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Challenges to Governance of Labour Migration in Asia Pacific

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The remarkable transformations of the economies and societies in the Asia Pacific region over the past three decades have had profound implications on the geography of labour and the governance of its movements. The comparative advantages derived from greater specialization and global division of labour have made it possible for the East Asian economies, first the Asian Tigers and later China, to expand at historically unprecedented rates. Today China is often referred to as the global factory, absorbing huge numbers of workers into gainful employment and in the process stirring massive internal movements and redistribution of the population from the rural areas to the cities. These same forces are now forcing adjustments in other countries and creating greater income imbalances that are prompting workers to cross borders in search of more productive employment.

Asia Pacific has seen in recent decades a much greater mobility of labour than before between neighboring economies and beyond. Migration is driven by differences and differences are growing, not narrowing. Globalization, which was supposed to help close the gaps in relative incomes and standards of living, appears to magnify the “pull” and “push” factors of migration, posing huge challenges for states in the region in regulating their labour markets. Labour-short economies face a common dilemma. On the one hand they have to respond to pressures for more flexible supplies of labour as native workers leave certain sectors and occupations. On the other, they have to contend with the political demands for defending the gains of native workers, preserving ethnic homogeneity and the dominant position of certain groups.

Migration for employment is now seen by nearly all national authorities as a growing phenomenon, a feature of globalization processes, and a largely positive development contributing not only to raising returns to investments in education but also bringing in know-how, information, and trade opportunities. More and more governments, from tiny Timor Leste to continental India and China, see labour migration (or labour service exports) as a part of their employment strategies and are taking corresponding measures to take advantage of opportunities for the temporary employment of their nationals in foreign labour markets.

A. Driving forces behind migration

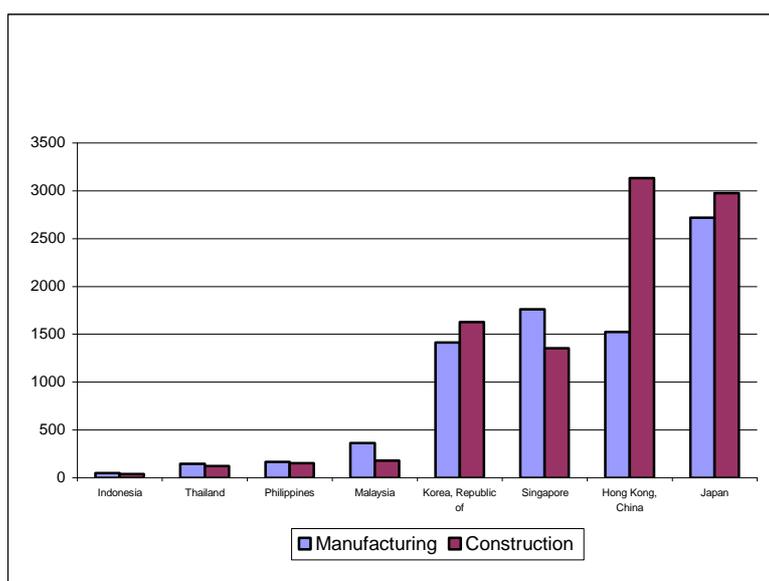
How much of contemporary migration flows in the Asian region owe to economic as opposed to demographic or other social factors remains to be established by migration scholars but I think most would agree that the key determinants are the wide gaps in wages and productivity of labour (see Figure 1 below), ageing and the uneven distribution in the region of young workers, state policies on immigration, and the dramatic improvements in connectivity thanks to cell-phones and the internet. To these I should also add the commercialization of migration processes as handsome

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profits can be had by those who are able to connect job-seekers to employers across borders.

