
An Overview on COVID-19 and its Impact on Migration in Malaysia

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Abstract - The COVID-19 pandemic has affected countries all over the world. Many countries have imposed restrictive measures, such as lockdowns, shelter-in-place, and stay-at-home orders, as an attempt to control the pandemic at a local level. However, these measures also hit the economy hard. This paper predicts the impact of COVID-19 on migration in Malaysia based on the experience during the Asian Financial Crisis. Migrant workers contribute a large portion of the labour market in Malaysia. Thousands of migrant workers are affected due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Besides, the implementation and re-imposition of multiple phases of Movement Control Order (MCO) which worsened the economy. Therefore, there is a need to review the possible effect of COVID-19 on migration as it would greatly affect the labour market and the economy as a whole.

Keywords - COVID-19, Migration, Malaysia's Economy, Financial Crisis

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I. Introduction

In 2019, the world was facing a deadly infectious disease exacerbated by severe acute respiratory syndrome coronavirus 2 (SARS-CoV-2), known as coronavirus disease (COVID-19). By 7th April 2021, the COVID-19 pandemic affected 223 nations, with 132,046,206 confirmed positive cases and 2,867,242 deaths (World Health Organization, 2021).

The first case of COVID-19 was found in Malaysia on 25th January 2020, and was tracked back to three previous encounters with Singaporean nationals. COVID-19 identified the first of the aforementioned Malaysians on

4th February. He developed a fever and a cough after returning from Singapore. On the 12th September 2021, the Malaysia's Ministry of Health (MOH) announced a total of 1,979,698 cases with 20,711 deaths. Selangor had the most cases (641,635), followed by Kuala Lumpur (180,067). On 26th August 2021, the highest new cases per day were recorded, with 24,599 cases. To control the spread of COVID-19 and reduce the number of active cases in Malaysia, the Malaysian government initiated a COVID-19 immunisation program which started in February 2021. As seen in Figure 1, the number of new cases in 2021 is started to decrease (Ministry of Health Malaysia, 2021).



Figure 1: Number of COVID-19 cases from 29th January 2020 to 12th September 2021
 Ministry of Health Malaysia (2021)

COVID-19 is a global concern, and numerous preventive measures have been implemented to ensure the virus's spread can be slowed. Countries around the world started adopting containment initiatives aimed at "flattening the curve" of COVID-19 infections well before the World Health Organization (WHO) declared it as a pandemic. The pandemic COVID-19 has also drawn the attention of researchers to estimate its possible impact on the migration of labour. Therefore, the main objective of this paper is to predict the impact of COVID-19 on the migration in Malaysia's labour market. There is a need to review the possible effect of COVID-19 as it would greatly affect the labour market and the economy as a whole.

II. Malaysia's labour market during COVID-19 pandemic

The COVID-19 and Movement Control Order (MCO) have a direct impact on Malaysia's labour market. Malaysia's labour market remained challenging in January 2021 as a result of an increase in the number of new COVID-19 cases and the re-imposition of multiple phases of MCO starting on 13th January 2021 and extending in most states until 4th February 2021. During this time, only five critical economic sectors were permitted to operate, and interstate and inter-district travel were prohibited. As a result, the country's labour supply situation changed modestly in January 2021, by a rise in the labour force, where an increase in working people outpacing an increase in unemployed people.

In terms of economic sectors, the number of employment has declined especially in tourism-related industries such as lodging, food and beverage facilities, transportation and storage, and arts, culture, and leisure activities, signalling that the pandemic has had a negative effect on these sub-sectors. The employment in agriculture and mining and quarrying has continued to fall over the last seven months, while surprisingly the employment in manufacturing and construction has increased monthly (ILO, 2020).

