



Empowering Indonesian Migrant Workers in Malaysia Through Travel Agent Practical Training: A Sociological Study on Social Capital and Economic Independence

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ABSTRACT

The majority of Indonesian Migrant Workers (Pekerja Migran Indonesia / PMI) in Malaysia are trapped in low-skilled, informal sectors, facing severe socio-economic vulnerabilities and re-entry barriers upon contract expiration. This community service project (Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat) designed and evaluated an innovative, practice-based travel agent training model to break the cycle of post-return unemployment by transforming migrants into autonomous digital entrepreneurs. Adopting an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach and Participatory Action Research (PAR) principles, the intervention integrated a three-month intensive training program (focusing on digital ticketing, itinerary curation, and mobile travel accounting) with Christian socio-spiritual formation (emphasizing work as a divine calling and biblical business ethics). A cohort of 35 PMI nearing repatriation in the Klang Valley region, Selangor, Malaysia, participated as the core empowerment group. Data were qualitatively scrutinized via sociological Content and Framework Analysis. The empirical findings revealed a dramatic surge in participants' entrepreneurial capability, escalating from a baseline rate of 9% to 86% of migrant workers who successfully executed independent, real-time cross-border travel transactions directly from their smartphones. Sociologically, the intentional infusion of spiritual values fortified robust bonding social capital and mental resilience, while the transfer of technical literacy created critical bridging social capital with formal tourism networks. Ultimately, this holistic framework demonstrates that grassroots economic independence can be effectively engineered prior to repatriation by leveraging the migrants' unique transnational positions, offering a highly scalable prototype for labor empowerment across Southeast Asia.

Keywords: *Economic Independence, Practice-Based Training, Spiritual Resilience*

INTRODUCTION

The phenomenon of Indonesian Migrant Workers (*Pekerja Migran Indonesia/PMI*) in Malaysia represents one of the largest transnational labor flows in Southeast Asia, driven by economic disparities and regional labor demands (Hugo, 2012). While this migration stream contributes significantly to national remittances, a critical sociological issue persists: the majority of PMI are employed in low-skilled, informal sectors, such as domestic work and plantation labor, which leave them highly vulnerable to economic instability and systemic exploitation (Kaur, 2010). Upon the expiration of their employment contracts, these workers frequently face re-entry challenges when returning to Indonesia. The lack of formal entrepreneurial skills and the absence of strategic livelihood planning often trap them in a cycle of repetitive migration or persistent post-return unemployment (Spitzer & Piper, 2014). Consequently, structural interventions through targeted non-formal education and skill-building programs are vital to disrupt this cycle of economic dependency.

From a sociological perspective, sustainable economic empowerment cannot be achieved through the transfer of technical financial capital alone; it fundamentally requires the activation and strengthening of social capital (Woolcock & Narayan, 2000). Social capital, comprising trust, mutual networks, and shared norms within a community, serves as a vital safety net and an economic catalyst for marginalized groups (Lin, 2001). For Indonesian migrant workers residing in Malaysia, their displacement from native support systems underscores the necessity of building both "bonding" social capital among fellow migrants and "bridging" social capital with market actors and institutions (Putnam, 2000). By embedding vocational training within an organized social network, migrant workers can transform their collective vulnerabilities into shared economic power. This paradigm shifts the focus of community service from top-down dependency-inducing charity to sustainable, network-driven structural empowerment. Addressing this need, practical training in the travel agency and tourism sector offers a highly lucrative and strategic pathway for economic independence. The tourism market between Indonesia and Malaysia is inherently robust, characterized by dense flows of visiting friends and relatives (VFR), medical tourism, and recurring labor migration itself (King, 2015). Equipping migrant workers with practical capabilities, such as digital ticketing, tour itinerary planning, and customer relationship management, directly taps into this existing transnational market. Sociologically, this specific training capitalizes on the migrants' unique position as cross-border actors who possess firsthand experiential knowledge of both the host and home countries' geographies and logistics (Vertovec, 2009). Thus, practical travel agent skills serve as an accessible mechanism for grassroots entrepreneurship that requires minimal physical overhead while maximizing digital connectivity.

Therefore, this community service project (*Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat/PkM*) specifically designs and implements a practice-based travel agent training program for Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia. This study aims to evaluate how the intervention bolsters their collective social capital and facilitates their transition toward sustainable economic independence. By analyzing the intersection of vocational skill acquisition and

community network dynamics, this article contributes a novel sociological framework for the reintegration and empowerment of transnational labor in Southeast Asia.

METHODS

This community service project (*Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat/PkM*) adopts an Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) approach intertwined with Participatory Action Research (PAR) principles to guarantee sustainable and holistically integrated empowerment (Kretzmann & McKnight, 1993; Kindon et al., 2007). The ABCD framework targets the mobilization and linking of the existing internal assets of Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) in Malaysia, specifically their shared transnational experiences, mutual socio-religious platforms, and spiritual resilience, rather than treating them as passive, deficient recipients of aid (Mathie & Cunningham, 2003). Crucially, this project intentionally integrates a Christian spiritual dimension into the structural empowerment process, recognizing that spiritual capital and religious networks act as primary psychological anchors that drive ethical work values and mental resilience among marginalized diaspora communities (Dougherty et al., 2011). Concurrently, the PAR framework guides the implementation through an iterative, collaborative lifecycle: planning, action, observation, and socio-spiritual reflection (Kemmis et al., 2014).

