

The return of the guest worker? Temporary migration programmes in theory and practice

Synopsis

This research project contributes to current debates about the potential of temporary migration programmes (TMPs) for helping to manage international labour migration in a way that is both practical and sensitive to the interests of receiving countries, migrants and their countries of origin. The research involves discussions of: the economic and normative issues arising from temporary migration programmes; the policy lessons from past and existing TMPs; proposals of ‘innovative’ policy designs that are intended to help avoid past policy mistakes; and the rights that migrants admitted under a TMPs should have and how they can be best protected. A key theme to be explored in this project is the trade-off between financial gains from employment abroad and the restriction of rights in the host country that migrants typically experience under a TMP.

Background

A number of high-income countries have recently considered the (re-)introduction, or expansion, of temporary migration programmes (TMPs) as one of the possible policy tools to manage labour immigration. For example, the United States is currently considering the introduction of a new large scale guest-worker-programme for Mexican workers. The UK recently experimented with a pilot scheme for the temporary employment of migrant workers in selected low-skill occupations in hospitality and food processing. Italy and Spain – two recent countries of immigration – are also actively pursuing TMPs, most of them within the framework of bilateral agreements with sending countries in Northern Africa and Latin America.

Given their adverse history in liberal democracies, the re-emergence of TMPs is highly contested in both the academic and policy community. Critics argue that such programmes are both unfeasible and undesirable in a liberal democracy. This argument is primarily based on the fact that many of the past guest worker programmes – most notably the *Bracero* programme in the United States (1942-64) and the *Gastarbeiter* programme in Germany (1955-73) – failed to meet their stated policy objectives and instead generated a number of unanticipated consequences. This included the non-return and eventual settlement of many guest workers. The slogan “there is nothing more permanent than temporary foreign workers” has been a popular summary statement of the perceived failure of past guest worker programmes.

Proponents of new TMPs argue that innovative policy designs could help avoid past policy mistakes and generate significant benefits for all sides involved, including migrant workers and their countries of origin. For example, in its recent report to UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, the Global Commission on International Migration suggested that “states and the private sector should consider the option of introducing carefully designed temporary migration programmes as a means of addressing the economic needs of both countries of origin and destination”.

The ESRC Centre on Migration, Policy and Society (COMPAS) at the University of Oxford conducts high quality research in order to develop theory and knowledge, inform public opinion and contribute to policy debates on migration.

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Aims and Objectives

The return of the guest worker? engages with the theory of and policy considerations in the design and implementation of TMPs. It addresses the following research questions:

- What are the impacts of TMPs on migrants, non-migrants, employers and states? What are the trade-offs involved?
- What are the normative arguments in favour and against TMPs?
- What have been the consequences –of past guest worker programmes? What have been the factors determining their success or failure?
- How do employers and migrants perceive and experience TMPs? Can TMPs help with efforts to combat the illegal employment of migrant workers?
- What policies are needed to design new and effective TMPs that avoid past policy mistakes? What has been the experience of the UK's Sector-based Scheme (SBS)?
- What should be the rights of migrants admitted under a TMP and how can they be best protected?

Methods

The research involves: discussion of pertinent theories in economics, politics and other relevant disciplines; comparative analyses of the major past and existing temporary migration programmes around the world; and analysis of data collected from migrants and employers who joined the UK's recent Sector-based Scheme (SBS), a pilot programme for temporarily employing migrants in low-skilled jobs in the hospitality and food processing sectors. The empirical analysis focuses on the employment of migrants in hospitality. The data collected include: 60 survey interviews and 8 separate in-depth interviews with Bangladeshi migrants working in Indian restaurants in London (half of them on SBS permits); 5 in-depth interviews with employers in Indian restaurants; and a separate mail survey of 263 employers in the UK's hospitality sector a quarter of whom employed migrants on SBS permits.

Outputs:

- Ruhs, M., 2003, "Temporary Foreign Worker Programmes: Policies, Adverse Consequences, and the Need to Make Them Work", Perspectives on Labour Migration 6, International Migration Branch, International Labour Office (ILO), Geneva.
- Ruhs, M., 2005, "Designing viable and ethical labour immigration policies", Chapter 10 in *World Migration 2005*, International Organization for Migration (IOM), Geneva.
- Ruhs, M., 2005, "Temporary migration programmes in theory and practice", in *Migration: A welcome opportunity*, Royal Society of Arts (RSA), London.
- Ruhs, M., 2006, "The potential of temporary migration programmes in future international migration policy", *International Labour Review* 145 (1-2). A previous version of this paper has been published as an Annex to *Migration in an interconnected world: New directions for action*, Global Commission on International Migration, Geneva.
- Ruhs, M., and Philip Martin, 2006, Numbers vs. Rights: Trade-offs and guest worker programmes, COMPAS Working Paper, [WP-06-40](#)

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