This incident resulted in workplace closures and reduced working hours, which had an impact on the global labour market in 2020. According to the International Labour Organization's (ILO) latest annual predictions, global working hours will be 8.8 percent shorter in 2020 than in the fourth quarter of 2019, equating to 255 million full-time employment. In 2020, there were 114 million fewer jobs than in 2019. 81 million people leaving their jobs have turned to inactivity while unemployment has increased by 33 million people. As a result, the global labour force participation rate declined by 2.2 percentage points in 2020 (DOSM, 2021).

III. Overview of migration in Malaysia

There are estimated 272 million overseas refugees worldwide. The number of people born in countries other than their native country has risen since 1970. The scale and speed of migration, described by the International Organization for Migration (IOM) as "the movement of people away from their usual residence, either over an

international boundary or within a state," are notoriously difficult to predict since it can correlate with events such as extreme conflict, economic crisis, or war.

Malaysia is one of the most populated countries in South-east Asia, with people hailing from various ethnicities and religions. Malaysians are predominantly Malay and Indigenous (68.8%), with a smaller proportion of Chinese (23.2%) and Indians (7%) (DOSM, 2017). Malay and Indigenous ethnic groups are known as 'Bumiputera', and have been given certain civil rights as a result of citizenship agreements signed after Malaysia's independence from British colonial rule. In the early 1920s, the migration of people from other countries to Malaysia culminated in creating a multiracial republic. The majority of the refugees arrived from China and India at the time. Initially, all refugees who arrived in this country were mostly looking for work. The Chinese and Indian communities contributed to the increase in the region's population (Nagayam, 1992; Abdullah, 2019; Abdullah, Theodossiou & Zangelidis, 2020).

Human migrations have existed in Malaysia for a long time under British rule due the labour shortage in agriculture, mining, and export industry in the entire country. Thus, the British implemented an open-door policy for taking migrant employees to Malaysia from South China, the Philippines, India, and Indonesia (Nagayam, 1992). Simultaneously, in 1970, the New Economic Policy (NEP) was adopted, which had a significant effect on the labour migration to Malaysia. This policy prioritised development in the public and export-oriented sectors (Sareya, Mansur & Mahmud, 2015). As a result, the number of foreign workers has slowly increased since then (Sireh & Arif, 2001). More agricultural workers, particularly from Indonesia (Aji Irawan et.al, 2019) and the Philippines, were required and accepted.

According to the DOSM's Migration Survey Study 2018, 1.6 percent out of 32.4 million population of Malaysia are migrants. Where 10.7 percent of total migrants were foreign migrants, and the remaining were domestic migrants. As mentioned earlier the international migration to Malaysia is mostly motivated by job opportunities. As seen in Table 2, migration due to occupation is approximately 73.8 percent, while migration due to climate and other factors is the smallest.

Table 2: Internal migrants and international migrants by reasons for migration, Malaysia, 2018

Reasons for migration	Internal Migrants	International Migrants	Total
Career	24.3	73.8	60.2
Education	3.3	2.2	3.2
Environment	22.4	0.6	20.1
Marriage & Divorce	4.8	3.7	4.7
Follow Family	44.2	19.5	41.5
Others	1.0	0.2	0.9

Department of Statistics Malaysia (2020)

IV. COVID-19 pandemic impact and prediction of Malaysia economic crisis

The global economy is on the verge of a severe recession as a result of the rapid spread of COVID-19. According to the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), the worst-case scenario would result in a half-point reduction in global growth. Similarly, organisations such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF), the World Bank, and the Secretary-General of the United Nations predict global stagnation and severe economic depression would happen in several countries (Khanna, 2020).

The COVID-19 pandemic has grown to unprecedented biomedical, financial, and humanitarian proportions. Malaysia's predicament is exacerbated by the fact that the new government, which has been the ruling coalition of Malaysia in early March 2020 and is still dealing with a massive financial pressures and the effects of the global shut-down on trade and tourism (ILO, 2020) (Ratul Maknu et.al, 2021). Thus, if COVID-19 continues and MCO remains in place, Malaysia could face a serious economic depression similar to what occurred in 1997 during the Asian Financial Crisis.

