

RESEARCH NOTE

MIGRANT NETWORKS, CITIZENSHIP, AND SECURITY IN SABAH: A RESEARCH NOTE

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ABSTRACT

This study explores the role of migrant networks in shaping issues of citizenship and security in Sabah, Malaysia, with a focus on Filipino and Indonesian migrant communities. Drawing on a qualitative ethnographic approach, the research examines how these networks enable migrants to navigate complex legal and social landscapes, while also influencing local attitudes and government policies. Despite their significant contributions to Sabah's economy and cultural fabric, migrants face considerable challenges related to legal recognition and social inclusion. The study advocates for migration policies that prioritise integration over exclusion and calls for a nuanced approach to security that balances national interests with the protection of migrants' human rights. The findings underscore the importance of inclusive policies that enhance migrants' access to legal residency, basic services, and meaningful community participation. This research contributes to ongoing debates on migration, citizenship, and security in Malaysia and similar socio-political contexts.

Keywords: migrant networks, citizenship, security, ethnography, Sabah

INTRODUCTION

Sabah, a Malaysian state located on the island of Borneo, has long served as a major destination for migrants seeking economic opportunities and refuge from conflict. Among the most prominent migrant groups are Filipino and Indonesian communities, whose intricate networks play a critical role in shaping both local perceptions of citizenship and national security concerns. These networks are not only essential in helping migrants navigate complex legal and social

challenges but also contribute to the ongoing debates around immigration, sovereignty, and national identity. This study investigates the impact of these migrant networks on issues of legal status, rights, and integration within Sabah's sociopolitical context. Despite their significant contributions to the local economy and cultural fabric, migrants in Sabah continue to face substantial barriers to legal recognition and social acceptance, underscoring the tension between national security priorities and the human rights of migrants. By exploring these dynamics, this research advocates for migration policies that promote integration and uphold human rights, while addressing legitimate security concerns.

METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative ethnographic approach to examine the role of migrant networks in shaping issues of citizenship and security in Sabah. Fieldwork was conducted over a 12-month period (January to December 2023), allowing for an in-depth exploration of migrant communities' experiences and the dynamics of their social networks. Data were collected through a combination of participant observation, in-depth interviews, and focus group discussions. The primary participants included Filipino and Indonesian migrants, community leaders, and representatives from local organisations involved in migrant advocacy. In addition, document analysis was employed to contextualise the findings within the broader frameworks of national migration policies and the socio-political environment of Sabah (Dayang Suria 2011).

Thematic analysis was used to identify recurring patterns and themes related to migrants' social networks, their experiences of marginalisation, and their perceptions of security. This approach enabled a detailed examination of how these networks influence both migrant integration and local security concerns. While the ethnographic method provides rich, contextualised insights into migrant lives, the study is not without limitations. These include the researcher's positionality within the field and the potential biases inherent in the specific sample of participants, which may limit the generalisability of the findings.

OVERVIEW OF MIGRANT NETWORKS

Migrant networks in Sabah, particularly within Filipino and Indonesian communities, are fundamental to migrants' survival and integration. These networks provide essential resources, including employment opportunities, housing, and social support, which are especially critical for undocumented migrants facing legal and social exclusion (Azizah 2009). Often transnational

in nature, these networks connect migrants to their home countries through remittances and the exchange of information, thereby facilitating economic survival and social connections across borders.

Migrant labour in Sabah is indispensable, with workers contributing significantly to key sectors such as agriculture, construction, and domestic work—industries where locals are either unwilling or unavailable to fill labour gaps. Beyond their economic contributions, migrant networks also foster cultural exchange and community building, enriching the local social fabric and enhancing the well-being of both migrants and the broader population (Portes 1998). Despite these positive contributions, however, migrants continue to face substantial challenges in securing legal status and achieving social acceptance (Granovetter 1973). This ongoing marginalisation underscores broader concerns related to citizenship and security in Sabah.

Citizenship remains a central issue for migrant communities, particularly given Malaysia's restrictive nationality laws. The Immigration Act of 1959/1960 and related citizenship policies prioritise ethnic Malays and indigenous groups, leaving many migrants—especially undocumented individuals from the Philippines and Indonesia—in a precarious legal position. This section critically examines the barriers to legal recognition, including bureaucratic inefficiencies, widespread discrimination, and the pervasive fear of deportation, which discourages migrants from pursuing formal legal status. Statelessness, particularly among children, further exacerbates the problem, depriving migrants of access to vital services such as healthcare and education, and reinforcing cycles of poverty and marginalisation.

