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## **Experiences of young Timorese as migrant workers in Korea**

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### **ABSTRACT**

Timor-Leste is one of 15 countries which have access to the South Korea's Employment Permit System allowing foreign workers to fill job roles on temporary visas for up to five years. Since 2009 several thousand Timorese workers have participated in the government to government program. This arrangement is promoted by the Government of Timor-Leste to give Timorese young people aged 18 to 39 access to jobs and to learn job skills that they can use on their return home

A small pilot survey of returned workers was undertaken in Dili in July 2015 to find out more about their experiences of work in in Korea as well as information about their post Korea employment experiences on return to Timor-Leste. Although less than half the workers sent to Korea successfully completed their assignment, those interviewed generally spoke well of their employers and valued the experiences they gained. The survey showed that although many workers have struggled to adapt to the high expectations of work demands that are normal in Korea, many felt they had developed useful work skills and were able to contribute to their families' wellbeing through their income. On returning to Timor-Leste, few have succeeded in obtaining regular work and many see returning to Korea as their main option. This research raises questions about whether the objective of the program for the government has become more focused on merely delivering financial remittances rather than working to ensure that the skills of returning workers are utilised better in the domestic economy of Timor-Leste.

## 1. Background

Timor-Leste has a large and growing youth population, a large proportion of which have limited opportunities for employment in their country. In response to this situation, the government of the Democratic Republic of Timor-Leste (*República Democrática de Timor-Leste*, RDTL), through the Secretariat of State for Professional Training and Employment Policy (SEPFPOPE) has agreed to send workers to South Korea, becoming the fifteenth Asian country with agreements under the ‘Employment Permit System’ (EPS) of Korea.

In Timor-Leste, the program was established to employ and skill Timorese youth after the 2006 outbreak of conflict involving young people in the capital Dili which drew attention to the growing cohort of young people with few prospects. The program to send workers to Korea was seen as a way to reduce the rate of unemployment in Timor-Leste. It was aimed **‘to tackle unemployment, provide technical training and develop the personal and professional skills of the Timorese workforce’** (SEPFPOPE’s press release, 27/2/2012).

As a result of its booming economy, South Korea was opened its doors to foreign workers to meet a labour shortage ‘concentrated mainly among small and medium-sized manufacturing enterprises, construction and service-oriented businesses’.<sup>1</sup>

The Employment Permit System (EPS) was introduced in South Korea in 2004 to provide low-income economies that have few job opportunities and high under-employment with migration opportunities for nationals to obtain work. An earlier ‘migrant trainee’ system (1992-2006), was subject to international criticism for ‘considerable abuse and exploitation of foreign trainees who were essentially providing their labour for free’.<sup>2</sup> The EPS has established a standardised system of recruiting temporary overseas workers managed through a government to government relationship. The system enables employers in the manufacturing, construction, fish breeding, agriculture and livestock breeding industries to recruit workers from countries with which South Korea has signed memoranda of understanding (MOUs) under the EPS framework

The temporary workers program to send Timorese to Korea was piloted from 2006 and the program formally started in October 2009. SEPFPOPE has not been able to fill the numbers requested by Korea. In 2011 Korea asked for 2,500 workers but Timor-Leste sent 400; Korea raised its request to 2,750 workers in 2012, but received 500 Timorese and requested 3,500 workers in 2013 but received just 280 Timorese workers.<sup>3</sup> This is a very small contribution to the total EPS program in which South Korea received 48,000 workers from 15 countries in 2011 (and similar numbers each year since) of which 40,000 were manufacturing, 4,500 in agriculture and 1,750 in fishing.<sup>4</sup> In spite of the small fishing sector, more than half the Timorese work in fishing (see table 1 below). A total of 1,886 Timorese workers were sent to Korea between from October 2009 to June 2015.

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<sup>1</sup> Ducanes, G (2013) ‘Labour shortages, foreign migrant recruitment and the portability of qualifications in East and South-East Asia’ ILO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific.

<sup>2</sup> EPS Policy Brief #2 ‘South Korea’s Employment Permit System – A successful Government to Government model?’ Open Working Group on Labour Migration and Recruitment Policy. <http://www.madenetwork.org/labour-migration-and-recruitment>

<sup>3</sup> Soares, Brigida (2014) ‘Sending People Overseas, Generating Money’, National Adviser to SEPFPOPE (unpublished)

<sup>4</sup> EPS Policy Brief #2

## 2. RDTL's program to send workers to South Korea

### 2.1 Preparation for working in Korea

According to SEPFOPE, Timor-Leste has sent 1,886 workers to Korea up until June 2015 of whom 340 have returned and 1,546 remain in Korea. The workers go for a period of three years but may extend to a maximum of 4 years and 10 months.

The program is open to young people aged 18-39 years old, most being single. Fishing is the largest work category with 1,117 of 1,886 (59 per cent) of all workers (62 per cent of all men). Agriculture is the most common category for women (74 per cent), and manufacturing is the occupation for 35 per cent of men and 26 per cent of women. Just three per cent of men engaged in agriculture.

