

TWC2's Recommendations for Singapore Budget 2014

Towards a more productive economy and a well-integrated society through sustainable foreign labour policies

Singapore will need to employ a significant number of migrant workers for the foreseeable future. Transient Workers Count Too (TWC2) believes that the interest of Singapore in increasing productivity levels and advancing its development are consistent with decent treatment of migrant workers and a harmonious relationship between these workers and their host society.

The proposals we advance in this paper concern medium and long-range policies that have definite implications for Singapore's budget and for advance financial planning.

The recommendations were prepared by a TWC2 research group. TWC2 wishes to express its thanks to John Gee, Edwina Shaddick, Cheow Xin Yi and Max Ang for their work in drafting these recommendations.

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Introduction

TWC2 thanks the Government for inviting views from the public before the Singapore Budget 2014 is finalised.

The Government has tightened control over the level of recruitment of foreign labour in recent years, even as it stressed the need to raise Singapore's productivity rate by between 2 to 3 per cent annually in the next decade. As a migrant worker advocacy group, we believe our recommendations – based on an integrationist approach that favours longer stays for foreign labour – will help to achieve the Singapore's target of developing a more productive economy while complementing existing initiatives to check the growth of the migrant labour workforce by curbing demand for more migrant workers in the future. At the same time, they would secure greater benefits for those migrant workers who are employed in Singapore.

We believe our recommendations would also go some way towards addressing issues that have been the cause of simmering tensions between some Singapore residents and migrant workers, and could contribute towards the promotion of more harmonious social relations between the two communities.

Our recommendations are aimed primarily at policies relating to low-wage migrant workers, i.e., work permit holders working primarily in the construction, manufacturing, marine, retail and hospitality service sectors, as well as domestic workers.

We have grouped the recommendations into two broad areas, under which we set forth specific proposed measures, along with our justifications for these calls.

Part One: Migrant Workers and the Economy

A. Long-Term Retention Of Workers

TWC2 firmly believes that it is in the best interests of both Singaporean society and migrant workers for our regulatory regime to allow and even encourage migrant workers to work in Singapore for prolonged periods. Clearly, in order to achieve this, regulatory instruments must allow for a migrant worker's labour mobility, i.e, the ability to change employers in Singapore, barring any exceptional circumstances, such as being convicted of a serious crime or suffering a substantial injury.

Here are reasons for increasing the stays and labour mobility of migrant workers in Singapore:

- a) Increased productivity is based on the basic premise that for the same input of work hours, output can be enlarged through the deployment of new technologies, improved work processes or the application of enhanced skills, thus contributing to a larger output in the economy without a corresponding increase in employment of labour. While much emphasis has been placed on investing in automation of equipment and processes with a leaner workforce, an equally important component, as pointed out by SIM University School of Business's Professor Sundaram Janakiramanan¹, is having trained workers to operate this equipment and effect the processes more efficiently, with full support from management to reward well-performing workers. Despite recent tightening measures to restrict the incoming flow of more foreign labour, with the low-skilled migrant workforce in Singapore currently making up 29 per cent of the total labour force in Singapore (970,600 out of about 3.4 million)², any training and development investments to increase productivity have to take into the account this large pool of workers.
- b) It is plainly the case that enhanced productivity requires not only training, but also the retention of workers in order that the benefits of training can be reaped by Singapore as a host society. Enlightened employers will see the value in training migrant workers as part of a concerted national productivity drive, but TWC2 believes the government can do more to incentivise employers towards such forward-thinking behaviour and to retain experienced, more productive workers. The current Work Pass Regulations system, however, encourages migrant worker churn, with some of the following negative outcomes that can be prevented by longer stays and increased labour mobility for migrant workers :
- i. The lack of opportunity for migrant workers to change jobs of their own accord, i.e, the absence of transfer rights under the current work permit system, gives excessive leverage to employers, some of whom are tempted to exploit it unfairly (e.g. through underpayment of salaries, illegal deductions, or inducing employees to work without adequate safety equipment)
 - ii. Excessive employer leverage, can lead to under-reporting of abuses and shortcomings in employment and work safety practices, as workers are disempowered and fearful of losing their jobs;
 - iii. As a consequence of (ii), efforts to improve productivity tend to be undercut as experience and experientially-acquired skills (including social and communication skills interacting with workers from other communities and Singaporeans) are lost.
- c) Many Singaporean citizens complain about the social impact of migrant workers, with littering and rowdy behaviour by male workers being a long-term bone of contention. Workers who stay for longer periods are more likely to adjust their behaviour to allow for Singapore's norms and standards.