The challenges surrounding citizenship are further complicated by historical factors, such as post-independence policies and demographic shifts, which have generated tensions over national identity and security. Nevertheless, migrant networks play a crucial role in helping individuals navigate these legal complexities. They provide invaluable support through information dissemination, legal assistance, and advocacy, enabling migrants to better cope with their precarious legal status. This study calls for policy reforms that expand legal pathways to citizenship and enhance access to information for migrants, aiming to reduce systemic inequalities and promote the social integration of migrant communities.

MIGRANT NETWORKS AS SUPPORT SYSTEMS

Migrant networks in Sabah are indispensable for overcoming the challenges posed by Malaysia's restrictive citizenship laws. These networks provide vital resources such as legal advice, information about migrants' rights, and

assistance with documentation, serving as crucial lifelines for migrants—particularly those without legal status. Community-based organisations, often born from these networks, play a central role in raising awareness of migrants' rights and advocating for legal reforms, creating avenues for social and political change.

In addition to addressing legal and bureaucratic obstacles, these networks foster social cohesion, helping migrants develop a sense of belonging and identity in an environment where they are often marginalised. They create spaces for cultural exchange, mutual support, and solidarity, contributing to migrants' resilience. However, the reliance on informal networks also exposes migrants to potential exploitation, particularly in the absence of formal legal protections. Without adequate state-sponsored support, these networks can become double-edged swords—both empowering migrants and rendering them vulnerable to exploitation by unscrupulous employers or service providers.

Empowering migrant communities through robust support networks is therefore essential—not only for improving their legal status but also for ensuring their social inclusion. Strengthening these networks can enhance migrants' ability to contribute fully to Sabah's economy and cultural diversity, while also reducing their vulnerability to exploitation and marginalisation.

SECURITY IMPLICATIONS OF MIGRANT NETWORKS

The increasing presence of migrant networks in Sabah has raised security concerns, particularly among local populations and government authorities. Migrants are often perceived as security threats, with anxieties about crime, resource competition, and cultural integration fuelling these perceptions. This has led to heightened surveillance and restrictive policies that, while framed as measures to protect national security, often exacerbate the vulnerability of migrant communities.

The stigmatisation of migrant networks as sources of insecurity can contribute to divisions within the local population, fostering xenophobic sentiments and social unrest. Security policies, such as increased border patrols and crackdowns on undocumented migrants, undermine trust between migrants and law enforcement agencies, making it more difficult for migrants to seek protection or report crimes. These policies may therefore do more to isolate migrants and entrench their marginalisation than to address actual security concerns.

A more nuanced approach is needed—one that balances legitimate security concerns with the protection of migrants' human rights. Policies aimed at fostering dialogue between migrant communities and local authorities can help mitigate tensions, promote mutual understanding, and create a more secure and harmonious environment for all. Research suggests that integrating migrants into society, rather than isolating them, is likely to lead to better long-term outcomes for both migrants and host communities.

The security landscape in Sabah is complex. While migrants are recognised as essential to the local economy, fears persist about crime, job competition, and social tensions. These concerns, often exacerbated by negative media portrayals of migrants, have led to calls for stricter immigration controls. However, studies indicate that such measures may not address the root causes of insecurity and could further marginalise migrant communities, making them more susceptible to exploitation.

State responses to these security concerns, such as intensified border patrols and immigration crackdowns, have significant consequences. While these measures are presented as necessary for protecting national sovereignty, they often alienate migrant communities, creating an atmosphere of fear and distrust. This environment discourages migrants from seeking legal assistance or reporting abuses, reinforcing their social exclusion and vulnerability.

The negative impact of these security policies on migrants has been profound. Heightened surveillance and border enforcement exacerbate discrimination, social exclusion, and violence against migrants. The fear of deportation or detention leaves many vulnerable to exploitation, and the lack of trust in law enforcement further compounds these risks.

Moreover, these policies strain relations between migrant and local communities, deepening divisions over immigration and security issues. To alleviate these tensions and promote social cohesion, the research advocates for a shift in policy—one that prioritises the protection of migrants' rights while still addressing legitimate security concerns. Rather than focusing solely on security, policies should seek to integrate migrants into the socio-economic fabric of Sabah, fostering a more inclusive and stable society (Dayang Suria 2011).