**Table 1: SEPFOPE data on distribution of workers from Oct 2009-June 2015:**

No. workers	Fishing	Manufacturing	Agriculture	TOTAL
<b>Male</b>	1,117	621	50	<b>1,788</b>
<b>Female</b>	0	25	73	<b>98</b>
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>1,117</b>	<b>646</b>	<b>123</b>	<b>1,886</b>

Source: SEPFOPE 'Numeru Prosesu EPS (Trabalhadores Timorenses ba serviso iha Korea du Sul) 2009-2015'

The 98 female workers who have been sent make up just five per cent of all workers, most working in agriculture. However since April 2013 no Timorese have been placed in agricultural work, in spite of RDTL's request to South Korea to re-introduce this type of work, according to Chief of the Department of Overseas Employment of SEPFOPE.

In preparation for going to Korea, candidates first of all have to learn Korean language and take the Test of Proficiency in Korean (TOPIK)<sup>5</sup>. SEPFOPE's statistics show that between 2009-2015 a total of 8,638 candidates attended a course of Korean language, of whom 3,410 passed (see Table 2). Their TOPIK score is valid for two years so during this time they should submit their job application form to SEPFOPE.

**Table 2 : Attendance at Korean Language Course and exam results**

Total	Male	Female	Passed	Failed
8,638	7,096	1,497	3,410	5,238

Source: SEPFOPE 'Numeru Prosesu EPS (Trabalhadores Timorenses ba serviso iha Korea du Sul) 2009-2015'

Once candidates have passed the TOPIK and a health check, they can progress to a job application. According to SEPFOPE data, a large number of applications were invalid prior to 2013 but since then all applications have been valid. Therefore it can be assumed that SEPFOPE has successfully strengthened their candidate preparation process. Registered Korean employers are invited to select from the EPS pool of registered workers, and then the Korean government forwards the request to the sending agency, which in Timor-Leste's case is SEPFOPE.

A Standard Labour Contract is signed between the employer and worker clarifying wages, working conditions, working hours and holidays. The employer will act as sponsor for the visa application. Once contracted, the candidate will attend a preliminary training course run by an approved training institute in

<sup>5</sup> Candidates must achieve 80 out of 200 points to be accepted, but the highest scores will be selected to achieve the designated quota.

the sending country. This includes understanding of Korean culture, understanding of Employment Permit System, basic training in industrial safety and industry specific training. After arriving in Korea, workers will be required to undertake further health checks, and training of at least 20 hours related to work conditions and their employment. Of the returnees, 23 of 340 returned before starting work because they failed their in-country medical test.

In Timor-Leste the preparation costs for enrolling in the EPS system are sponsored by the Korean government. If Timorese migrants working in non-sponsored programs are also considered, migrant labour was Timor-Leste's second largest export after coffee in 2007. At that time most migrants were in UK or Ireland with Portuguese passports and they found 'pre-departure and travel costs are a significant burden on migrant families and a policy issue for governments seeking to promote remittances'.<sup>6</sup> The issue of pre-departure costs was not raised investigated in this study nor mentioned by the Timorese returnees interviewed, but this should be included in any follow-up study.

According to SEPFOPE records, of the 340 returnees since the start of the program, only 124 (37%) had completed their contract (See Table 4). Another 18 per cent broke their contract either because the work was too hard or for personal reasons, while 7 per cent failed the medical exam or became sick and left.

**Table 4: Reasons for return of workers from Korea (analysis from SEPFOPE data)**

Reason for return	Fishing only	All Men	All Women	All returnees
Contract completed	18%	35%	50%	37%
Deported or captured/deported	45%	31%	22%	30%
Self-ended the contract	13%	13%	11%	13%
Failed medical in Korea	5%	6%	-	5%
Family reasons	4%	3%	8%	4%
Cannot endure the work	6%	4%	-	4%
Died	4%	2%	-	2%
School/study	1%	1%	-	2%
Health/ mental illness	1%	1%	8%	1%
Accident	1%	1%	-	1%
Committed crime/ captured & deported	-	1%	-	1%
Reason not provided	1%	1%	-	1%
Partnered Korean woman/ captured & deported	1%	0%	-	0%
<b>Number of workers</b>	<b>171 =100%</b>	<b>300 =100%</b>	<b>36 = 100%</b>	<b>336 = 100%</b>

A massive 101 (30%) were deported, of whom a significant number were 'captured and deported' indicating that the Korean police had been involved in their deportation, such as catching them at a check point. Another four (1%) were captured (and presumably deported) for committing a crime. Fishermen, comprising over half the male workforce, have significantly lower completion rates than other categories of worker, with only 18 per cent completing their contract against 35 per cent of all male workers, and 50 per cent of female workers. In all 45 per cent of fishermen were deported compared to 31 per cent of all male workers and 22 per cent of female workers. There were six Timorese workers who died in Korea, all in the fishing sector. Female workers have the highest completion rate and lowest deportation rates.

