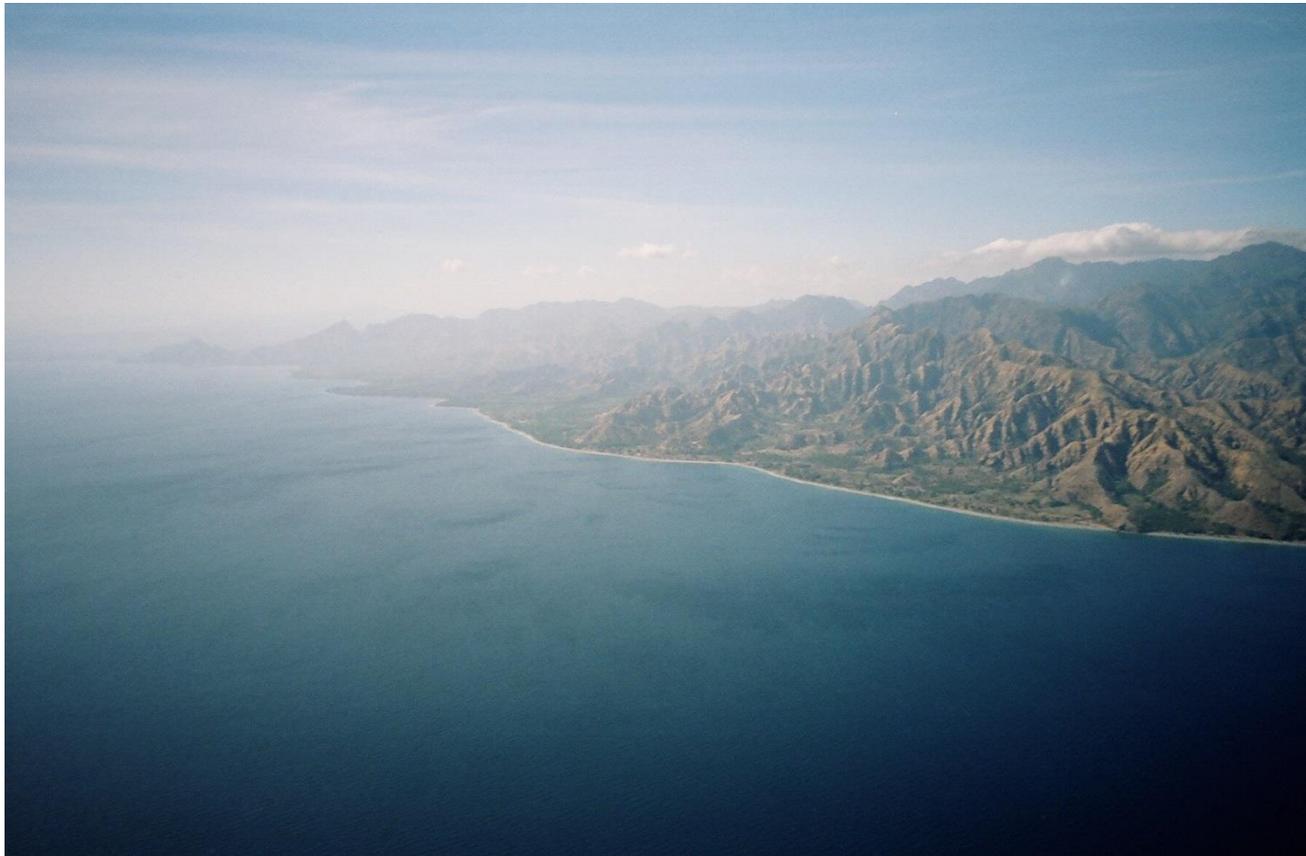


Experiences of young Timorese as migrant workers in South Korea

by Ann Wigglesworth and Zulmira Fonseca



Introduction to the research

- A small study of returned Timorese workers was commissioned as a research input for the Labour Mobility in the Pacific Project of the ANU Development Policy Centre.
- Research was carried out in Timor-Leste in July 2015. Data was provided by the sending agency Secretariat of State for Professional Training and Employment Policy (SEPFOPPE).

Migrant worker arrangements

- South Korea has arrangements with 15 Asian countries to provide temporary workers through their Employment Permit System (EPS).
- Timor-Leste saw the program as a way ‘to tackle unemployment, provide technical training and develop the personal and professional skills of the Timorese workforce’, particularly to employ and skill youth.

Timorese workers in Korea

- A trial program from 2006 was followed by the official start of the program in October 2009. Since then 1,886 workers have been sent.
- Workers are 18-39 years old, 95% male and 5% female.
- Prospective workers must learn Korean language and undertake health tests and workplace training. Only 39% pass their language tests.
- Initial contracts are 3 years but can be extended to a maximum of 4 years 10 months.

Nos. Timorese workers in Korea by type of work and gender

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

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

Source: SEPFOPE *‘Numeru Prosesu EPS (Trabalhadores Timorenses ba servisu iha Korea du Sul) 2009-2015’*

The survey

- A questionnaire was developed based on internationally accepted survey instruments and contained both multiple choice and open answer formats.
- A small sample of 30 returned workers were selected. Interviews were held with male and female workers, workers from different sectors, and those that completed and those who did not. It was not intended to be representative of the returnees but to shed light on the positive and negative experiences of different workers.