¹ <http://www.todayonline.com/commentary/productivity-really-guarantee-growth>

² See labour force statistics at: <http://stats.mom.gov.sg/Pages/Labour-Force-Summary-Table.aspx>, from which we calculated the most up to date percentage figure.

- d) The business community has long complained about Singapore's labour crunch and the negative effects for businesses' bottom-line following recent years of progressive foreign manpower tightening through the dependency ceilings and levies. A contented, well-trained and productive foreign workforce, with a preference for continuing to work in Singapore over a series of work permit renewals, would be a valuable continuing resource. Better tapping on this group through longer stays and increased labour mobility would complement the current tightening drive by curbing demand for fresh intakes of inexperienced migrant workers.

Guided by the aforementioned considerations, TWC2 has the following specific policy recommendations:

- a) Separate duration of employment contracts from duration of work permits:

At present, migrant workers who are Work Permit and S-Pass holders can be treated as "term contract workers", in the sense that it can be assumed by employers and the Ministry of Manpower (MOM) that their term of employment is the same as the duration of the Work Permit (usually one or two years). In some cases, this is clearly the case (e.g., domestic workers often have employment contracts stipulating a two year term of employment). In other cases, from a legal perspective, the position is unclear in the absence of a written employment contract.

By contrast, foreign professionals who hold Employment Passes are generally regarded as being employed either on a permanent basis, or for a longer contract period negotiated between the employer and employee that usually bears no relationship to the validity of the Employment Pass. In such cases, employment contracts may stipulate that the continuance of the employment contract is "subject to" renewal of the employee's Employment Pass, or may simply be silent on the issue, with both parties relying on an assumption that in the usual course of business a request for renewal is not likely to be refused by MOM.

TWC2 believes that this second model, in which the terms of employment are subject to, but not determined by, the duration of the work pass, is clearly a better conceptual framework for the employment of all migrant workers in Singapore. We urge that MOM's policies and procedures be reviewed to ensure that it is understood that a worker's term of employment is viewed as a separate matter from the duration of his or her work permit. The Employment of Foreign Manpower Act (EFMA) and Employment Act (EA) should also be amended to provide that in the absence of a specified term of employment in a written employment contract, employees shall be deemed to be employed on a permanent basis, subject to MOM renewing their work permits as required and subject to lawful termination by either party in accordance with the termination provisions in the EA and/or the terms of the contract. Employers and employees also need to be made aware of this distinction (including its impact on annual leave and medical leave entitlement) and encouraged to

enter into employment contracts that reflect the true nature of the arrangement.

In addition to the above recommendations, we recommend that the EA and the EFMA should require both the IPA application and letter to clearly stipulate if the contract is not to be of a fixed term. If not, the default presumption would be that the contract is on-going. For termination at the end of the term to be valid, this information must also be clearly stated in a written employment contract.