A worker leaves for Korea having signed a work contract with the sponsoring employer, and if they leave this employer without requesting another contract through official channels the Korean authorities consider them 'illegal'. If they changed jobs three times they are eligible for deportation. As noted above,

<sup>6</sup> Foundation for Development Cooperation (2007) 'Leveraging Remittances with Microfinance: Timor-Leste Country Report'.

some 30 per cent of returned workers are listed as deported or ‘captured and deported’. In addition, SEPFOPE staff noted that a number of workers have partnered Korean women and stayed on in Korea. Although just one is reported ‘captured’ and deported, others would become illegal if they stay beyond their contract period or more than 4 years 10 months.

## **2.2 On returning to Dili**

On returning to Dili there are two avenues of support from SEPFOPE for returnees. Firstly, SEPFOPE has a ‘Job Application Form’ which returnees can fill in to register for work with Korean companies in Timor Leste. A list of names, contact details and category of work experience is provided on request to interested Korean companies. A number of interviewees had been invited to attend and had participated in another test for working with Korean companies based in Dili, and were waiting to hear back from them. According to SEPFOPE, this process is not the responsibility of SEPFOPE but it is managed by a separate joint structure made up of SEPFOPE and Korean officials. This arrangement did not appear to be known by the returnees, who were expecting SEPFOPE to contact them.

The second option is to apply return to Korea, and a number of interviewees expressed interest in doing this, even some who had themselves broken their contract or been deported. None of the returnees who had been deported had had any contact with SEPFOPE. According to SEPFOPE it was ‘difficult’ for the government to support those in the ‘illegal’ category.

SEPFOPE has a ‘committed worker’ category that indicates a worker who completed their term in a single workplace. About 17 workers have achieved this and are entitled to return for up to another 4 years 10 months. Four have already gone and others are preparing to go.

SEPFOPE does not routinely contact returnees, but expects the workers to contact the office to provide their updated contact details when they return. According to the Chief of the Department of Overseas Employment of SEPFOPE, the government policy is that on returning to Timor-Leste they should get help in finding work in Timor when they return, but the department is unable to do this as the expected budget for this part of the program was not funded.

Given the high number of contracts that were not completed and of workers who were deported it was anticipated that the stories from returnees would be on the whole negative. However this was not the case – there are significant lessons from the experiences of these workers that could be used to reduce of the difficulties they face. The next sections will document the research process and the responses of the returnees interviewed.

## **3. Research methodology**

This small research project was undertaken as a case study for a larger project into Labour Mobility in the Pacific conducted by the Development Policy Centre of the Crawford School of Public Policy at the Australian National University with funding from the World Bank. The study was commissioned by Richard Curtain, as the lead researcher for the labour mobility project. Curtain developed the questionnaire used in the study, based on a survey instrument developed by the Return Migration and Development Platform of the European University Institute<sup>7</sup>. Curtain has also provided valuable feedback on the results of the study.

The survey of returned workers from Korea in Dili was carried out from 29 June to 10 July 2015 by Dr Ann Wigglesworth, specialist in youth and gender issues in Timor-Leste, and Zulmira Fonseca, a

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<sup>7</sup> <http://rsc.eui.eu/RDP/research-projects/cris/survey-on-return-migrants/questionnaire/>

Timorese graduate in Community Development at Victoria University in Melbourne. The interviews were conducted in Tetun, the lingua franca of Timor-Leste.

To start the research, contact was made with Valencio de Jesus, Chief of Department for Overseas Employment of SEPFOPE (Secretariat of State for Professional Training and Employment Policy, formerly SEFOPE)<sup>8</sup>. He was helpful in providing us with an overview of the program as well as their list of returnees and contact details. A second meeting was held with Valencio de Jesus towards the end of the research to obtain a government perspective on some issues raised by the returnees in the interviews. As well an interview with Mauricio Giraloi, a SEFOPE representative on leave from the Timorese embassy in Korea, provided information on support provided to the workers within Korea<sup>9</sup>.

Given the small budget and timeframe for this research it was not possible to go outside of the capital, Dili. A target of thirty interviews was established. The selection of interviewees was required to include male and female workers, workers from different sectors (fishing, agriculture and manufacturing), and those that had completed their contract and those that had not (including voluntary returnees and those deported). Returnees who had returned last year or this year were targeted to gather fresh memories of their experiences, as well as earlier workers whose experience includes more perspectives on the outcomes on return to Timor. A higher proportion of females were interviewed than is representative of workers in Korea because only 5 per cent of workers were women which would have resulted in only 1 or 2 interviews with women. By interviewing a larger number of women it was possible to obtain a gender perspective on the difference experiences of workers. Thus the sample was selected to shed light on their range of experiences, and was not intended to be representative of the returned workers.

