

Precarious lives: Transnational biographies of migrant oil palm workers

Abstract

Based on ongoing biographical research of Indonesian migrant workers in the oil palm plantations of Malaysia, this paper explores their different strategies of survival in a sector characterised by an ongoing precarity of livelihoods. The life stories of six workers from Sulawesi, Flores, Java and Sumatra are used to illustrate a tentative typology of migration experiences. As the workers set out from their own specific context of 'surplus population', they are confronted with a migration labour regime that is based on the social and political precarisation of the workers. However, in order to achieve their development aspirations, the workers find different ways of adapting to or circumventing the precarious labour regime. In particular, flight or absconding (*lari*) is used to change employers, to find better working conditions and to increase wages. Another key strategy is to increase the permanence of their stay, either by choosing illegality or by negotiating retrospective documentation. These strategies lead to the emergence of long-term transnational networks that change the social reality of the migration regime in the oil palm industry.