Wage differentials have been good predictors of migration, but not levels of employment. In the absence of very tight controls foreign workers will be employed even if there are still many unemployed or underemployed native workers. In the two economies which have emerged as large net recipients of foreign labour – Malaysia and Thailand - there are still significant numbers of underemployed workers. What is unmistakable however is the growth in absorption of foreign labour as a consequence of rising per capita incomes, slowing down of labour force growth as the youth spend more years in school, and the cross-sectoral transfers of native workers as they avail of opportunities for better jobs in the modern sectors. There have been continuous increases in the absorption of foreign workers in agriculture, fisheries, and construction which native workers desert as soon as better prospects emerge in expanding modern sectors. The same is true of small industries which find it hard to attract native workers.²

Figure 1. Comparison of average earnings in construction and manufacturing in East Asian countries



As in other rich countries, dependence on foreign labour is becoming a structural feature of some of the region’s more developed economies. In Singapore migrant workers already account for more than 30 percent of the labour force despite measures such as levies on employing foreign workers. Even more important to note is the fact that the dependence on foreign workers is impervious to the oscillations of economic fortunes. In Malaysia the number of registered foreign workers more than doubled in five years from 532,000 in 1993 to 1.1 million in 1998. The large

² In the Republic of Korea, the Federation of Small Business successfully lobbied for admitting unskilled workers as “industrial trainees” despite long-standing policy of the government to only admit professionals and skilled workers. The industrial trainee programme lasted for many years but the Government eventually abandoned it in favour of a regular “guest worker” programme.

repatriations in the wake of the financial crisis greatly reduced their numbers, but it did not take much time for the numbers of foreign workers in Malaysia to climb up again. Many of the foreign workers who were sent home have apparently found their way back to Malaysia as evidenced by the numbers reported to be without regular status when Malaysia declared another amnesty programme in October 2004.

Dependence on migration is mirrored on the other side of the migration link. The growth of labour outflows reported by some countries of origin has been remarkable. See Table 2 . In Indonesia annual labour outflows in the early 1980s were estimated at a mere 24000 annually. By the late 1990s this had risen to almost 320,000 a year. Migrating for employment as a traditional “rite of passage” for young men in some islands in Indonesia is now a much larger phenomenon, and young women are the bigger participants. The Philippines still remained the largest supplier of labour where the annual outflow of to all destinations at the turn of the century represented about 1.0 percent of the 30.9 million labour force.

The participation of women in migration is by no means a recent phenomenon in the region but what distinguishes recent trends from the past is the scale of their movements. The past two decades have seen ever growing numbers of women from Indonesia, Myanmar, Sri Lanka, Laos, Cambodia and the Philippines moving across borders to work as domestic helpers in neighboring countries. Women from these countries, except perhaps Myanmar, now outnumber the men in migration flows. This trend is expected to gain further momentum as demand for “care-givers” rise with the rapid ageing of populations in some parts of the region and with increasing proportions of their national income being spent for caring for the elderly.

The movement of technical workers has so far represented a small proportion of total flows but their share is growing as the region’s economies shift to more and more sophisticated services and manufactures. Their actual numbers are not easily discernible from statistics on admissions since they enter countries under many different admission categories, from tourists to business visitors and investors. Since there is little cause for concern over their treatment most professionals are able to travel without registering with the origin country authorities, while admitted fairly liberally in countries needing their services. A related notable trend has been the growth of admission of students in countries like Japan, Korea, Singapore, Malaysia, and China. Foreign students now comprise a small but already significant population who eventually become entrants to the labour force. Their employment is being encouraged by easier procedures for changing immigration status.

In countries with ageing populations planning has already started for a large host of measures to permit people to stay longer in the workforce such as different ways of organizing work, factories and work schedules redesigned for older workers, strengthened social security systems, and the like. Liberalizing immigration remains a contentious issue but undoubtedly seen as being part of the solution. Japan, for example, has started to open avenues for admission of foreign-trained nurses and care-givers and is including the subject in trade partnership agreements.

B. Challenges to governance of cross-border movements

The region faces three major challenges in the governance of labour migration.

- How to address illegal migration?
- How to manage the demand for labour?
- In the medium to long-term, how to deal with the problem of ageing and the consequences of declining labour supply
- How to make migration not a necessity but a choice.