A list of names and contact details of the 340 returnees from Korea provided by SEPFOPE was used to contact returnees. Approximately 50-60 individuals were called overall as a significant number of the phone numbers were inactive. No-one refused to participate in the research. Some district based returnees were disappointed when told that we could only interview in Dili, but were so eager to tell of their experiences that it was decided that some interviews would be undertaken by telephone. So a small number of district based returnees were included in the sample. On embarking on this project several Timorese colleagues told us that they had friends who were returnees and assisted us in contacting them directly. Other interviewees were friends of ex-workers contacted by the research team and had accompanied their friend to the interview. Several of these returnees were not found on the SEPFOPE list.

The vast majority of calls resulted in a positive response. This included not only the willingness to be interviewed but gratitude that they had the opportunity to give their opinions about the years they spent in Korea and their experiences on their return. There was no remuneration given for attending the interviews.

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<sup>8</sup> SEFOPE – Secretary of State for Professional Training and Employment.

<sup>9</sup> The authors would like to thank these SEPFOPE staff for their contribution, particularly their willingness to share data on the Timorese workers in Korea.

#### 4. Findings from survey of 30 returnees from Korea

##### 4.1 Profile of workers interviewed:

All but one worker interviewed was in the age range 25-35. The one worker over 35 was part of the first trial intake to go to Korea in 2006 and again returned to Korea in 2009 when the main program started. He is the only respondent who has completed two terms of work in Korea.

The majority of respondents, 19 of 30 (63%) were male and 11 (36%) were female. This survey was Dili based, so unsurprisingly 22 of the respondents were from Dili, while 8 were from different districts, either temporarily in Dili or interviewed by phone. Four respondents had moved their place of residence from before going to Korea, two moving from their district to Dili, and another two moving from Dili to the districts.

##### 4.2 Reasons for going to Korea to work

The reasons given by workers for going to Korea was checked against the list in Table 5, recording as many reasons as were mentioned:

**Table 5: Why did you want to go to Korea to work?**

Why did you want to go to Korea to work?	Number (of 30)	Percentage
To earn money for my family to live on	28	93%
To earn money to set up a business	25	83%
To pay for school or university fees	24	80%
To earn money to build a house	25	83%
To earn money to buy goods for my household	26	87%
To get work experience in Korea	29	97%
Needing money to pay off a debt	9	30%
Other reasons	0	0%

To get work experience is the most commonly stated reason for going, a response is supported by commentaries by various workers that Korea offers them work opportunities while Timor-Leste does not. Beyond this there were a wide range of reasons which got agreement, thus rather than a specific plan for how the money will be spent, it appears they saw opportunities for material improvement of their families' situation and sometimes showed evidence of how they had upgraded their family's house. Their earnings had contributed to the family needs in ways that would not be possible if they had stayed in Timor-Leste.

##### 4.3 Period of stay in Korea

The initial contract is for three years and they can extend to four years and 10 months. Half of the workers (50%) stayed four or more years. This is higher than the SEPFOPE figure for contract completion which is 36 per cent. It may be explained by the fact that a number of workers interviewed claimed to have completed their term but were listed by SEPFOPE as deported rather than as completed contract. Only one worker stayed less than a year, seven (23%) stayed 1-2 years, six (20%) stayed 2-3 years and one stayed 3-4 years. This reflects a higher drop-out rate during the initial contract period, but greater stability for those that extended their contract beyond 3 years.

In the study, the workers were categorised according to the type of work they were contracted to do initially (agriculture, fishing or manufacturing). The placements were mostly family businesses, for instance 10 (33%) of workers were in a company with four or less workers and another 10 (33%) in a company with 5-10 workers. Two interviewees worked in large companies of 50 workers, one a factory

having 31 Timorese workers and the other a farm with just 5 Timorese workers. Of the others, eight interviewees (27%) had no Timorese colleagues and 18 (60%) had one to five Timorese colleagues.

Within this study, the most successful category of workers is female agriculture workers. They were most likely to complete their contracts in a single company and spoke positively of their experiences. Most were employed in small family businesses with just a few workers and some were treated like part of the family. Because of the cold winters and seasonal closure of the business they were working in, some had to be transferred to another workplace, an arrangement made by the boss.

**Case study 1: Agriculturalist 2010-2012 (interview 3)<sup>10</sup>**

Angelina produced vegetables, working every day with just two days off each month. She returned early because her boyfriends' family said bad things about her staying in Korea. She was happy with the experience because she got some new ideas and skills. It was hard at first, as you have to learn to keep to time and to follow the rules. Since she returned, Angelina has shared her knowledge of growing vegetables with others. She has given loans to others in the community with her money earned in Korea and receives it back with interest. She plans to open a kiosk (small shop).

A significant number of male workers changed their jobs at some stage. The reasons given were: the work was too hard, conflict either with other workers or the boss, or the pay was higher in another workplace. Five of the workers interviewed had shifted several times, typically from fishing into manufacturing. Fishing was a particularly challenging work placement - no workers interviewed had completed their initial contract. Timorese found living on a fishing boat for extended periods at sea intolerable, many moving jobs as a result. However, some fishing jobs were shore based such as working in hatcheries.

