

Chapter 7

Economic Development and International Labour Migration in Malaysia

Machiko Watanabe

Professor

Department of Economics

Meikai University

Abstract

Malaysia made a transition to "labour-shortage economy" in the process of sustained economic development from the 1970s onward. The labour shortage had already become serious in the 1970s, first in the agricultural sector, especially in the rural plantation sector, and then in the construction sector. In the latter half of the 1980s, a labour shortage also occurred in the manufacturing and certain service sectors. Foreign workers who come from Indonesia, the Philippines, Thailand and others not only legally but also illegally have covered labour shortage in these sectors.

The number of foreign workers in Malaysia as a whole had already reached approximately 500,000 by 1984. The number of unskilled and semi-skilled foreign workers increased further after their employment was permitted in the manufacturing sector in 1991. Recent official statistics state that there are at least 1.7 million foreign workers in the country, counting about 1 million unregistered workers. This figure accounts for 20% of the total number of employed persons in Malaysia. In any event, there is no doubt that Malaysia is one of the countries with a large foreign labour population and that her economy is highly dependent on foreign workers. An apparent tendency of Malaysian citizens to avoid low-wage, unskilled occupations that emerged with improvement of the living standard has become another background factor aside from the labour shortage, which is making the country's economy dependent on foreign labour.

The government stressed the transition to a knowledge-based economy and lowering its dependence on foreign workers in the long term, while permitting employment of foreign workers under certain management conditions to cope with the

severe labour shortage. The purpose of the foreign labour management policy lies in preventing excessive reliance on "cheap labour" that foreign workers offer while serving as a measure for adjusting the labour market in response to economic trends. The management policy has been frequently changing the content of work permits, occupation/industry regulations and nationality regulations. Underlying that, however, are considerations catering to socio-economic trends. The special circumstances in Malaysia of having to attract foreign capital to support economic growth, in addition to the sensitive ethnic balance within the country among Malays, Chinese and Indians, are complicating the management of foreign workers.

Regulation of foreign workers based on the government's expectations will bring about an increase in illegal employment and have a strong negative impact on the society, resulting in higher costs for controlling the regulation. In reality, it is also essential to secure cheap labour for plantation and labour-intensive industries in the short-to-medium term as they support the sectors that earn foreign currency for Malaysia. Taking these matters into consideration, further efforts are required from the Malaysian Government toward development of human resources that support the transition to knowledge-based economy and improvement of labour productivity as well as a transparent public policy on foreign workers and its administrative capacity.

要約

マレーシアは、持続的な経済成長の過程で「労働力不足経済」へと移行した。労働力不足は、1970年代末からプランテーションや建設業で、1980年代後半には製造業やサービス業でも深刻化していった。労働力不足を埋めていったのがインドネシア、フィリピンなどからの合法・不法就労者である。

外国人労働者の数は、1980年代半ばで約50万人、製造業での雇用が認められるようになった1990年代にさらに増え、1997年には登録者だけで147万人に達した。その後、アジア経済危機で減少したが、最近の公式統計でも100万人の未登録者を含め約170万人、就業者総数の約2割を占める。全体的な労働力不足に加え、生活水準向上に伴うマレーシア人の低賃金・非熟練職種を忌避する傾向が、外国人労働者依存経済の背景にある。

政府は、長期的には知識基盤型経済への移行を目指す一方で、労働力不足への対応として一定管理の下での外国人労働者雇用を容認してきた。管理政策には、過度の「安い労働力」依存を防ぐことと、景気に対する労働市場調整策としての役割が課されている。これまでの管理政策は、社会経済動向に応じて外

国人雇用の推進と抑制との間で目まぐるしく変わってきた。人種間のバランス問題に加え、経済成長を支える外国資本への配慮というマレーシアの特殊事情が、外国人労働者管理政策の舵取りを複雑にしている。

経済が必要とし、周辺国からの流入圧力が高い場合、政府の思惑による外国人労働者の規制は、結果として不法就労を増やし、社会問題、取締りコストの増大という結果をもたらす。マレーシアの外貨獲得部門を支えているプランテーションや労働集約型産業に対する安い労働力を確保することも現実には必要である。こうした点を考えると、知識基盤型経済への転換を支える人材の育成と同時に、透明性のある外国人管理政策とその運営能力がマレーシア政府によりいっそう求められる。