Addressing illegal migration

Whether one is talking of countries with well-protected borders like Korea or Japan, or countries with porous borders like Malaysia or Thailand, the problem of illegal migration is large, problematic, and bound to grow in the future. For the Asia Pacific region as a whole there may be as many as one out of every four migrant workers in an irregular status, but the ratio is much larger in some countries than others. In Japan, at the end of 2004 there were some 192,000 registered foreign workers with work visas while 43,000 foreign nationals temporarily admitted as tourists and the like were found to be illegally working (a ratio of slightly more than 1 in 5). In Malaysia the ratio of undocumented to authorized migrant workers is closer to 1 in 3, or an estimated 700,000 irregular migrants out of a total of about 2.2 million foreign workers. In Thailand they were surprised to find a few years ago that they had over 1.8 million unregistered Burmese, Laotians, and Cambodians in their farms, factories, and homes representing about 5 percent of the total labour force.

The phenomenon has grown because borders are difficult to secure, because there is strong demand for labour especially in the informal economy, and because of problems with enforcement of impractical regulations which easily turn regular into irregular migrants. Thailand has about 2000 kilometers of borders with its neighbouring countries, in many areas without natural barriers except for small rivers. Most of the economies large informal sectors that thrive on the growth of domestic consumption, tourism, and exports. Prominent in these sectors are small scale enterprises that operate with very low margins and which have enormous difficulties keeping native workers. Many governments also may unwittingly exacerbate the problem by making it expensive for employers to comply with the law because of heavy fees for registering their migrant workers, or by making it much more costly for the workers to go through the normal legal procedures.

The problem is not infrequently caused also by tolerating the unauthorized entrance of foreign workers through the “back door” whenever the labour market is tight. This short-sighted “non-policy”, premised on the assumption that it is much easier to kick out undocumented workers at one’s whim than those with valid authorization to work, often backfires because as a consequence it fosters dependence of the economy on low-wage foreign labour, compounds the problem of regulating working conditions and protecting workers, and encourages illicit activities to thrive.

Illegal migration is a serious issue that needs resolution. From a human rights perspective it represents a huge problem. Those who cannot effectively access their right to basic protection under national laws especially labour laws suffer daily abuses and exploitation in silence. To the citizens in the countries of employment it means the government’s loss of control over borders and thus over security. To the citizens of origin countries it means the failure of their state to generate growth and provide better alternatives at home.

There are many factors making it difficult to deal effectively with illegal migration. To start with, there are economic rewards to moving, both for the workers and the employers, even if means violating the policies of states. Because economies differ in labour productivity (in some cases by a factor of 50) there can be significant “efficiency” gains when labour moves from less to more productive employment. It is very tempting, for example, for an Indonesian to cross over to Malaysia for work. If she has a son whom she wants to go to university in Bandung she will need to work 24 months at the Indonesian minimum wage in order to pay for his tuition for one year. However, if she crosses over to Malaysia she only needs to work 4 months in order to earn what her son needs.

The income differences between countries need not be large to make migration a sensible option for many. It partly depends on how much it would cost to get into a job across the border, and how much one can expect to earn. An unskilled Laotian worker can expect to earn 4000 bahts a month in Thailand compared to 1600 bahts at home. It only costs about 2000 bahts to cross the border and find work. This is through “informal” ways, by walking across the bridge and paying one’s way through the usual controls. This easily explains the magnitude of worker migration from Laos to Thailand.

A recently concluded agreement between Thailand and Laos aimed at curbing illegal migration has greatly increased the cost of migrating for employment. Under the terms of the agreement Laotian workers have to go through the formal processes of securing jobs in Thailand through licensed brokers and obtain a work visa. The Laotian Government has since adopted a procedure whereby a worker applies for a passport, obtains a health certificate and police clearance, applies with a licensed agent in Vientiane who works with a licensed agent in Thailand, applies for a Thai work permit and entry visa, and is taken by the broker to the employer. Fees and taxes have to be paid every inch of the way, so that the whole process adds up to a princely sum of 18,000 bahts. Since the worker still ends up working for 4000 bahts a month it is not surprising that the system has not worked. The workers still go mainly through informal channels.

A second factor making control of illegal migration difficult lies in the fact that, as pointed out earlier, informal work is alive and well in many countries, and even growing faster than formal work.