The EPS regulations require that a worker may not change employers more than three times during a contract period. Migrant workers requests for workplace change must be forwarded to Korean labour centre officials. Migrants' visas require that they hold a work contract and Korea will deport workers who are without contract (illegal). Five of the interviewees were indignant that they had been categorised as deported as they claimed to have left at the end of their contract. A record of being deported will prejudice their opportunities for working overseas in future, and indeed, some expressed an interest in returning to Korea. EPS eligibility rules to return include that they must be a 'Person with no past records of deportation or departure under a departure order from the Republic of Korea', and deported workers are prohibited from returning for 10 years (and then only if they still fall within the age limits).

**Case study 2: Fisherman/Factory Worker 2010-2015 (interview 18)**

Joni was sent to work in Fishing but left this work after 6 weeks because he could not tolerate living on a boat in the ocean. He then worked in a seaweed factory for two and a half years. They had to meet targets and this caused arguments with his Timorese colleagues so he left. Joni then joined a factory making refrigerators and air-conditioners for more than two years until the end of his contract. During this time he was able to send money home to his brother to buy a truck. He and his brother now live from this income. Although he stayed for four years and 10 months, the maximum time allowed, he is nevertheless listed as 'captured and deported'.

<sup>10</sup> The names of the people in the stories presented have been changed.



#### 4.4 Income and remittances

The amount of money earned and sent home was significant. Eighty percent of workers received between \$1001-2000 a month, while 20 per cent received \$500-1000 for both men and women.

**Table 6: How much did you earn per month in Korea in US dollars?**

Monthly Pay in USD	Men	Women	All
Less than 500	0	0	0
501-1000	4	2	6
1001-2000	15	9	24
More than 2000	0	0	0
<b>TOTAL RESPONDENTS</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>30</b>

Almost half the workers remitted \$6,000 or more a year to Timor-Leste. The most common recipients were parents, but most frequently the funds were sent to the worker's own account, while others sent money to other recipients such as spouse, other relatives or friends.

**Table 7: How much did you send to Timor-Leste each year on average?**

Remittance in USD	Male	Female	All respondents
Less than 200	0	0	0
200-500	1	1	2
501-1000	1	0	1
1001-2000	3	2	5
3001-4000	1	2	3
4001-5000	2	1	3
5001-6000	1	1	2
6000+	10	4	14
<b>TOTAL RESPONDENTS</b>	<b>19</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>30</b>

A 2014 report on two overseas worker programs, (Korea and the small Australian seasonal workers program), showed participation of 1,389 people produced remittances of US\$ 2,946,838 a year.<sup>11</sup> SEPFOPE estimates that the EPS program has realised \$2 million a year for Timor-Leste in remittances up until mid-2015.

## 5. Workers perceptions

### 5.1 Attitudes towards Korea work experience

<sup>11</sup> Soares, Brigida (2014) 'Sending People Overseas, Generating Money', National Adviser to SEPFOPE (unpublished)

There were a number of quantitative and qualitative questions about the worker's experiences in Korea and on return to Timor-Leste. The open answer questions allowed the interviewee to use their own words to talk about their experiences.

Given the poor completion rate of workers in Korea, their opinions about the experience are of great interest. A Question '*How did your employer treat you?*' resulted in an overwhelming 90 per cent of responses stating 'well' or 'very well'. Only 10 per cent responded that they had problems.

A further question was '*How easy or hard was it to live in Korea?*' Positive responses by 70 per cent of workers stated 'easy' or 'very easy' compared to 23 per cent reporting 'some problems'. Just one (3%) reported 'many problems' and another gave 'no opinion'.

Yet their comments demonstrated that life was not necessarily easy in Korea. The most common comments on work culture in Korea were:

- You are expected to work fast, strongly and diligently
- Lack of time off, often only one Sunday off every second week with long working days.
- There are a lot of rules that must be followed and must keep to time
- You have to meet targets. If you work slowly the boss will compare you to others that work harder
- You are expected back to work quickly after being sick or injured
- Good pay gives opportunity to earn and save money

Comments on workplace challenges included:

- Living at sea on a big boat is very difficult
- It was very cold in winter and some farms closed down for the season
- Male workers fought with other Timorese or Indonesian workers causing them to change jobs or be deported.
- Living away from family is difficult, especially in isolated locations.

Respondents gave many reasons for not completing a contract and returning home early. Sometimes responses related to family events back home in Timor-Leste, other responses related to finding the working conditions too challenging. Some of the individual stories give an indication of their challenges. For instance one man wanted to return home for the funeral of a parent but was not permitted to by his boss, so he broke the contract and left. Another decided to stay in Korea following a death in the family, but had to send significant sums of money for the family's funeral costs. As a result he had little money to show for his work in Korea when he returned home.

A couple of interviewees had quite traumatic experiences in Korea. One worker hurt his back in a fall at work and was told by the doctor to rest for a month. His boss did not accept this and he had to go back to work before he had recovered. Another man had his finger cut off in a machine accident. He took time off work but his boss said he had taken too long and therefore became 'illegal'. He continued to work for this boss for some time after the accident but was ultimately categorised as deported.

