader reshaping of international labor migration policies. The pandemic-induced restrictions and regulations prompted a reconsideration of global travel, profoundly affecting the mobility of workers worldwide.

With the resumption of international travel in August 2022, there has been newfound hope for prospective Kangean migrants to realize their aspirations of working in Malaysia. This policy shift offers a glimmer of hope for individuals eager to rebuild their economic prospects amid the evolving global landscape.

In short, the intricate bond between Kangean migrant workers and Malaysia remained robust, with economic considerations being the primary driving force. While the COVID-19 pandemic introduced formidable challenges, the unwavering determination of these workers and the evolving global landscape were poised to shape the future of Kangean labor migration to Malaysia.

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