A third factor is commercialization of migration processes in Asia Pacific. States have left the organization of migration largely in the hands of profit-taking brokers whose function is not only to match the worker to a job, but also to help the worker go through the regulatory hurdles put across the path of aspiring migrants. These intermediaries provide the service of taking care of all the paper work involved in securing travel documents, getting job contracts approved and registered, getting exit permits, applying for insurance and registering with the welfare fund, going through pre-departure seminar, etc. The more requirements are imposed the more services need to be paid for.

Incoherent policies and measures constitute another important factor contributing to the problem. In the Republic of Korea the use of “trainee schemes” to

bring in unskilled foreign labour and paying them allowances rather than regular wages has produced irregular migration as an unintended consequence. The trainees simply left the scheme soon after they discover that they can easily get regular wages in other establishments. The high rate of drop out from the scheme in order to work for wages, rather than for allowances, has been widely blamed for the growth of the irregular migrant worker population. The 'training scheme' has in effect become another gate for labour migration, something which was always recognized in the origin countries but which policy-makers in Korea tried to hide by using another term.

Most of the countries admitting foreign workers like the Republic of Korea, Taiwan (Province of China), Singapore, Brunei Darussalam and Malaysia have adopted one form of "guest worker" programme or another, premised on the idea of rotation, without giving unskilled or low-skilled foreign workers any possibility of gaining a right to stay permanently. The employment of unskilled foreign workers is usually based on one-year, but renewable, work permits. Migration is treated only as a means to meet temporary shortages in the labour market, one that can be turned on or off depending on the economic conditions. The problem is that such policies are out of sync with the interest of the employer and the migrant worker who both want to prolong the relationship. The former does not want to lay off a worker he or she has trained and hire a raw one again every few years. The worker does not want to leave a place where the job is already familiar and where he or she may already gain seniority after proving his or her capacity.

Nevertheless states go to so much trouble in order to counter this perfectly natural tendency and human reality. Some have sought to prevent settlement of unskilled foreign workers by not permitting them to become pregnant. They are of course sent home if they dare to marry a native. Some require employers to put up bonds tied to return of their workers, exclude them from membership in social security, tying them to specific employers through their work visas, restricting their mobility to certain locations, and not allowing family reunification. Fearing settlement of foreign workers, a provincial governor in Thailand recently complained that migrants in his province have become "too comfortable". He said they now engage in such objectionable practices as celebrating festivals by dancing in their traditional costumes. He was so upset that he issued a decree restricting their use of motorcycles and mobile phones.

Managing the demand for labour

In Asia Pacific and in other parts of the world most countries have what are usually referred to as "employer-driven" immigration policies. That means the state does not decide on limits or ceiling on how many people to let in, but leaves it to administrators to decide when requested by employers for permission to employ foreign workers. The rationale is to insure that immigration policy is driven by what the economy needs, rather than by humanitarian or other reasons. Even traditional immigration countries like Canada, the US and Australia have been shifting markedly from immigration driven by "family-reunification" to immigration driven by the requirements to be competitive in the global economy.

In principle it is easy enough to think of designing immigration policies that would be responsive to the requirements of the economy. Translating the principle into practice

is however much more difficult. How does one establish that there is a “shortage” of workers? A shortage exists only when demand exceeds supply at a given price. If the price rises, there may no longer be an excess demand. If the price is high enough there may be an excess supply. Governments usually employ the so-called “labour-market test” whereby administrators seek evidence that every effort has been taken to find native workers (i.e. jobs remain unfilled after 2 to 4 weeks of advertisement). The system however lends itself to easy abuse. Employers can easily claim that they cannot find enough workers to fill a position and must therefore be allowed to bring in foreign workers.

The problem is that wage structures are difficult to disturb. Even if no one applies for a job to clean the toilet the cleaner will not be offered a higher salary than say a secretary for whose job there may be plenty of applicants. Social status attaches to jobs and hierarchies especially in wages must be maintained. Hence there are social limits to using wages as a means of motivating native workers to accept certain low-status jobs.

Government generally find it extremely difficult to decide on the merits of a claim that there is a shortage of labour. If a hotelier claims that there is a shortage of cooks who can prepare “peach flambé” how will the labour market analyst be able to assess if this claim is valid or not? Or how does one decide if there is a shortage of “entertainers”? One entertainer like Madonna can entertain a couple of thousand fans at the same time, but an entertainer in a bar in Ginza may only be able to entertain one client at a time. When employers in Thailand were asked how many work permits they wanted, the Department of Labour registered over 1.6 million jobs for which permits were sought. The Department of Labour did not even bother to ask the employers what wages they offered.

