

Transitional livelihoods: Timorese migrant workers in the UK



Introduction

- Migration is driven by the desire for a better life.
- Migration for work has become increasingly seen as a strategy for development.
- It is sponsored by governments to create remittance streams and taken up by families to improve their economic status.
- Large numbers of Timorese travel unsponsored to UK on Portuguese passports for work.

Research on Timorese migrants

There are three principle destinations for Timorese migrant workers – South Korea, Australia and UK

- Last year at this conference I presented a paper on the experiences of Timorese migrants to Korea as part of the ANU's 'Labour Mobility in the Pacific Project'
- I am currently working with Cardno undertaking research on Timorese experiences of the Seasonal Workers Program.
- This research on Timorese workers in the UK used a similar format to that used for workers in Korea.

Official migration programs

The RDTL government manages two official migration programs:

- Timor-Leste participates in the Korean Employment Permit System to send young Timorese to work for 3 to 5 years, involving 1,886 Timorese workers from 2009-2015.
- Timorese have participated in the Seasonal Workers Program since 2012, working for up to six months in Australia. 593 workers have participated since 2012.

Timorese migrants to UK are self managed. Today there are an estimated 16,000 Timorese in UK.

History of Timorese migrants in UK

- In 2000 Northern Ireland's Dungannon Meat factory sought migrant labour from Portugal. One of the workers recruited was a Timorese.
- The worker told his friends that work was available, triggering a flow of Timorese to Northern Ireland and other parts of UK that continues to this day.
- Timorese born before 2002 have been granted the right to a Portuguese passport, and therefore access to EU countries.
- Brexit will deny new workers gaining access to this source of work in future.

Map of Northern Ireland

showing Dungannon, Cookstown, Portadown



The survey

- This qualitative survey was carried out July-August 2016 to understand the hopes, aspirations and experiences of Timorese migrants in UK.
- It included ten workers interviewed in Northern Ireland and nine workers interviewed in Dili after they had returned from working in different parts of the UK.

Theoretical Framework

- Positioning theory provides the framework for the analysis. Positioning theory is about how people use words and discourse to locate themselves and others (Moghaddam and Harre 2010)
- It draws on the discursive production of selves such that the positioning they aspire to can create the positioning they achieve by influencing the underlying mood of society (Boxer 2005).

Profile of workers interviewed

Gender: Male 14; Female 5

Age:

| Age | Number |
|-------|--------|
| <30 | 1 |
| 30-39 | 8 |
| 40-49 | 8 |
| 50+ | 2 |
| Total | 19 |

Education:

| Education | Number |
|-----------------------------|-----------|
| Primary, pre-secondary | 3 |
| Secondary | 5 |
| Some university or graduate | 11 |
| Total | 19 |

Time in UK

| Time in UK | Number |
|-------------------|---------------|
| < 1 year | 1 |
| 1-5 years | 8 |
| 6-10 years | 7 |
| 11-14 years | 4 |
| Total | 19 |

Type of Work

- In Northern Ireland, Dungannon Meat factory employs about 600 workers of whom a third are Timorese.
- Moy Park chicken factory in Dungannon employs about 1800 workers working around the clock on three shifts, of which about 800 are Timorese.
- Timorese workers say they do not have a problem to work in meat factories but the British do not want to do this work.
- In England, Timorese workers are more likely to work as kitchen hands in a restaurant, in a warehouse or a supermarket, as cleaners or in food processing factories.

Starting life in UK

- Timorese go to a location in UK where they have family or friends. They stay with these family or friends while looking for work.
- Many workers start working part-time, often weekend shifts only. It can be months before they get a full time job.
- Timorese lived with other Timorese, some lived in overcrowded conditions to reduce rent, while others choose to have their own space.
- During their time in UK many have moved from one place to another to get a better job.

Work in UK

- All said their treatment by employers was 'good' or 'very good'.
- All said the official 'system' did not discriminate against them, everyone is treated the same.
- However, there were complaints about discrimination or exploitation by 'supervisors', generally other migrants from eastern European countries.
- Timorese interviewed did not become supervisors even after 8 to 14 years in a factory.
- Many workers did not achieve a good level of English limiting their social contact to other Timorese workers.

Family arrangements

1. Workers with spouse and children in Timor-Leste
2. Workers who brought their spouse and children to UK
3. Single workers who met and married other Timorese workers in UK
4. Single workers
5. Workers who have children born in UK

Case studies

(full text removed from public domain)

- Case study 1: Male worker in Northern Ireland with family in Timor-Leste
- Case study 2: Male worker with family in Northern Ireland
- Case study 3: Timorese couple who married in Northern Ireland
- Case study 4: Single male worker in England
- Case study 5: Female worker in England with family in Timor-Leste
- Case study 6: Female worker in England with family in Timor-Leste
- Case study 7: Male worker in England with family in Timor-Leste

Analysis of workers' position in UK

- Many Timorese workers felt that their only reason for being in UK was to earn money and send remittances to their family in Timor-Leste, which most did monthly (case studies 1, 5, 6, 7).
- Most Timorese are working as unskilled workers, some in spite of tertiary education. Many do not learn good English and live as part of a Timorese migrant community (case studies 1, 5, 6).
- Some others learnt English and engaged with neighbours or British workmates, and some worked as interpreters with the British service sector which radically increased their integration, income and status (case studies 2, 3, 4).
- Timorese workers who raised their families in UK may no longer send regular remittances to Timor (case studies 2, 3). With children in UK, they receive significant benefits in the form of free education government child support allowances. Their children do not want to return to Timor-Leste.