MIGRANT NETWORKS, CITIZENSHIP, AND SECURITY IN SABAH: CASE STUDIES

The issue of migration in Sabah is intricately connected to broader themes of citizenship, security, and the role of migrant networks. This section presents case studies of two major migrant groups—Filipino and Indonesian migrants—

demonstrating how these communities navigate the complexities of legal status, security concerns, and the support provided by their respective migrant networks. These case studies not only illuminate the challenges faced by these communities but also highlight their resilience strategies, offering insights into the broader implications for migration policy in Sabah.

Case Study 1: Filipino Migrants in Sabah

Filipino migrants, particularly those from the Sulu Archipelago, have long been a significant presence in Sabah, primarily driven by conflict and economic hardship in the Philippines. Despite their substantial contributions to sectors such as agriculture and construction, many Filipino migrants face significant barriers to legal recognition and citizenship.

A considerable portion of the Filipino migrant population in Sabah is undocumented, leaving them in a vulnerable position. Their lack of legal status restricts access to essential services such as healthcare and education, and exposes them to the constant threat of deportation. The social stigma associated with their status exacerbates their precarious living conditions, fostering an environment of fear and insecurity. The persistent uncertainty and bureaucratic obstacles heighten the psychological stress experienced by these migrants.

In this context, migrant networks play a crucial role in supporting Filipino communities. These networks provide legal assistance, advocacy, and practical resources to help migrants navigate the legal landscape and secure basic services. They also facilitate collective action, organising campaigns to address policy gaps and ensure the recognition of migrant rights. However, government crackdowns on undocumented migrants have intensified the vulnerabilities of the Filipino community. The threat of arrest or deportation discourages many migrants from seeking help, reporting crimes, or engaging with authorities, thus heightening their risk of exploitation.

These dynamics underscore the dual role of migrant networks: they provide vital support in the face of legal and social exclusion, but also highlight the systemic barriers that prevent migrants from achieving long-term stability and security.

Case Study 2: Indonesian Migrant Workers in Sabah

Indonesian migrant workers, particularly from East Kalimantan and Sulawesi, represent a significant segment of Sabah's labour force, primarily in low-skilled sectors such as agriculture, construction, and domestic work. However, like

their Filipino counterparts, many Indonesian workers face substantial obstacles to legal recognition and citizenship, leaving them vulnerable to exploitation and abuse.

Many Indonesian migrants enter Sabah on temporary work visas but face significant challenges in extending their stay or transitioning to permanent residency due to restrictive immigration policies. As a result, they often find themselves in a state of legal 'limbo,' with limited access to labour protections and social services. This precarious status increases their vulnerability to labour exploitation, as they are often forced to work under substandard conditions or without proper documentation.

Migrant networks within the Indonesian community play a vital role in providing mutual support and resources. These networks assist with job placements, housing, and access to social services, while also offering workshops and legal education to help migrants better understand their rights and navigate their uncertain status. By fostering a sense of solidarity and community, these networks help mitigate some of the challenges of living in legal and social limbo.

However, Indonesian migrant workers in Sabah also face security-related challenges. Perceptions of Indonesian migrants as security threats—often tied to concerns about crime, job competition, and cultural integration—have influenced government responses, leading to heightened surveillance and stricter enforcement measures. These policies, though framed as necessary for national security, have had the unintended consequence of deepening distrust between migrants and law enforcement agencies. Cultural stereotypes and misconceptions about Indonesian workers ignore their significant economic contributions, further marginalising these communities.

The criminalisation of undocumented migrants and the increasing securitisation of migration issues have created a climate of fear and suspicion. This climate deters many migrants from engaging with authorities, reporting abuses, or seeking legal assistance, which exacerbates their vulnerability to exploitation and further marginalisation.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The challenges faced by Filipino and Indonesian migrants in Sabah underscore the urgent need for comprehensive policy reforms that address issues of legal recognition, social inclusion, and the complex balance between security and human rights. Drawing from the case studies, several key recommendations emerge to improve the legal status, security, and well-being of migrant communities, while ensuring that migration policies are more inclusive and sustainable.

Integration Policies

Pathways to legal residency

One of the most pressing needs is the establishment of clear, accessible pathways for undocumented migrants to regularise their status. This could involve creating temporary residency permits or work authorisation programmes that would grant legal protection to migrants while acknowledging their significant contributions to the local economy. These initiatives would not only reduce the legal uncertainty faced by migrants but also enable them to access essential rights and services. Regularising the status of undocumented migrants is critical for both improving their quality of life and ensuring they can contribute more effectively to the community.