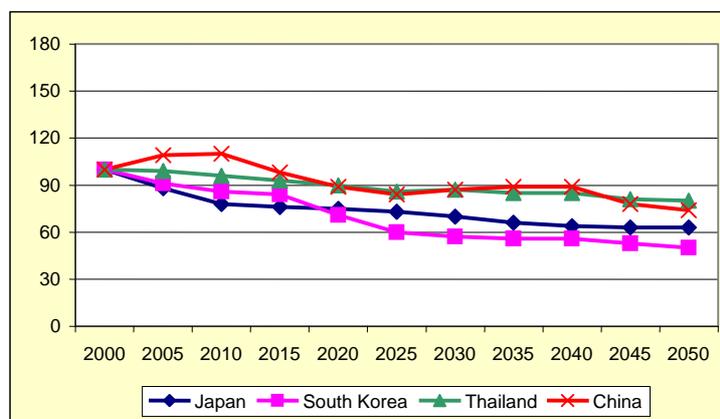
There are some occupations that native workers, faced with a choice, tend to leave right away. In most countries the first ones to feel starved of workers are small enterprises – the family businesses that have a few workers outside of the family. Naturally an ambitious young man will not hang around a small firm where the only chance of getting promoted is to marry the boss’ daughter. Most would want to go to Hyundai or Samsung where there are opportunities for promotion, for assignments in subsidiaries or branches abroad, and which have HRD Departments busy organizing self-improvement programmes and activities for families like summer camps.

Shortages of labour are also often claimed for the so-called 3 D jobs- those jobs the Japanese were the first ones to label as 3-K jobs (cleaning streets, washing dishes, mining coal). Every society has them but what is interesting is that they are not always the same jobs. In some countries construction work, though dangerous, still attract many young natives because they pay well. Many 3-D jobs are disdained not because they are inherently unlikeable but because they do not pay well, and because they do not pay well they have low social status. If wages are to remain high, numbers must be limited thus entry must be restricted. In some rich countries construction workers are well organized, and do not look too kindly to entry of new members. In Europe there is a long history of restricting entry into certain trades. All kinds of excuses were used to restrict entry. An account dating back to 14th C Tübingen tells of a young guild apprentice being kicked out of the carpentry guild because the masters found out that his grandmother was an illegitimate child!

Ageing and decline of labour force

There has been a remarkable, historically unprecedented decline in fertility and mortality in Asia, especially in East and Southeast Asia, during the second half of the 20th century. For Asia as a whole the total fertility rate (TFR) declined by more than half, from 5.9 in 1950-55 to 2.7 in 1995-2000.³ In China, Hong Kong, Republic of Korea the TFR declined by more than two-thirds over that period. By the end of the century fertility rate was below replacement level in East Asia. In Southeast Asia the fertility rate declined by more than half during the second half of the century, from nearly 6.0 to 2.8 children per woman. As a consequence the population of Japan will begin to decline after 2010, and those of Korea and China after 2035. In China the population aged 15-64 will begin to decline after reaching 1,007 million in 2025.

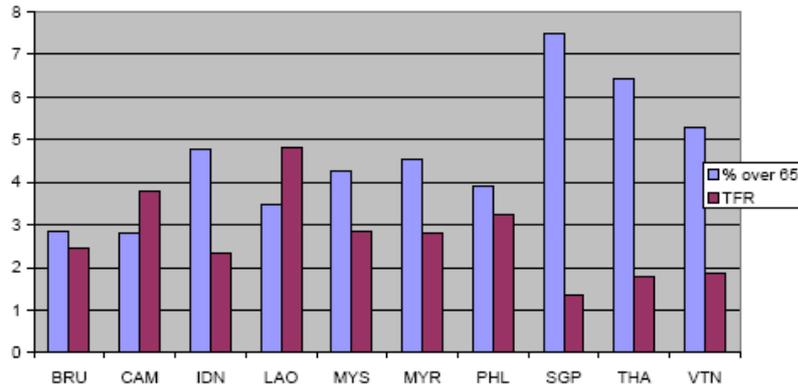
Figure 2 Declining population cohort of 15-24 years (index 2000 = 100)