By clearly separating the term of employment from the validity period of the work permit, the employment arrangement's nature is made much more transparent and both the migrant worker and his or her employer can align their expectations about whether the position meets his or her needs for the former and the obligations required in exchange for the labour demand for the latter. Both could plan better for the long term. An employee might reasonably be expected to be available for work over a series of work permit periods and, should employment of a worker cease before the expiry of a work permit, the presumption would be that the worker would be free to seek employment elsewhere for the duration of the permit, with the expectation that it would be renewed (See Proposal c).³

b) Contract terms should be a minimum of two years in Singapore

In the past, migrant workers were typically employed on two-year contracts/work permits. However, in the last few years, a new norm seems to have developed in the construction industry, where migrant workers seem to be typically engaged on the basis of one year contracts/work permits. While we appreciate that some industries are project-based and experience up-turns and down-turns in work levels, we believe that migrant workers should not be the ones to bear the impact of such vicissitudes by being engaged on such short term contracts, which can result in a harsh and exploitative outcome and, as suggested earlier in our considerations, is counter-intuitive to current productivity efforts from a training of manpower perspective. If a particular job is clearly of a short-term nature, we suggest that it should be performed by local rather than imported labour, particularly given the current inability of migrant workers to readily change employers at the end of a contract period.

We urge MOM to amend the EFMA Work Pass Regulations by stipulating a minimum contract period of at least two years for Work Permit and S-Pass holders. However, as proposed in our first specific policy recommendation, in the absence of stipulated contract duration, the contract would still be presumed to be on-going.

c) Allow migrant workers whose work permit has been terminated to stay in Singapore with a "Job-Search Pass Visa" of up to 30 days.

³ The issues reviewed here and on the next four pages were raised in TWC2's submission: *Proposals – Second Phase Review of the Employment Act and Employment of Foreign Manpower Act*, (October 2013), which can be accessed through the TWC2 website at: <http://twc2.org.sg/2013/11/01/proposals-submitted-for-second-phase-employment-legislation-review/>

Currently, the termination of employment of a migrant worker results in the immediate termination of the work permit, in which case the migrant must leave Singapore within seven days, regardless of how long he or she has stayed in the country. Barring conviction for a criminal offence or the suffering of a serious injury, TWC2 proposes that workers should be given suitable opportunities to seek new jobs in Singapore rather than being automatically repatriated at the end of a contract period or on the whim of the employer.

In particular, in no circumstances should migrant workers need to obtain from their employers a “release” in order to change jobs in Singapore. Migrant workers should not be treated as the property of their employers. MOM has a legitimate interest in ensuring that the worker has a valid work permit with the correct employer (together with the necessary security bond, medical insurance etc). However, the circumstances in which workers can lawfully terminate their employment should be governed by the terms of the relevant contract and the termination requirements of the EA. There is no justification for giving employers the power essentially to force workers to choose between remaining in an unsatisfactory job in Singapore and being repatriated empty-handed, especially if huge investments have been made in training the worker, or the worker has already incurred significant placement costs to come and work in Singapore, as is almost invariably the case.

Workers may find themselves quite suddenly without a job in a number of ways:

- i. when their employment is terminated at short notice and their work permit is prematurely cancelled by their employer;
- ii. when their work permit is cancelled by MOM for reasons to do with the employer breaching the EFMA requirements; or
- iii. when their employer disappears or becomes insolvent.

Through amendment of the EA, we propose the following notice period be given to workers in the case of (i.), or by the workers if they are contemplating leaving their current employment:

- i. Not less than seven days’ notice if he has been so employed for less than one year;
- ii. Not less than two weeks’ notice if he has been so employed for one year or more but less than five years; and
- iii. Not less than 30 days’ notice if he has been so employed for five years or more.

In ii and iii, workers should be issued with at least a 30-Day Job Search Pass Visa, beginning on termination of their previous employment, with an extension to be considered upon the worker’s request. It should be illegal for an employer to repatriate a worker during either of these job search periods. If the worker finds a position within this period, the worker should be free to enter into a new contract with the new employer and, together with the new employer, apply for a new work permit.

