

## **Strengthening Migrant Protection in an Integrating ASEAN\***

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### **Migration flows and the emerging ASEAN labor market**

The ASEAN Leaders have targeted 2015 as the year of full regional integration for Southeast Asia, the year the region shall become one 'ASEAN Economic Community' (AEC). As spelled out in the AEC Blueprint approved in the November 2007 Singapore Summit, by 2015 ASEAN shall become a single market and a single production base characterized by the free flow of goods (zero-tariff within the region), free flow of services (no restrictions on trade in services), and free flow of investment (with only a few restricted areas).

However, on the movement of labor in the region, the AEC Blueprint talks only of the ASEAN resolve to facilitate the movement of professionals and skilled labor engaged in cross-border trade and investment-related activities, obviously as a supplementary support to the expansion of intra-ASEAN trade and investment under the ASEAN Framework Agreement on Services (AFAS) and the ASEAN Investment Agreement (AIA). This means the movement of labor, especially the movement of semi-skilled and unskilled labor, will remain subject to the strict visa policy and selective work requirements

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of each ASEAN member country, particularly those at the receiving end of the impositions of countries with markets for this labor. The ASEAN policy of open regionalism or outright liberalization as the principal mode of hastening regional integration does not apply to the labor market.

And yet, statistics indicate an increasing intra-ASEAN flow of migrant labor, with the labor markets of some ASEAN countries such as that of Singapore and Brunei even regionalizing and globalizing rapidly. Statistical data from the ILO Regional Office in Bangkok (2007) indicate that 13.5 million migrants in the world as of 2005 hail from the ASEAN bloc. Of this number, 5.3 million are 'circulating' within the ASEAN. These figures are, of course, vastly understated given the large number of unregistered or non-regular migrants in the ASEAN, such as the hundreds of thousands of migrants crossing from Burma to Thailand, from Indonesia to Malaysia, and from Laos and Cambodia in the Thai-Vietnam-led Greater Mekong Area. There is also a growing number of highly-mobile professionals and experts getting deployed within the region and beyond through online recruitment or through tourism-cum-hiring arrangements, which governments are unable to track or monitor.

ILO migration expert Manolo Abella (2008) also estimates that migrant workers comprise about 30 percent of Singapore's labor force and 20 percent in the case of Malaysia. Brunei has probably a higher percentage of migrant workers. In all three labor-receiving ASEAN countries, migrants can be found in virtually all categories of employment—managerial and professional talents, supervisory and skilled personnel, and semi-skilled production and service workers, including domestics. Without these workers, it is doubtful if these countries would be able to maintain the high economic growth that they have registered in the last two decades.

But the flow of intra-ASEAN migration is not linear. As Abella pointed out, about 40 percent of Singapore's 230,000 emigrants are in Malaysia occupying high-skill positions, while 73 percent of Malaysia's 1.5 million overseas workers are employed in Singapore. In the same manner, Thailand, which is a major absorber of workers from Myanmar and the neighboring Indochina countries, is also a large labor-sending country. Indonesia, the Philippines and Vietnam remain the largest labor-sending countries. However, these countries are also hosting growing communities of expatriate managers, professionals and skilled workers coming from the various ASEAN and other countries.