The ageing of the population will soon be very noticeable in Japan, Korea, Singapore and Thailand because young population cohorts from ages 15 to 24 have already started to decline. In just another 22 years one will no longer find many young people roaming the now fun and lively districts of COEX in Seoul or Shinjuku-ku in Tokyo. Their numbers will be cut in half by 2030 in Korea, by 40 percent in Japan, and by almost 20 percent in Thailand. Because of this demographic phenomenon these countries are going to be faced with some difficult choices, and sooner rather than later. The magnitude of the decline is sure to affect the productivity of these countries, their ability to imbibe or invent new technologies, their propensities to save or consume, hence their ability to sustain the standards of living that many now enjoy. With dependency ratios rapidly rising, those who are working will be taxed much more heavily than before in order to support the rest of the population who are no longer able to work. Moreover, with growing life expectancy, old-age care becomes more complex and demanding, hence more costly.

Figure 3: Fertility rate and population of elderly

³ See Jones, Gavin "Underlying Factors in International Labour Migration in Asia: Population, Employment and Productivity Trends" Working Paper No.1, ILO Regional Programme on Governance of Labour Migration, Bangkok, 2008.



Source: World Development Indicators, data for 2002

Creating jobs at home

There is finally the challenge facing countries that are unable to create jobs as fast as the growth of their workforces. In Southeast Asia the labour force grew at a fairly high rate of 2.2 percent a year over the first half of the current decade, but is expected to go down to 1.8 percent a year until 2015. That still means some 5.6 million additional workers each year to provide jobs for, in addition absorbing into full employment many who are still underemployed. In China there will be 4.3 million new entrants every year. From 2000 to 2004 China's GDP grew by over 50 percent but employment only rose, in the net, by 5 percent. This explains the astounding 88 percent growth in labour productivity in East Asia over the past ten years.

Stahl conducted an exercise where he compared the growth of non-agricultural wage employment in various countries with the projected rate of growth of their labour force to estimate the number of non-agricultural wage jobs per 100 extra or additional members of the labour force. Assuming that the growth rate of non-agricultural wage employment from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s would continue unchanged, he found that this would be rapid enough to absorb only 30 per cent of the extra labour force in Indonesia and 75 per cent in the Philippines, though in China and Thailand it could more than absorb all additional workers. In making similar estimates for China and India based on more recent data Jones found that non-agricultural wage employment actually *fell* over the period 1995-2003, reinforcing Stahl's conclusion that strong pressures exist to migrate overseas, because few opportunities exist in the kinds of employment most desired by labour force entrants.

C. Responding to the challenges of governance

The growing phenomenon of illegal migration clearly points to the need for countries to ensure that they have coherence between their immigration policies and their economic strategies. This of course is easier said than done because what makes economic sense may not be easy to sell politically. Long before Korea adopted a

regular temporary foreign worker policy (EPS) most economic policy-makers were already convinced that the “trainee scheme” has become a gate for illegal migration, but the Federation of Small Business was a powerful group which resisted reform. In Thailand the shrimp exports will collapse over night if the borders were closed – over 90 percent of the workers in shrimp processing are from Myanmar and Laos – so the borders are likely to remain porous. It takes political leadership to engineer structural adjustments and insure coherence between economic policies and immigration policies.

There are only a few examples in Asia – Korea being notable exception – where migration of workers is organized on a government-to-government basis and subsidized by both. There is an absence of state bodies in organizing movements in most instances and this has led to a degree of commercialization of migration processes not found in other regions. The role of private intermediaries may be credited for the rapid expansion of the system and its relative efficiency, but there have been serious problems with fraud and abuse, making migration a high cost and risky undertaking for many migrant workers. Many governments of origin countries have had to take strong measures to address problems of fraudulent job offers or organized schemes for smuggling workers clandestinely through borders, and to put limits on fees charged from workers, but seldom with any significant effect. These have only proven successful where action by authorities of destination countries give more teeth to measures taken by their counterparts in countries of origin.