Why did you want to got 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%

Income and remittances

- Monthly income of Timorese in Korea:
 - \$500 to \$1,000 20%
 - \$1,000 to \$2,000 80%
- Monthly Remittances to Timor
 - \$200-1,000 10%
 - \$1,000-5,000 37%
 - \$5,000 < 53%

Official data on reason for return

Of 336 workers returned to Timor in 2009-2015:

- Contract completed 37 %
- Deported 30 %
- Self-ended contract/family/cannot endure 21 %
- Failed medical, health or mental health 6 %
- Died (6 fishermen), accident 3 %
- Other 3 %

Analysed from SEPFOPPE data '*Lista naran trabalhadores nebe fila mai Timor tinan 2009-2015*' (list of names of workers who returned to Timor 2009-2015)

Attitudes to work in Korea

- *'How did your employer treat you?'*
 - *'Well' or 'very well'* 90%
 - *Had problems* 10%
- *'How easy or hard was it to live in Korea?'*
 - *'Easy' or 'very easy'* 70%
 - *Some problems* 24%
 - *Many problems* 3%
 - *No answer* 3%

Workers' comments on work in Korea

- You are expected to work fast, strongly and diligently
- Time off is often only one Sunday every second week, with long working days.
- Lots of rules must be followed and must keep to time
- Must meet targets. If you work slowly the boss will compare you to others that work harder
- You are expected back at work soon after being sick or injured
- Living at sea on a big boat is very difficult
- I regret coming back early, I now realise it is good to work hard

Case Studies

Female Agriculturalist 2010-2012

Angelina produced vegetables, working every day except for 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 small grocery store.

Fisherman, 2010-2014

‘The first year I was fishing but stopped because I did not like living on the ocean. Then I was two years in shellfish production putting out cages for shellfish, living on-shore. The company closed and I joined a gas bottle company for a year, in total 4.5 years’.

He claims the work ended and he returned voluntarily but he is listed as deported. He said ‘in Timor-Leste we cannot work like we did in Korea’.

Fisherman/Factory Worker 2010-2015

‘I worked in Fishing but left this work after 6 weeks because I did not like living on a big boat. I worked in a seaweed factory for 2 ½ years but had arguments with Timorese colleagues about meeting targets and so I left. I then joined a factory making refrigerators and air-conditioners for more than two years to the end of my contract. I sent money home to my brother to buy a truck, and we both live from this income now.’

Although he stayed for four years and 10 months, the maximum time allowed, he is nevertheless listed as ‘captured and deported’.

Manufacturing 2010-2015

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. SEPF OPE 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.

Role of Timorese government

- SEPFOPPE manages the program in coordination with the Korean government.
- SEPFOPPE staff in Korea negotiate with the work boss in cases of injury and act as mediator in case of work difficulties.
- In Korea and on return to Dili, SEPFOPPE does not make contact with the 30% of workers who are listed as deported.

On return to Timor-Leste

- Three men found employment
- Two women had become money lenders and another two set up a small grocery store.
- Thirteen had returned within 6 months and were 'resting' before looking for work.
- Some intended to sit the test to again return to Korea.
- Some wanted to set up a business but lacked necessary support (skills and capital)

Key findings

- South Korea offers work, while few opportunities exist in Timor-Leste.
- 1,886 Timorese have experienced work in Korea, but only 37% completed their contracts.
- There are many inaccuracies in the SEPFOPE data, incl. dates of work and reason for return.
- Returnees are positive about their experiences even though they initially struggled with the demanding work culture.
- Many have given significant financial support to their families.
- Although many believe they learned useful new skills, few have found work or business opportunities at home, or assistance to use their skills in small businesses.
- Many believe their best option is to return to Korea.

Policy Implications

- The program falls short of meeting the original objective to develop professional skills to contribute to the Timorese economy on return.
- SEPFOWE does not contact deported workers, so fails to learn from their experiences. New recruits should be able to learn from previous experiences.
- To re-integrate into working life in Timor, returned workers need more support to access services such as business development services.
- To reduce their isolation on return, a network of returned workers would enable a self-help approach to support each other and access services.

Post-script 1

As a result of the study, SEPFOPÉ's representative in Korea contacted co-researcher Mira Fonseca to organise a meeting of returnees when he was next in Dili. The meeting was held at SEPFOPÉ on 19/11/2015



Post-script 2

On 27/11/2015, Mira organised a meeting with former Korean workers to form a small committee to facilitate a simple needs assessment in relation to implementing their agriculture skills in Timor Leste.



Next Steps

- Mira Fonseca (a VU community development graduate) will support ex-Korean workers to submit a proposal to SEPFOPPE for green house for vegetable production, packaging and marketing.
- Richard Curtain, lead researcher of the Labour Mobility in the Pacific Project, Mira and myself will present key issues from the research at a seminar in Dili mid-year to inform the Timorese government of the research findings.