The issuance of a new work pass to the worker (with all of the related work pass obligations such as medical insurance and the security bond being assumed by the new employer) should automatically relieve the previous employer of any responsibility for the support or repatriation of the employee from that date onwards. Under such a process, there is no need for the first employer to issue any “release” letter or sign any documentation in connection with the transfer. In this regard, we note that MOM currently provides some migrant workers with Special Passes which allow them to seek new employment, in salary dispute situations. In doing so, MOM presumably recognises that it is quite possible to allow workers to change employers without destroying the integrity of MOM’s work permit/security bond system.

One of the collateral benefits of allowing a worker to remain in Singapore for a period following the unexpected loss of a job is that it provides the worker with an opportunity to make a claim for unfair dismissal under section 14 of the EA (where relevant). At present, workers are often in practice denied their right to file a complaint for unfair dismissal as they can be terminated on short or no notice (depending on the situation) and repatriated without having the opportunity to make a complaint to MOM. Once returned to their home countries, where many live in remote rural areas, the practical obstacles to making and pursuing an unfair dismissal claim against a Singapore- based employer are almost impossible to surmount. The changes that we propose would redress this concern.

- d) Incentivise employers to hire migrant workers in Singapore, rather than hiring new workers from abroad.

TWC2 is of the view that the realities of the employment culture in Singapore should be taken into account in order to make it meaningful for workers to seek a change of employer. Even when workers are allowed to seek new jobs locally without first being repatriated, take-up by employers may be too low, thus frustrating the aim of retaining skills and experience. From TWC2’s viewpoint, some of the stumbling blocks are likely to be:

- i. Employers may believe the workers already here and looking for new jobs are more “difficult” workers, instead of viewing them as valuable resources to be tapped on;
- ii. A large proportion of employers still ask workers to pay “kickbacks” in exchange for being given a job or having their positions renewed⁴;
- iii. A belief amongst employers that, aside from the foreign-to-local manpower ratio, there is nothing which stands in the way of them bringing in “fresh” workers, who may be more compliant, less “savvy” to their legal rights and more willing to pay greater kickback amounts in return for their jobs.

⁴ Worse off for working? Kickbacks, intermediary fees and migrant construction workers in Singapore
<http://twc2.org.sg/2012/08/12/worse-off-for-working-kickbacks-intermediary-fees-and-migrant-construction-workers-in-singapore/>

For these reasons, in order to truly promote long-term stays by migrant workers in Singapore, measures must be taken to discourage the intake of “fresh” workers from abroad, while incentivising the take-up of existing migrant workers in Singapore who are looking for a new job.

Accordingly we recommend that applications for work permits for persons who have never worked in Singapore before, or who have stayed away for more than three years, be subject to a slight delay in processing (say, sixty days). That way, employers will soon realise that to obtain the manpower they need — at least within a short time frame — they should look to hiring workers who are seeking change of employer locally.

This delay period could be lengthened or shortened as needed according to supply and demand considerations. In this regard we expect that MOM should have no difficulty in accessing real-time data on how many workers are looking for new jobs in Singapore, as MOM would be in control of issuing Job Search Special Passes and Job Search Extended Special Passes under our above recommendations.

A further benefit from encouraging employers to hire migrant workers who are already here in preference to those fresh from abroad, is that should an employer ask for or receive a kickback, the illegal act takes place within Singapore’s jurisdiction and thus can be readily prosecuted. By contrast, it is clearly very difficult for the Singapore government to police what transpires between migrant workers and intermediaries in the workers’ home countries. Furthermore, workers who have been in Singapore for a number of years may also be less fearful and more prepared to report errant employers to MOM.

At the same time, we also recommend MOM to further incentivise the hiring of already present migrant workers by employers by linking the hiring of such workers to the relaxation of the dependency ceilings or the levy system: e.g., every employer who hires five migrant workers who have been working in Singapore, instead of an intake of five fresh workers from abroad, could be subjected to a slightly lower migrant worker levy.

e) Incentivise employers to send their workers for training.