In the *Surviving the Storm*, the latest edition of the World Bank's Malaysia Economic Monitor, published on 25th June, 2020, Malaysia's economy is expected to contract by 3.1 percent in 2020 due to a sharp drop in economic activity caused by COVID-19. As the pandemic subsides, the World Bank predicts inflation will resume at a 6.9 percent rate in 2021. Malaysia's aggregate investment fell for the fifth consecutive quarter in Q1 2020, falling by 4.6 percent (compared to a 0.7 percent drop in Q4 2019) due to the widespread COVID-19. Malaysia's goods and services exports fell 7.1 percent for the third consecutive quarter in Q1 2020 (-3.4 percent in Q4 2019), the largest quarterly drop since the Global Financial Crisis in 2009. Private consumption fell to 6.7 percent in Q1 2020, from 8.1 percent in Q4 2019, owing largely to the significant impact of COVID-19 and the MCO on

shopping, transportation, leisure and tourism, and durable goods consumption in the previous year (World Bank, 25th June, 2020).

Thus, Malaysia's current economic condition demonstrates that the country faces a high risk of economic depression due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Additionally, it would also have a direct impact on the socio-economic system, including internal and international migration. According to Richard et al. (2011), migration is influenced by a variety of factors. According to their hypothesis, people migrate for a variety of reasons: to increase their incomes; to join family members; to flee persecution; and to escape environmental or other risks, often temporarily. While the quantities of these drivers will fluctuate over the next few decades. Environmental change has emerged as a significant factor in the modern era (Richard et. al, 2011). Pandemic Covid-19 might have the same effect as climate change by affecting several additional migratory factors. Thus, this research will adopt the methodology proposed by Richard et al. (2011) to understand the influence of the Covid-19 epidemic on migration.

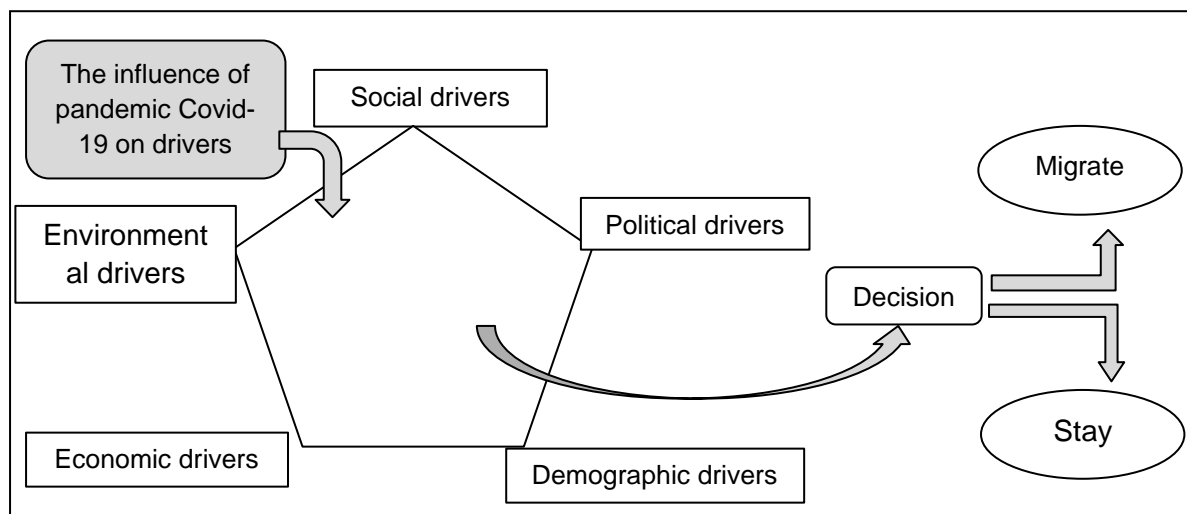


Figure 3: Covid-19 impact on migration

This paper is based on a postpositivist philosophy that promotes an objective, if flawed, approach to social knowledge. Additionally, this study places a higher premium on quantitative findings than on qualitative ones. Figure 4 below portrays the six steps process for methodology of this study.