When a country already has a large population of undocumented workers, national authorities usually opt to declare amnesty and regularize them. While this is a welcome step to address a big problem, authorities unfortunately often make the mistake of imposing conditions which defeat their objective. Revenue-raising side-objectives are often attached to regularization programmes such as imposing stiff fees for registration. The consequence is to discourage employers from registering their undocumented workers.

Thailand and Malaysia have experimented with various measures to address the problem through heightened border controls, amnesties and registrations, deportations, allowing temporary admissions under industry quotas, and restricting the migrants to certain areas. They have recently also entered into agreements for joint management of migration with source country governments. Malaysia offered amnesty to irregular migrants in a four month period bridging late 2004 and early 2005. However, only about 380,000 of the estimated 0.8 to 1.2 million irregular migrants availed of the offer. Thailand undertook a registration campaign and offered amnesty to irregular migrants from July to August 2004 and around 1.3 million irregular migrants registered. Subsequent re-registrations attracted much fewer migrants however and the number fell to 344 thousand by June 2005.

It is clear that migration controls alone will not be adequate to deal with these problems. Reform of labour market policies, the development of strong labour institutions, the involvement of employers’ and workers’ organizations, and cooperation with source countries are also important elements of an effective approach to the complex issues that arise with migration. The problem needs to be addressed on a broad front since it has many dimensions –protection to asylum seekers, displacement of unskilled native workers, impact on labour cost in

construction and labour-intensive exports, concerns over national security, relations with friendly neighbouring states, human rights of victims, education of migrants' children, among others.

Table 1 How Per Capita Incomes compared among Asia Pacific Countries
Relative to GDP per capita of :

	<i>Japan</i>		<i>Singapore</i>		<i>Taiwan(China)</i>		<i>Hong Kong (China)</i>	
	<u>1990</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>2000</u>	<u>1990</u>	<u>2000</u>
Indonesia	2.6	1.9	5.3	3.2	8	5.2	4.8	2.9
Philippines	3	2.6	5.9	4.3	9	7	5.4	4
Thailand	6.3	5.3	12.7	8.7	19.3	14.3	11.6	8.1
China	1.3	2.3	2.5	3.7	3.9	6.1	2.3	3.4
Vietnam	0.4	1.1	0.8	1.7	1.2	2.8	0.7	1.6
R. of Korea	24.5	26	49	42.2	74.4	69.5	44.6	39.2
Singapore	50	61.6			151.8	164.8	90.9	92.9
Malaysia	10.3	10.4	20.6	16.9	31.3	27.8	18.7	15.7

Sources: WB, World Development Indicators, 2002
 ADB Statistical Indicators 2003

Table 2 Average Annual Labour Emigration to all destinations based on Emigration
Clearance issued by National Authorities

	1975-79	1980-84	1985-89	1990-94	1995-99	2000-04
East Asia						
China		37600	61100	135000	320000	
Korea, Rep.of	79900	142600	52100	20200	n.a.	n.a.
Mongolia						
South-east Asia						
Cambodia						
Indonesia	10400	24400	63500	148900	321300	480393*
Lao PDR						
Malaysia						
Myanmar			8100	9000		
Philippines	42400	274000	353900	471000	562000	890266**
Singapore						
Timor-Leste						
Thailand	6300	60100	89600	86800	193100	149311
Viet Nam						55860

Table 3 East Asia Projection of Labour Force 25-64 years,

	2000	2005	2010	2015	2020	2025	2030	2035	2040	2045	2050
Japan	100	100	98	93	89	87	84	80	74	70	66
Rep Korea	100	106	111	113	114	111	104	97	89	83	77
Singapore	100	109	117	122	124	121	114	107	103	102	102
Malaysia	100	114	130	143	158	171	182	191	199	205	207
Thailand	100	108	116	122	125	126	126	126	125	123	120
China	100	107	113	120	121	122	118	122	108	106	104
Philippines	100	116	132	151	169	185	200	213	223	230	233
Indonesia	100	112	125	137	146	153	159	163	164	162	159

Source: Jones, G.