#### **Case study 3: Fisherman - 2011-12 (interview 9)**

'I was working in fishing, catching Octopus and fell down and hurt my back. The doctor said I should rest for a month but the boss did not agree – I had to go back to work. I am aware that by being absent for many days the company will not make money, but I wanted to focus on my health. My boss said I was lying and gave me the option to return to Timor or return to work?.'

Jose said he signed a contract for 1200 Won a month which included food but his boss paid only 600 Won a month and did not provide food. He then ran away to the Catholic Centre which supports

overseas workers and he stayed with the Priest for 6 weeks. They helped Jose negotiate a better salary at the same workplace, but he said he never received the full amount.

Just one worker deported for a crime was interviewed, explaining that it was because he had been involved in a fight with another worker. However, several interviewees had mentioned they got on badly with other Timorese or Indonesian colleagues as a reason for changing work places. Showing anger and fighting with others is not tolerated in Korea.

In spite of the challenges mentioned above, in response to the statement *'Overall I think my experience working in Korea was a good one'* gained universal acceptance with most strongly agreeing and just two saying they 'somewhat agreed'. There was more caution about responses to the statement *'I found living in Korea easy to do'* with only 27 per cent agreeing or strongly agreeing, 60 per cent neutral and just two disagreeing. Importantly, the responses to the statement *'I am happy to tell others to apply to work in Korea'* showed acceptance from all but two interviewees who gave 'somewhat disagree' responses. Given the high contract non-completion rate, the extent of the positive responses of workers to their Korea experience is surprising. Some of those that did not complete their contract explained that they wished they had had more perseverance, while those that did complete their contract spoke of overcoming those challenges.

In summary then, with a few exceptions, the former workers spoke positively of their experience and/or the Korea bosses they worked for. Overwhelmingly they spoke of how hard work was in Korea, but many felt they had gained skills. Many respondents noted Korea's potential in contrast to the lack of work opportunities in Timor-Leste. Some who spoke of their difficulties, such as being injured at work or not being paid regularly, were not the same workers who reported 'problems' in the questionnaire, suggesting that some gave positive responses to the experience even though they had major problems during their placement.

SEPFOP's list of returning workers to Timor-Leste presents a challenge as the basis for determining the 'success' of the program, as there are many errors in the list. For example, several workers had their gender wrongly listed, one woman was listed under the wrong work category, two interviewees had returned significantly later than indicated on the list. One interviewee had his or her name improperly listed by SEPFOP and several interviewed (as a result of contact through another returned worker) did not appear on the list at all. Greater care needs to be taken by SEPFOP in the data collection and documentation to properly analyse the program outcomes.

## **5.2 Opportunities for returned workers on returning home**

On return to Timor-Leste, some workers were involved in businesses or other economic activities, but most of these also said that they were currently looking for work. This reflects the fact that most Timorese in informal or part time work are typically looking for a more secure job.

Several of the female respondents had opened a kiosk or gave credit loans with interest, while several men had started a construction business. One had sent money to his brother to buy a truck which now supports them both. But the majority remained at home living off their savings, including 43 per cent who had returned in the previous six months and were 'resting' while considering their options and before looking for work.

### **Case study 4: Agriculturalist 2010-2015 (interview 20)**

Maria was vegetable harvesting for 7 months before the company closed for winter due to the cold, so she was transferred to another farm. When this one closed after 9 months she was transferred to a

farm where she stayed until the end of the contract. Maria explained ‘when you follow the rules it is good’. She is now helping her mother sell vegetables, but recently invited by SEPFOPE to a meeting with Korean companies looking for workers in Dili and is waiting to hear from them.

Respondents were asked what support they had from the government. Only 37 per cent reported having received help from SEPFOPE, some had received further training to go again to Korea and others had been invited to a meeting with Korean companies in Dili that want to recruit workers. The majority, 53 per cent, had had no contact at all with SEPFOPE. Almost half of these had tried to make contact with SEPFOPE but received no response and a further 10 per cent had made contact with SEPFOPE and received a response.

### **5.3 Analysis of findings about work experiences in Korea**

The results of this survey show that the returned workers surveyed consider that work in Korea was a valuable experience but that many of them also struggled with the work culture, strict rules and different lifestyle.

While many men changed their job at some stage, women workers we spoke to only changed jobs if required to do so by their boss due to seasonal closure of agricultural work. There was a tendency of male workers to change their workplaces when they had problems, such as they did not like living at sea, another job offered better pay, or they did not get on with their boss or fellow workers. According to the SEFOPE representative in Korea, if workers were unable to work for a period they sometimes faced a lot of pressure from their families to continue sending money home, and this pressure resulted in some of them seeking illegal work. A contract of work is directly between the Korean business owner and the temporary worker, so once workers are classified as illegal, the Timorese authorities in Korea are limited in what action they can take. In the case of accidents, on the other hand, the embassy has become involved arranging for medical insurance or compensation to be paid to the worker.