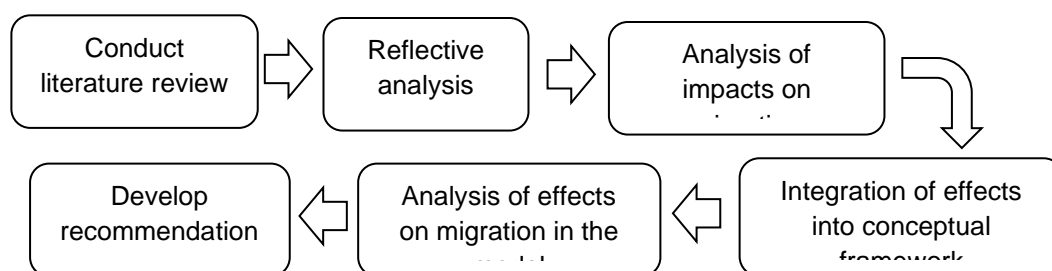


Figure 4: Six steps process for methodology

V. Impact of Economic Crisis on Migration

Back in the 1900s, The Great Depression precipitated a sharp escalation of the foreign labour migration downturn. In Canada, for example, the number of landed immigrants fell from 166,783 in 1928 to 14,382 in 1933. There are many countries that repatriated a large number of people following the Great Depression (Koser, 2009). Throughout the economic crisis, the majority of countries placed a variety of restrictions, most notably on travel, in an attempt to minimize or eliminate cross-border movement of people. Most researchers believe that the new restrictions on labour migration during the economic crisis is one of the consequences of the increase in the

number of illegal migrations. For instance, in Europe due to the Oil Crisis refugees attempted new migration routes to reach Europe and gain entry into the labour market (Koser, 2009), resulting in an increase in the number of illegal migrants in Europe.

While in Asia most countries, including Malaysia, have been affected by the Asian Financial Crisis, which has impacted both internal and international migration. According to Ahmad S. N (1998), Malaysia is one of the countries that were most affected due to the Asian Financial Crisis. In 1997, the currency crisis contributed to a serious recession in Malaysia and it negatively affected the labour force participation rate. According to the Malaysia's Human Resource Ministry, around 60,000 people in Malaysia were laid off between 1997 and 1998 as a result of the Asian Financial Crisis. This figure includes foreign workers who have been laid off. In the first quarter of 1998, migrants comprised an average of 12.5 percent of retrenched workers. This data is extremely important in demonstrating that the Asian Financial Crisis had a severe impact on Malaysian employees, including migrant workers (Pillai, P, 1998). As a result of the crisis's effects on migrant workers, it was predicted that labour migration, especially the international migration in Malaysia would decline. This is supported by Ahmad S. N (1998), in his study on the impact of Asian Financial Crisis based on Bangladesh perspective where he found that the number of labour from Bangladesh to Malaysia decreased from 66,631 in 1996 to 2,844 in 1997. This sharp decline in 1997 was due to the stringent restrictions that the Malaysian government imposed on labour imports to the country including new regulations on work permits and the implementation of a regulation requiring migrant workers to contribute their monthly wages to a foreign workers' provident fund. The policy that has been implemented is to mitigate the crisis's impact on the local labour force. This impact, however, may be understated because the data did not include the number of illegal immigrants who might have lost jobs due to the Asian Financial Crisis.