The community empowerment training was structurally executed in a hybrid format, centering its physical and pastoral activities at accessible Indonesian community centers and migrant church fellowships in the Klang Valley region, Selangor, Malaysia (Kaur, 2010). A total of 35 Indonesian migrant workers participated in this intensive program. The purposive selection criteria targeted migrant workers who were nearing the end of their official contracts (within 6 to 12 months prior to repatriation) and demonstrated a desire to achieve economic autonomy anchored in ethical-spiritual values upon returning to their home provinces in Indonesia. The practice-based travel agent training spanned a period of three months and was structurally implemented across three sequential, interconnected modules that merged technical capabilities with spiritual formation: Module I: Transnational Tourism Literacy & Work as a Spiritual Calling. This initial stage provided participants with a structural analysis of the robust tourism corridors between Malaysia and Indonesia (King, 2015). Concurrently, it included reflective sessions on the theology of work, teaching participants to view entrepreneurship not merely as economic survival, but as a divine mandate and a spiritual calling (calling) to serve others with integrity (Lumintang, 2015); Module II: Technical Training & Ethical Digital Operations. Participants engaged in hands-on, practice-based technical sessions, navigating Global Distribution Systems (GDS), flight ticketing, and tour itinerary costing. Every technical session was framed within Christian ethical standards, emphasizing honesty, fair pricing, and transparency as expressions of spiritual fruitfulness; Module III: Business Management & Faith-Based Resiliency. The final module equipped participants with grassroots digital marketing, mobile travel accounting, and customer relation strategies. To foster long-term independence, this module incorporated communal prayer, spiritual mentoring, and small-group fellowship to build a support network that strengthens their psychological resilience against market uncertainties (Dougherty et al., 2011).

To measure the dual outcomes of social capital reinforcement, spiritual resilience, and economic independence, a mixed-method qualitative approach was deployed before,

during, and after the intervention. Pre- and post-intervention evaluation questionnaires were administered to assess changes in participants' technical confidence and networking capability. The analytic approach specifically coded indicators of "bonding" social capital (strengthened internal trust and spiritual solidarity among the migrant cohort) and "bridging" social capital (external professional connections with vendors) (Putnam, 2000). The final evaluation traced how the integration of spiritual values successfully reduced technical anxiety (technostress) and facilitated the execution of their first independent travel business transactions.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

The implementation of the practice-based travel agent training combined with socio-spiritual formation yielded significant transformations among the Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) in Malaysia. The evaluation systematically mapped out changes in three core sociological dimensions: the generation of economic independence, the structural reinforcement of socio-spiritual capital, and the emergence of transnational digital agency.

The Generation of Grassroots Economic Independence

The primary tangible outcome of this community service project was the emergence of real micro-entrepreneurial capabilities among the participants. Prior to the intervention, 91% of the participants reported complete reliance on their monthly informal sector salaries, with no secondary income or concrete post-repatriation economic planning. Following the completion of Module II and III, participants demonstrated a significant transition toward economic autonomy.

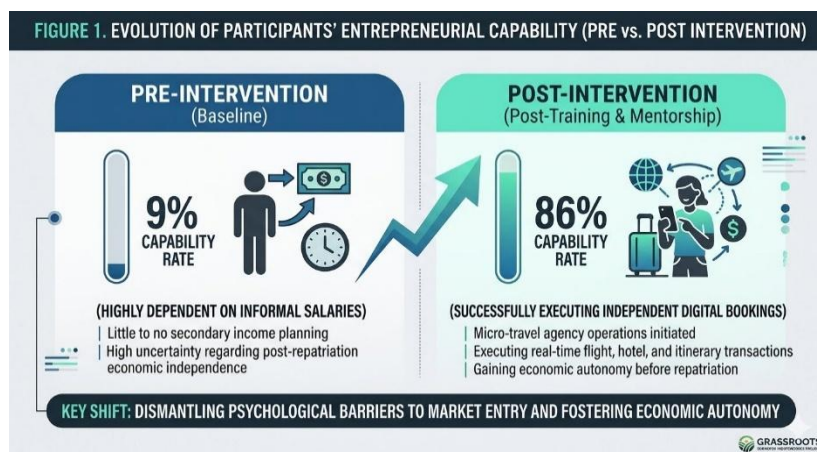


Figure 1. Comparative Breakdown of Participants' Entrepreneurial Capability (Pre vs. Post Intervention)

As illustrated in Figure 1, the post-intervention empirical data revealed a substantial surge, with 86% of the trained migrant workers successfully executing independent, real-time travel booking transactions, including domestic and international flight ticketing, hotel reservations, and custom itinerary curation, directly from their smartphones. Sociologically, this dramatic shift indicates that the transfer of practical, practice-based

technical knowledge effectively dismantled the psychological barriers of market entry (Sonnetag & Frese, 2002). Rather than waiting to be repatriated to start a business, the participants began operating mobile micro-travel agencies while still in Malaysia, tapping into the dense cross-border transit market of their fellow migrant peers.