#### **Case study 5: Fisherman 2011-12 (interview 7)**

Filipe lived with the boss together with four other workers. They did not get any days off or holiday except at Christmas and when the sea was too rough to go fishing. When his mother and father died he wanted to return to Timor but his boss did not want him to return so Filipe broke his contract. In Dili he approached SEPFOPE to return to Korea but they only told him to go to meet the Korean Ambassador in the Korean embassy. Filipe did not feel he could do this and does not feel he has a pathway to return to Korea.

As noted above, only one worker interviewed had done two tours of work in Korea. This interviewee was in the first trial of 20 workers that was sent to Korea in 2006, returning in 2008. He then took the language test to return to Korea in 2009 (when the main program started) but returned before the end of his contract in 2011 because his child was sick. He has taken the language test to return a third time but he has not been called, possibly because he is also listed as deported.

This man had some valuable observations about work in Korea. He explained that Korean culture demands respect of seniors and respect for the rules and many Timorese have problems with these aspects of the culture. Many workers sought help from the Catholic Centre and several of the interviewees spoke of the types of assistance they received from the Catholic Centre or a Priest. But Timorese had difficulties when they changed their jobs because often their Korean language skills were inadequate to negotiate a new contract, and as ‘illegals’ they were vulnerable. With the help of the Catholic Centre, they organised

for more experienced Timorese workers with good language skills to help other Timorese who faced problems in their workplaces. This returned worker shared a story of a workers who had done well in his work and his boss liked him, but he had not received his salary for two years. This was because his Korean language skills were insufficient: each time the boss called him to pay his salary, he wrongly replied in Korean language ‘next time’, when really he wanted to be paid. With help of a translator to speak to the boss, he finally got his full salary for two years.

The harsh work practices of the Korean EPS system have come under criticism by several international organisations. Concerns about human rights relate to where migrants have been denied adequate rest days, received harsh treatment or experienced breaches of salary payments. These contraventions have reportedly not resulted in any investigation by the authorities into such breaches<sup>12</sup>. Further, Amnesty International notes that it is very difficult to get another contract in Korea if a worker has previously changed workplaces, and so this requirement places the employer in a powerful position:

“...the EPS work scheme requires migrant workers to establish and maintain a good relationship with their employer in order to be able to continue working in South Korea and makes it very difficult for them to challenge exploitative conditions of work and to change jobs”.<sup>13</sup>

It would be valuable for SEPFOPE to hold a de-briefing with returned workers, both to ensure their information is correct and to learn about the more difficult experiences that some workers have faced. Their current position that they should not talk to the workers who became ‘illegal’ might be necessary for the SEFOPE representative based in Korea, but once back in Dili information about the difficulties faced by these workers should be collected and acted upon. By learning from these experiences SEPFOPE could reduce the numbers of deportees through more thorough pre-departure briefings and in-county support.

#### **5.4 Analysis on findings about workers’ return to Timor Leste**

A significant number of returnees expressed interest in setting up their own small business. Some had already done so, such as two men who had set up construction businesses, two women who became money lenders and other women who established kiosks (small shops). Others said they would like to establish businesses using the skills they had learnt in Korea. For example, one worker who worked in a fish hatchery saw this as an important skill to bring back to Timor-Leste and wanted to set up a similar business. Similarly an agricultural worker who learned about mushroom growing wanted to use that skill in Timor Leste. Another wanted to open a Korean Language Centre because he believed that the Korean language training course provided in Dili is too general and so they spent too much time in Korea to learn the words related to their work. Each of these claimed they lacked either the finance or skills required. Other returnees were waiting for a friend with similar skills to return from Korea to establish a business together.

While a number of returnees believed that they had learned technical skills that could be put to good use in Timor-Leste, they felt they lacked management skills or capital to start a business. SEPFOPE has a Small Business unit which is aimed at building business skills of entrepreneurs. In spite of this, neither the Department of Overseas Employment nor any of the interviewees mentioned the existence of this Small Business Unit as a resource for returnees from Korea. The research team made contact with the Director of the Small Business Unit to suggest that information about this unit should be made available

<sup>12</sup> EPS Policy Brief #2 ‘South Korea’s Employment Permit System – A successful Government to Government model?’ Open Working Group on Labour Migration and Recruitment Policy

<sup>13</sup> Amnesty International (2014), “Bitter Harvest: Exploitation and Forced Labour of Migrant Agricultural Workers in South Korea.” p7. <https://www.amnesty.org/en/documents/asa25/004/2014/en/>

to the workers before going to Korea, as it provides exactly the kind of support that returnees have expressed interest in.

**Case study 6: Factory worker 2010-2015 (interview 22)**

Pedro worked in a furniture factory for four years and ten months, the maximum time allowed. The work was hard and they had to work overtime which was sometimes paid but not always. There were three days of holiday each year when the Timorese would organise a sporting event together. Since returning a few months ago he is just resting. SEPFOPE contacted him to attend a meeting with Korean companies and he is waiting to hear back from them. He feels it is difficult to use the skills he learned in Korea because they only use machines which do not exist in Timor-Leste.