Some construction firms already incentivise their workers to upgrade their skills, but these companies are few and far between. Those that do are provided with an incentive to do so by the reductions to the levy that they can gain if they upgrade a worker from one with only basic skills to one with higher qualifications.⁵

One problem with this is that there is currently no guarantee that workers will go on to use the skills in which they receive training. Rather than as a way to enhance productivity, some employers simply see training workers as a way to pay a lower levy while deploying them in the same unskilled or semi-skilled

⁵ Construction firms offer pay hikes to skilled workers - <http://www.straittimes.com/breaking-news/singapore/story/construction-firms-offer-pay-hikes-skilled-workers-20130909>

work as before their training. It may be hard to prevent this, but at least better utilisation of training could be promoted by making it easier for workers to seek alternative employment at the end of a contract period and by offering them the chance to advertise their skills and abilities to other employers. One way to further incentivise employers to leverage on trained migrant workers would be tie further reductions of the levy to the promotion and corresponding wage increases of these workers who should then be in a better position to contribute more to the company and the economy as a whole.

Domestic workers' levies should also be tied to productivity in the same way that migrant workers' levies are. Shirlena Huang and Brenda Yeoh argued that the "lack of a parallel levy structure and employment quota differentiating between 'skilled' and 'unskilled' workers in the domestic service sector clearly indicates the way the state positions domestic work: it is not regarded on the same level as productive work and hence is not work for which one can upgrade one's skills."⁶

Thus, we recommend that the government adopts a "sliding scale" approach to domestic workers' levies as well, such that if a domestic worker took cooking, sewing, childcare, nursing or computer courses, this will count towards 'skills upgrading', and that both the domestic worker and her employer will be rewarded for this.

B. Alter Levy System on the Employment of Migrant Workers

The main original reason for introducing a levy on the employment of migrant workers was to moderate demand for them. By making it more expensive to hire non-Singaporeans, it was intended that some protection would be given to nationals against their salary levels being depressed and their employment opportunities being diminished by the hiring of low-paid migrants. (Effectively, it is used in conjunction with the Dependency Ratio Ceiling, governing the proportion of migrant workers employable within firms in each economic sector). It was also a device to hold down total migrant worker numbers.⁷ In the more recent past, the levy has been used to encourage the hiring of skilled migrant workers and the upgrading of the skills of existing employees in order to raise productivity. This has been done by setting the levy for skilled workers at a lower level than for unskilled workers.

The intentions in these cases were to benefit Singapore's social and economic development. However, there are problems in the use of the levy.

As far as society at large is concerned, the main difficulty is that the growth in migrant worker numbers and the increase in levy rates (except on domestic workers) over the past decade or so has resulted in the levy becoming a major source of revenue for the government. The difficulty here is that it is a departure from the original central purpose of the levy; it may prove difficult, in time, to discuss a rational development policy without admitting into consideration arguments for sustaining migrant worker employment for the sake of sustaining government revenue. Furthermore, in a

⁶ The Difference Gender Makes: State Policy and Contract Migrant Workers in Singapore, p89

http://www.smc.org.ph/administrator/uploads/apmj_pdf/APMJ2003N1-2ART4.pdf

⁷ <http://www.mom.gov.sg/foreign-manpower/foreign-worker-levies/Pages/levies-quotas-for-hiring-foreign-workers.aspx> ; this refers in general terms to moderating demand.

regional environment in which attractive alternatives to labour migration are developing, it would be disadvantageous to be overly dependent on a revenue stream from the levy.

From the point of view of migrant workers, the levy imposes a disadvantage without necessarily fulfilling the intention of protecting the jobs and incomes of nationals. There is good reason to consider that the levy has the effect of depressing the salaries of migrant workers. Employers are obliged to pay the levy, but they may try to control their costs by holding down their employees' salaries. Furthermore, the need to pay the levy – one that is rising in the cases of workers other than domestic workers – tempts employers to recover money from workers in the form of cuts of recruitment fees/kickbacks and work permit renewal fees while at the same time encouraging workers to look for illegal work where levies are not paid and workers and employers share the benefit of the saving. This qualifies as a specimen of “bad law”: it's not a legal measure that was introduced from bad intentions, but it has the result of encouraging people who might otherwise be law-abiding to break the law.