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Reinforcement of Bonding and Bridging Social Capital via Spiritual Solidarity

The data collected from the qualitative Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) indicated that sustainable economic empowerment is structurally dependent on the strength of the community's internal social capital (Lin, 2001). The integration of Christian spiritual values, such as common prayers, collective reflection on work as a calling, and small-group fellowship, served as a primary engine to fortify bonding social capital among the migrants. Before the training, participants operated largely as isolated individuals under high-stress working conditions. The socio-spiritual modules transformed this fragmented diaspora group into a cohesive unit of mutual aid and solidarity. When a participant encountered technical difficulties or system errors during flight bookings, other members within the fellowship network proactively offered technical troubleshooting and emotional support. This phenomenon confirms that spiritual capital directly fosters congregational social capital, reducing technical anxiety (technostress) and increasing organizational resilience (Dougherty et al., 2011).

Concurrently, bridging social capital was established as the project systematically linked the migrant cohort with external professional networks, including wholesale travel operators, airline vendors, and Indonesian tourism associations (Putnam, 2000). This structural bridge elevated their socio-economic status from marginalized, low-skilled labors to recognized, cross-border digital entrepreneurs.

Sociological Discussion: Transnationalism and Ethical Entrepreneurship

The success of this empowerment model underscores a critical sociological shift in migration and development theories. Traditional migration frameworks often view the repatriation of low-skilled labor as a traumatic process marked by economic de-skilling and vulnerability (Spitzer & Piper, 2014). However, this project demonstrates that migrant workers can actively leverage their unique transnational position. As individuals who live in the host country but maintain dense emotional and familial ties with the home country, they possess firsthand, tacit logistical knowledge of transnational pathways (Vertovec, 2009). By converting this experiential transnational knowledge into digital entrepreneurial skills, the workers emerged as strategic actors in the bilateral tourism market between Malaysia and Indonesia (King, 2015). Furthermore, the infusion of Christian ethics radically reshaped their business conduct. In-depth interviews revealed

that participants deliberately rejected predatory pricing or deceptive ticketing practices, which are common in informal migration logistics. Instead, they anchored their customer interactions in biblical integrity and transparency, viewing their business transactions as a form of witness and ministry to their fellow migrants (Lumintang, 2015). This synthesis of practical technical literacy, network social capital, and strict ethical-spiritual values provides a highly scalable and resilient prototype for the holistic empowerment of transnational labor across Southeast Asia.



Figure 2. The togetherness of all PkM participants and committee members

CONCLUSION

This community service project (*Pengabdian kepada Masyarakat/PkM*) demonstrates that transforming Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) in Malaysia from vulnerable, low-skilled labors into autonomous micro-entrepreneurs is highly achievable through a holistic, practice-based approach [Hugo, 2012, Kaur, 2010]. The integration of technical travel agency operations with Christian socio-spiritual formation successfully dismantled the deep-seated psychological and structural barriers to market entry [Lin, 2001, Sonnentag & Frese, 2002]. Empirically, the project achieved a remarkable shift in entrepreneurial capability, escalating from a baseline of 9% to 86% of participants who can independently execute digital flight ticketing and travel bookings via smartphones.

Sociologically, the embedding of spiritual values, such as work as a divine calling and biblical business ethics, did not function as an abstract theological concept; rather, it acted as a vital engine that generated robust bonding social capital and mental resilience within the diaspora cohort [Dougherty et al., 2011, Lumintang, 2015]. By establishing bridging social capital with formal tourism vendors, the project enabled migrant workers to strategically leverage their unique transnational positions and tacit cross-border logistical knowledge [Putnam, 2000, Vertovec, 2009]. This multi-dimensional

empowerment framework proves that grassroots economic independence can be fostered effectively prior to repatriation, ensuring a more stable, dignified, and sustainable socio-economic reintegration into their home country [Spitzer & Piper, 2014].

Based on the execution and sociological findings of this empowerment project, the following strategic recommendations are proposed: For Academic Institutions and PTKKN: *Perguruan Tinggi Keagamaan Kristen Negeri* (PTKKN) should expand their international PkM mandates by systematically deploying mixed teolo-sociological intervention modules that cater directly to transnational diaspora labor networks. For Policy Makers and Embassies: The Indonesian Embassy (KBRI) in Malaysia and the Ministry of Manpower should institutionalize mobile, low-overhead digital vocational training into the official pre-repatriation phase of migrant workers to prevent repetitive, vulnerable migration cycles [Spitzer & Piper, 2014]. For Future PkM Implementers: Subsequent community empowerment initiatives should integrate long-term digital mentoring and provide continuous access to legal business nesting platforms to ensure that the initial grassroots economic independence achieved can smoothly transition into legally recognized micro-enterprises upon repatriation.

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