Perceptions of the Timorese community in Northern Ireland

- Those that arrived in the early 2000s faced discrimination as Catholics by the Protestant community, but they report that this problem of racism is no longer an issue
- There have been a series of conflicts and incidents which have involved Timorese resulting in the community being negatively profiled, including stories of Timorese fighting or killing each other.
- Lack of knowledge of local laws has resulted in behaviour that is unacceptable in UK such as buying and killing animals to eat, and animal abuse resulting in a local petition against them 'do not bring your culture here'.
- Timorese workers on Portuguese passports do not get support from the Timorese consulate. Several workers have died, and the community joined together to raised funds to help the family repatriate the body.

Family case study in Northern Ireland

Filipe obtained a passport in Portugal and was recruited by an employment agency to get a job in UK in 2003. He has worked at Moy Park chicken factory in Northern Ireland since then, initially through the agent but later got a direct contract with the factory. In 2006 his wife, Maria, visited with their baby son. She decided to stay and they brought over their other children in 2012. Maria had one child born in the UK and has never worked. The salary Filipe receives is only £260 a week, but they also benefit from child benefits for each child up to 17 years adding £130 a month and they receive free health and education. They occasionally send remittances to their parents or brother if they need something.

Filipe and Maria do not speak English, but speak the language of their home district. The children do not speak this language as they were brought up in Dili so they speak Tetun with their parents. The oldest children are now working in UK. The younger children are still in school or college, English is their main language of communication and have English speaking friends. The youngest children have never visited Timor-Leste. While Filipe and Maria would like to return to Timor-Leste, they see that the future of their children is in the UK.

(Names have been changed)

Deconstructing family members' identity

In this family, it is suggested here that demarcation of positioning is clearly different between these four groups of the same family.

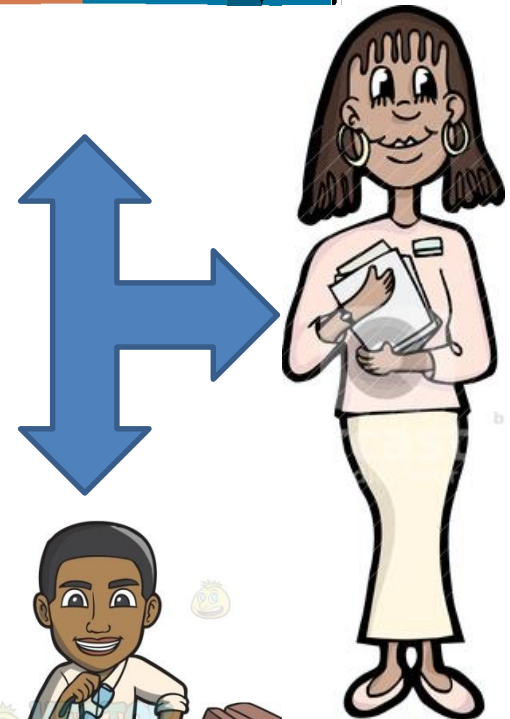
1. The father has been an unskilled migrant workers for 14 years but has not learned English, nor has his wife who joined him after a few years with the older children. They had a further child born in UK. They speak their local language (mother tongue) together.
2. The older siblings who were mostly educated in Timor-Leste but since joining their parents have learned some English. These older children received some education in UK and although they continue to work as migrant workers, one has been able to get a more skilled job in a car factory in Oxford.
3. The middle school-age siblings born in Timor-Leste arrived young and were predominantly educated in English. They speak the national language Tetun with their parents and as Timorese citizens but with a UK education they can position themselves as UK residents with broader capabilities and employment opportunities.
4. The youngest school-age siblings are British citizens for whom English is becoming their major linguistic environment. As a consequence of their participation in primary school with members of the Irish community, they have opportunities only marginally different from their Irish classmates, in accordance with their competence and capabilities. They identify with their English-speaking friends in school and have no memories of Timor-Leste.

Story-line

Position

**Achieve
different
opportunities
through
introducing a
new discourse**

Speech Acts



Conclusion

- Migration offers significant opportunities for improving the economic situation of the family at home
- In UK, the Timorese community work together and support each other. However they often fail to engage with the broader host community.
- Insular migrant communities with minimal English are subject to the most discrimination, and are most likely to get in trouble with the law
- Migrants with children in UK tend to focus their lives on the welfare of the children, and stay in UK longer.
- All the migrants workers wanted to return to Timor-Leste, seeing life in UK as a means to an end, but the children want to stay in UK which has much greater opportunities.