The net effect is to restrict the benefits the workers might otherwise see for the sacrifices they make in leaving their homes to work abroad. Depressed salary levels in turn make employment in other countries more appealing, rendering Singapore's goal of upgrading its workforce's skills and enhancing productivity harder to achieve. Increased salaries are a vital means for encouraging valued workers to stay on over a series of contract periods and apply skills and experience gained in Singapore within Singapore.

It would be hard to make a case that the presence of migrant workers is depriving Singaporeans of attractive jobs in the construction and shipyard sectors, or as domestic workers. There is little or no Singaporean demand for employment in these areas, nor would there likely be much more if salary levels were substantially raised.

The case in favour of the levy is particularly weak when it comes to domestic workers, the lowest paid employees in Singapore with the longest hours. Far from excluding Singaporeans from an occupation in which they desire to work, they take on work that no local wishes to do. They enable tens of thousands of families to be dual income households and to provide care for young, disabled or elderly relatives for which no adequate alternative yet exists. The levy is simply a burden on employers' families and a constraint on domestic workers' incomes.

TWC2 proposes that the role of the levy should be re-examined with a view to its reduction over time and its ultimate abolition. The domestic worker levy should be abolished forthwith. The main means of controlling migrant worker numbers should be through restrictions on entry and through documentation, which would complement current initiatives to restrict migrant labour through cuts in Dependency Ratio ceiling as well as TWC2's recommendations to lift the productivity of the migrant workforce.

In the meantime, part of the revenue from the levy should be used for the Migrant Workers' Assistance Fund. (Please see page 11 of this proposal for further elaboration) It would be prudent to devote much of the rest to “one off” projects rather than core spending, to guard against any potential disruption in the future that might result from an unplanned contraction of the migrant labour force.

Part Two: Migrant Workers' Wellbeing and Social Integration

In 2013, DPM Teo Chee Hean spoke to Parliament on the need for a sustainable population for Singapore. The secret to this sustainability lay supposedly in taking in 15,000 to 20,000 foreigners a year, a number that allows for economic growth without straining existing resources and infrastructure. However, these 15-20,000 foreigners are permanent residents and new citizens that the state is planning to integrate. Not included in this figure is the 900,000⁸ or so work permit holders that “are here during their productive years but return to their home countries after working here and hence do not add to our retiree population”.⁹

TWC2 would like to recommend that in addition to integrating the new citizens taken in each year, it is important to plan policies around the presence and participation of work permit holders in society. Though most of our work permit holders do not intend to settle in Singapore, this does not change the fact that they contribute substantially to the Singapore economy, and hence deserve to have as much access to services as Singaporeans and other migrant workers. These services include medical care, decent accommodation as well as access to public transport, information, representation and public spaces.

A. Medical Care and Welfare

Employers of work permit holders are required to take out insurance to cover \$15,000 worth of hospitalisation or day surgery costs.¹⁰ Those who employ domestic workers must also take out a personal accident insurance policy for a minimum of \$40,000 to cover compensation for injuries or a worker's death.¹¹ Other migrant workers can benefit from work injury compensation, for which their employers must take out insurance: under the Work Injury Compensation Act, the insured amount to cover a worker's medical leave for a work-related injury must allow for it to be up to \$30,000.¹² Work permit conditions for all workers covered state that an employer is responsible for the “upkeep and maintenance” of a foreign employee, which includes medical treatment.¹³

These terms provide a basic safety net for migrant workers, but it is one in which there are significant gaps and deficiencies.