Skleton (2004) stated that the number of foreign workers in some Asian countries were increasing after the Asian Financial Crisis. Table 3 shows the number of foreign workers in Asian economies after the Asian Financial Crisis. It can be seen that the number of foreign workers in those countries, including Malaysia, has increased in 1998 and 1999. However, this figure does not include the undocumented migrants, of whom at least 500,000 were deported from Malaysia and Thailand alone during and after the crisis. The increasing number of foreign workers in Malaysia is due to the push and pull factor. Most of the foreign workers are from Indonesia as the country was hit the most during the Asian Financial Crisis, thus it forced the labour force to migrate to other countries for a job. Malaysia is one of the host countries that offers job opportunities especially for the unskilled labour force to fill the labour shortage in the agricultural sector.

Table 3: Total number of foreign workers in Asian economies, 1997-1999

Country	1997	1998	1999
Malaysia	959,000	1,014,500	1,071,400
Hong Kong SAR)	171,000	180,600	193,700
Japan	630,000	660,000	670,000
Taiwan Province of China	245,697	255,606	278,000

Skleton (2004), Department of Statistical Malaysia (2021)

Table 4 shows the estimated numbers of registered and illegal migrant workers in Malaysia in 1998. It can be seen that most of the illegal immigrants in Malaysia were from Indonesia, approximately 475,000 persons in east and west Malaysia. During the Asian Financial Crisis, a specific migration mechanism was reported: increased exploitation by "middlemen" or agents, who took advantage of increased demand in crisis-affected countries to move elsewhere for work, especially from Indonesia. Therefore, this would increase the number of illegal migrant workers in the destination countries including Malaysia.

The discussion in this section indicates that the economic crisis has a wide-ranging influence on the economies of the countries involved. In terms of labour, this leads not only to an increase in unemployment, but also to labour shifts or migration to other regions in search of better economic opportunities. This situation is akin to the effect of a Covid-19 epidemic on a nation. It wreaks havoc on the country's economy as a whole, resulting in a sharp increase in unemployment. Covid-19, like the economic crisis, affects more than one country's labour force. As a result, examining the effect of the economic crisis on migration is the best approach to estimate the impact of Covid-19 on migration. While it is not a perfect prediction, it is the greatest option for analysing and projecting the expected effect of the covid1-9 outbreak on migration.

Table 4: Approximate stocks of registered and illegal migrant workers in Malaysia by source countries/economies (in thousands) in 1998

Country of Origin	East	West
South Asia		
Legal	-	247
Illegal	-	258
Indonesia		
Legal	170	340
Illegal	120	355
Philippines		
Legal	96	11
Illegal	83	10
Thailand		
Legal	-	10
Illegal	-	8
Other Asia		
Legal	-	5
Illegal	9	40
Western Countries		
Legal	5	41
Illegal	-	-
Asia Total	478	1284

Manning (2001)

VI. Migrant Workers

Based on discussion in the previous topics, it can be seen that the best approach to predict the COVID-19 pandemic impact on migration in Malaysia is by examining the impact of the Asian Financial Crisis on migration in 1998. The main reason is that the COVID-19 pandemic potentially gives a great impact on Malaysia and on the global economy similar to the economic crisis. Thus, by studying the impact of Asian Financial Crisis on migration in Malaysia, it could give a presumption on the impact on migration due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

COVID-19 has severely impacted Malaysia's economy by forcing economic sectors to close and it also has increased the unemployment rate in Malaysia. This is a very similar effect to Malaysia during the Asian Financial Crisis. However, the impact of financial or economic crises was unequal across national economic sectors, which means that even within a single crisis, they affected economic sectors that employed migrant workers differently. For example, Koser (2009) reported that the Asian Financial Crisis affected the construction and manufacturing sectors in Thailand. Construction suffered the most as output prices and interest rates rose, while manufacturing slowed as the cost of imported inputs rose. Meanwhile, the agricultural sector in Thailand, which is another major employer of migrant workers, has been relatively unaffected by the financial crisis. Thus, the Asian Financial Crises affect differently in each of the sectors in each country/economy. Therefore, the COVID-19 pandemic may have a similar effect on the Malaysian economy. Most of the economic sectors were severely affected due to this pandemic and also the multiple phases of movement control order. However, there are some sectors that were less affected such as the essential services and some manufacturing sectors as they are allowed to open during the movement control order.