Access to basic services

Ensuring that all residents—regardless of their legal status—have access to basic services such as healthcare, education, and social welfare is vital for improving the integration of migrants into Sabah’s social fabric. Universal access to these services would help reduce the socio-economic divides between migrants and locals, mitigate public health risks, and ensure that migrants can contribute meaningfully to the local economy. Policies that support the well-being of migrants are not only ethically sound but also economically beneficial, as they help reduce the cycle of poverty and marginalisation.

Cultural exchange programmes

Promoting cultural exchange initiatives is another critical step towards fostering mutual understanding between migrant communities and the local population. By encouraging intercultural dialogue and collaboration, these programmes can challenge stereotypes, reduce xenophobia, and improve social cohesion. Integrating migrant voices into local cultural initiatives also helps create more inclusive communities that recognise the valuable contributions of migrants to Sabah’s cultural diversity. Ultimately, fostering intercultural exchange can play a significant role in building bridges between migrant and host populations.

Balancing Security and Human Rights

Human rights-based approaches

Security policies in Sabah must prioritise the protection of human rights. A shift from punitive, exclusionary measures to approaches that address the root causes of insecurity—such as poverty, lack of access to legal pathways, and social services—would better serve both migrants and the broader community.

A rights-based approach to security would not only improve migrants' living conditions but also foster greater social harmony, as it would focus on empowering vulnerable populations rather than criminalising them. Addressing the root causes of insecurity ensures that both migrants and host populations benefit from more stable and inclusive social policies.

Community policing initiatives

To bridge the gap between migrants and law enforcement, community policing strategies should be implemented. These strategies, focused on building trust and cooperation, can create safer environments for both migrants and locals. Police officers should undergo training in cultural sensitivity, conflict resolution, and the rights of migrants to ensure that law enforcement practices are non-discriminatory and foster community collaboration. By prioritising trust-building, community policing can reduce tensions between migrants and authorities, creating a more harmonious society.

Inclusive dialogue platforms

Establishing formal platforms for dialogue between government representatives, civil society, and migrant communities is essential to crafting migration policies that are more attuned to the lived realities of migrants. These platforms should provide opportunities for migrant communities to express their concerns and needs, while also allowing policymakers to better understand the complexities of migration issues. Facilitating ongoing dialogue can help ensure that migration policies are more responsive, inclusive, and effective. A participatory policy process allows for more balanced and representative governance, which in turn promotes social stability.

Strengthening civil society and NGO support

The role of civil society organisations (CSOs) and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in advocating for migrant rights is indispensable. These organisations have proven essential in providing legal assistance, conducting educational outreach, and advocating for policy reforms. To enhance the effectiveness of these organisations, the government should provide greater funding and institutional support. Strengthening partnerships between government bodies and NGOs can improve the delivery of services, empower migrant communities, and ensure that their rights are better protected. A collaborative approach between the state and civil society can bridge gaps in service delivery, particularly in areas where government capacity may be limited.

CONCLUSION

The case studies of Filipino and Indonesian migrants in Sabah reveal the complex and often fraught relationship between migration, citizenship, and security. These communities, integral to Sabah's economy and cultural landscape, navigate a host of challenges related to legal status, social exclusion, and security concerns. While migrant networks play a crucial role in providing essential support and advocacy, they also face significant obstacles due to restrictive immigration policies and negative societal perceptions.

The experiences of Filipino and Indonesian migrants underscore the pressing need for comprehensive policy reforms that prioritise inclusivity, legal recognition, and the protection of migrant rights. Migrants in Sabah contribute profoundly to local industries such as agriculture, construction, and domestic work, yet their potential is constrained by systemic barriers that prevent them from fully participating in society. This marginalisation not only undermines the well-being of migrant communities but also hinders Sabah's broader socio-economic development.

To create a more inclusive and harmonious society, future policies must reconcile security concerns with a human rights-based approach. This means shifting away from punitive and exclusionary measures towards frameworks that facilitate the legal recognition of migrants, ensure their access to basic services, and foster social cohesion. By implementing the policy recommendations outlined in this study, Sabah can move towards a future that embraces its diverse, multicultural population, where both migrants and locals benefit from a more secure, integrated and equitable society.

In doing so, Sabah would not only address the immediate needs of migrant communities but also lay the groundwork for a sustainable and harmonious future, one that values human rights, social inclusion, and the undeniable contributions of all its residents.

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