In most cases, \$15,000 worth of insurance to cover hospitalisation is enough, but when a worker requires complex surgery or an extended hospital stay, the costs can soar far beyond that amount. This places a great burden on conscientious employers who wish to ensure that their workers receive the treatment that they need. It tempts others to seek to evade providing for the treatment of their workers, in some cases, by repatriating them untreated or after only basic treatment.

⁸ Foreign Workforce Numbers from 2013 <http://www.mom.gov.sg/statistics-publications/others/statistics/Pages/ForeignWorkforceNumbers.aspx>

⁹ Speech by Teo Chee Hean, point 48 http://www.mha.gov.sg/news_details.aspx?nid=Mjc2Ng%3D%3D-xjkrdUAnzhE%3D
¹⁰ <http://www.mom.gov.sg/foreign-manpower/passes-visas/work-permit-fw/before-you-apply/Pages/medical-insurance.aspx>

¹¹ <http://www.mom.gov.sg/foreign-manpower/passes-visas/work-permit-fw/after-you-apply/Pages/default.aspx>

¹² http://www.mom.gov.sg/workplace-safety-health/work-injury-compensation/Pages/WICA_claimed.aspx

¹³ For example, the first clause of the conditions for employment of a domestic worker says: “The employer shall be responsible for and bear the costs of the upkeep and maintenance of the foreign employee in Singapore. This includes the provision of adequate food as well as medical treatment.” <http://www.mom.gov.sg/Documents/services-forms/passes/WPSPassConditions.pdf>, Page 18

Recommendations:

One way to approach this problem might be to increase the level of insurance required from employers, but this would place an increased burden on all employers when only a relatively small minority might need to make use of the higher level of provision. We believe that it would be preferable to create a fund from which grants may be made to cover hospitalisation costs over the maximum amount currently insured. This would be to the advantage of both employers and employees. It would also set to rest concerns in public hospitals about their ability to secure payment for the treatment of migrant workers. In submitting proposals to the Ministry of Manpower on the amendment of EFMA and the EA, TWC2 called for the establishment of a Migrant Workers Assistance Fund: the needs indicated here could be met by this.¹⁴

The work permit references to the “upkeep and maintenance” of a foreign employee, including medical care, could be interpreted very broadly, to require the indefinite support of a worker who falls ill or has an accident. This presumably was not intended, and it does not seem to be common practice, in any case: TWC2 encounters cases of domestic worker employers contesting whether they should be liable for continued support to a worker once the \$15,000 insurance for hospitalisation has been exhausted, and of other employers likewise challenging their liability beyond the insured amount. Our view is that the work permit conditions could be made more specific, but this should be done with the proviso that any explicit limit to an employer’s obligation should not come at the expense of ensuring that workers receive appropriate medical attention. The establishment of the fund proposed in the preceding paragraph could help to ensure that this happens.

Subsidised medical treatment for foreigners at hospitals and polyclinics was withdrawn in January 2008. The introduction of mandatory medical insurance, purchased by employers for their migrant workers, was meant to fill this gap, but as it only covers hospitalisation, workers who have cuts and bruises, or who come down with fevers, ‘flu, colds, chicken pox and other common illnesses that require outpatient treatments may not, in practice receive the care they need. They are reluctant to ask their employers to allow them to seek medical attention and to pay for it, fearing refusal by them and indeed, experience confirms that this fear is often justified, despite the stipulation on “upkeep and maintenance” contained in the work permit conditions. Given their relatively low pay, migrant workers have to be quite desperate to spend their own money on ensuring that they receive the necessary attention. In these circumstances, they are likely to resort to self-medicating or to free or heavily subsidized medical services offered by community groups, whose resources are very limited. This is one reason that many continue to work through an illness, which, when it is infectious, raises the risk that they will spread it to other workers and the general population (The other main reason is that they fear being repatriated by their employer if they stop working). There is a further risk that a worker who is ill and on pain-killing medication may be less alert to work hazards and be more likely to suffer or cause a serious accident. The

¹⁴ Transient Workers Count Too, *Proposals – Second Phase Review of the Employment Act and Employment of Foreign Manpower Act*, (October 2013), Page 12.

proposed **Migrant Workers Assistance Fund** could provide workers in need with small grants to allow them to pay consultation and medication costs.