The Asian Financial Crisis is having a similar unequal impact on highly qualified migrants. The number of international professionals in the Hong Kong Special Administrative Region has remained stable. However, Malaysia and Thailand experienced minor declines in highly qualified migrants (Koser, 2009). According to a report by IOM in 2009, despite the fact that economic industries with a high proportion of migrant workers have been particularly hard hit by financial crises, migrants have not been heavily reflected in lay-offs. Although a large number of migrant workers were laid off in the construction and primary extractive sectors during the economic crisis, there is little evidence that migrant workers were negatively affected. In most countries, native workers were laid off faster than migrant workers.

Therefore, in the financial crises, there is no evidence of excessive unemployment among migrant workers, and there is no evidence of a specific effect on migrant subgroups. Besides, in the aftermath of the financial crisis, some parts or certain regions were not affected by this crisis and even thrived compared to other regions, as the crisis created new job opportunities in the region. The Oil Crisis, for example, exacerbated unemployment in

Western Europe's retail and construction industries, both of which employed a large number of refugees. At the same time, it created new job opportunities for foreign workers in Middle Eastern oil-rich countries. Another example, Argentina's small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs) were particularly hard hit during the Latin American financial crisis, as they employed a sizable proportion of foreign workers. However, in many cases, workers reopened businesses on their own or through worker-owned cooperatives (Koser, 2009). Thus, this situation also may happen in Malaysia where the COVID-19 pandemic creates new job opportunities such as in the gig economy or encourages workers to start a small scale business. If this situation takes place in the labour market, the COVID-19 pandemic would have a modest impact on the migration of workers in Malaysia.

There are many other explanations on why the foreign workers' employment was not affected by the financial crisis. One is that, most of the unappealing jobs (3D - Dirty, Dangerous and Difficult) to local workers are filled by foreign workers. Therefore, the crisis would not affect them from lay-off or migrate to other places as they were still needed in the market. Another explanation is that foreign workers are easier to hire than local workers because they can tolerate wage changes or increased work hours, for example, and are less likely to be heavily unionised.

VII. Conclusion

Globally, the COVID-19 pandemic is spreading at breakneck speed. This health crisis has affected the global economy and slowed economic recovery. The economic activity stagnates in most countries, and it directly affects the industries. It eventually led to the "bankruptcy" of a large number of businesses, and this led to continuing job losses, and a rise in unemployment rate.

This is a similar situation that existed during the economic crisis. Therefore, to see the impact of pandemic COVID-19 on migration in Malaysia, this paper considers the impact of the economic crisis which is the Asian Financial Crisis on migration in Malaysia. According to previous studies, the economic crisis will have an impact on the global economy and will have a direct impact on internal and international migration due to the economic depression and policy restrictions during and after the economic crisis. It is the same situation during the COVID-19 outbreaks where many countries have been forced to close most economic sectors and their borders due to the alarming situation. This will almost certainly have an immediate effect on internal and international migration.

Based on a report from the Department of Statistics Malaysia, there was an increase in the number of foreign workers in Malaysia following the Asian Financial Crisis. The majority of in-migration into Malaysia at the time was made up of illegal workers from countries struck by the financial crisis. According to previous studies, economic recessions or Asian Financial Crises have different effects depending on the sector and country. The effect of COVID-19 would be similar to the Asian Financial Crisis where it could reduce the employment rates in agriculture and quarrying while it may increase employment rates in manufacturing and construction.

As discussed in this paper, in 2021 there was an increase in the number of working people in Malaysia and it was significantly greater than the increase in unemployed people. This indicates that the demand in the labour market has increased. This might be due to the creation of new jobs during the COVID-19 pandemic, which had a positive impact on employment and the country's economic development. Therefore, this would indirectly affect the internal and international migration of labour in Malaysia.

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