Only three of the interviewees had found formal employment, one in the public service, another in a hotel and the third was working for the Korea Foreign Affairs Bureau. Two returnees had returned to do agriculture in the districts. At least five of them were planning to return to Korea again, some having sat for the language test and were awaiting a response from SEPFOPE. Some workers who want to return to Korea are listed as deported, but they had believed that they returned voluntarily from Korea. Their continuing lack of understanding of their status leaves them with the false hope that they can return.

It is clear that many workers struggle with Korean work practices at first. However, they also described how they learnt to comply with demands and see value in the Korean experience. So it appears that time is needed to reconcile them with the expectations of workers in Korean culture. Given the considerable resources going into training these workers in language and work practices, it would be more effective to send workers on a second tour, as they are well prepared for the conditions they will be working in. Some who had good reasons to break their contracts could be given the opportunity to tell their stories and help new recruits be prepared for the challenges.

A concern of many returnees is how to keep contact with other returnees once they have returned to Timor-Leste. Many wanted to be able to connect with each other, but could not make contact as many of their telephone numbers have become inactive and they have to get new numbers on arriving in Dili. One idea that was presented was of a voluntary organisation of returnees from Korea that could support each other to establish businesses and gain access to other skills they need. The kind of mutual self-help that was used in Korea to assist workers with poor language skills could be a model to support each other after return to Timor. It was clear that many returnees felt isolated and were eager to talk of their experiences, reunite with fellow returnees and realise a better life in Timor Leste on the basis of the skills they developed in Korea. An organisation for returnees could help them know how to access services. The small business service within SEPFOPE, backed by and banks (i.e. *Banco Nacional de Comércio de Timor-Leste*) or micro-credit organisations (*Moris Rasik* or *Tuba Rai Metin*) to provide credit, can open up opportunities for them. However, they need to have knowledge of these to be able to make use of them. Such an organisation could also organise financial management training to help consolidate the financial gains they made and assist them to make a plan for the future. Indeed financial training before they leave for Korea could help them identify potential ways they could invest their savings and better manage their earnings while in Korea.

## 6. Conclusions

The temporary workers in Korea program has enable 1,886 people to experience work in South Korea over the past six years in three fields of work, agriculture, fishing and manufacturing. The small sample of returnees interviewed indicates that they have gained from their experience in Korea, both developing workplace skills and being able to finance material assets for their families. However it appears that the program falls short in meeting the original objective that returned workers will contribute to the Timorese economy by using their newly acquired skills when they return.

The 98 workers who are female have higher completion rates than the men and more women applicants should be encouraged. Most women are working in agriculture, but this field of work has been removed from the places offered to Timor-Leste. It does not appear that agriculture has been removed from the EPS program so this perhaps leaves SEPFOPPE some room to negotiate for continuation of this field. A few women have also worked in manufacturing but not in fishing (even though it includes on-shore fish breeding facilities). The fishing sector received more than half the Timorese workers, but only 18 per cent completed their contracts and six of them died. This abysmal record should be properly investigated, especially as some employers have come under investigation for human rights abuses and non-compliance with their contracts.<sup>14</sup> As well, with fishing making up such a small proportion of the overall EPS system, there should be the opportunity to increase work for Timorese in other sectors such as manufacturing and agriculture.

SEPFOPPE have a duty of care for all returnee workers. As the sending agency, a debriefing interview should be held with all the workers, even deported workers who, once back in Timor Leste, are no longer subject to Korean rules. This would ensure that the program can learn from the both the positive and negative experiences, so that difficult placements are minimised.

More attention should be paid to maintaining accurate data about the returnees and their dates and reasons for return, ensuring the categorisation is accurate and any inconsistencies with the workers' own understanding of their reason for return clarified. For new workers to have a better understanding of what to expect in Korea, the participation of former returnees to a briefing session for departing workers would be valuable.

That many workers want to return to Korea, even though they struggled with the hard work and conditions at first, indicates that their experience was valuable. However it also results from the dearth of any work opportunities in Timor-Leste. Many returnees wish to establish businesses or otherwise use their skills in Timor-Leste, but they feel they lack necessary skills to do this, and lack of support to overcome these constraints.

Isolation from each other on return to Timor-Leste and the lack of any formal process or support structures for returnees from Korea has made it more difficult for them to build on their experience in Timor-Leste. The establishment of an Association of Returned Workers from Korea would assist returnees to support each other, to identify where support is available and to use their new skills to establish viable livelihoods on their return. Without such assistance, there is a danger that the work skills and work attitudes which they have learnt is not making the significant contribution to the Timorese economy that was envisaged when this program was first established.

Ann Wigglesworth and Zulmira Fonseca,  
Revised February 2016

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<sup>14</sup> EPS Policy Brief #2 'South Korea's Employment Permit System – A successful Government to Government model?' Open Working Group on Labour Migration and Recruitment Policy. See 'Box 2: Human Rights Concerns for Migrant Workers Under EPS'.