A worker (unless she is a domestic worker) who has suffered an accident may currently remain in Singapore and receive payments from his employer while he is on a medical certificate (MC), which is normally for a matter of weeks or months in the more serious cases. The worker should receive the equivalent of his full average monthly earnings for the first 60 days, and 2/3 of that from day 61 for up to one year, or until the expiry of his MC, whichever comes first.¹⁵ This should be in addition to the employer providing for the worker's "upkeep and maintenance", but in practice, many employers treat the MC payments as their fulfillment of this obligation. This leaves such workers out of pocket and unable to send home the money on which their families depend. It is little wonder that some are tempted to work illegally. The dual obligation of the employer in these circumstances should therefore be clarified and enforced.

A worker who has made a claim for work injury compensation or has launched a legal suit for compensation is not allowed to work. That makes sense while the worker is on MC, but when that comes to an end and he is left without an MC wage, how is he meant to survive and support his family? Our view is that he should be certified as fit to work, if that is so, and allowed either to return to his original employment or to seek alternative employment. In the latter case, his original employer would cease to be responsible for his "upkeep and maintenance" once he has a new employer. Until such a time as the worker resumes work or is employed elsewhere, we propose that his existing employer should have an obligation to pay the equivalent of his MC wages.

Some employers seek to evade their obligations to their migrant worker employees, including full payment of their salaries and ensuring that they receive proper medical attention, by sending them home. A particularly serious challenge to Singapore's mechanisms for the protection of migrant workers is posed when this practice is applied to domestic workers who have been persuaded, one way or another, to take no days off and have been prevented from communicating freely with the outside world by their employers throughout their employment. They may be subjected to a variety of abuses and never be able to report them or seek help. Under present conditions, their employers will then be free to treat other workers the same way with impunity. We propose that there should be staffed desks at points of departure from Singapore just before passport control where workers would be asked to fill in a simple form to establish whether they had any issues with their employers that had not been resolved before their departure. In the vast majority of cases, it should not be expected that this would result in workers staying on and pursuing complaints, but it would sift out particularly serious abuses that were not revealed earlier through other channels. It would also provide a basis for a 'watch list' of employers about whom multiple complaints were received. They could then be warned so that they either improved their behaviour or were investigated if the complaints received suggested that was desirable. These desks should be located at a point after the worker is free from any interference or intimidation by an employer or a repatriation agent. They should be managed by MOM.

¹⁵ Paragraph 4, Third Schedule, under the Work Injury Compensation Act, on the website, <http://statutes.agc.gov.sg/>

B. Access to decent accommodation

A significant aspect of a worker's life in Singapore is his accommodation. It is important for Singapore, the host country, to provide adequate health and housing for the workers. This housing has to be not just sanitary, but also comfortable and even recreational, and has to be a decent place for workers to take a rest from work. Far from being a luxury, the ability to rest is vital for migrant workers' physical and psychological well-being.

Migrant workers

The housing situation differs from company to company. While MOM has a list of approved housing, employers have the freedom to put their workers up where they wish, and some accommodation may not be of an acceptable standard.

An article published in The Straits Times on December 8 2012, reports that the Humanitarian Organisation for Migration Economics (HOME) spoke to 150 migrant workers on living conditions and found the following¹⁶:

- i. Many workers have only five hours of sleep every night.
- ii. Some rise about 2.5 hours before their shifts start to queue for the toilet, an indication of the lack of sanitation infrastructure.
- iii. Many are not housed in government-approved housing. Those who live on-site, for example, have to use buckets to bathe and they sleep in unfinished buildings or containers.
- iv. Some say the dormitory is like a prison as their comings and goings are monitored. They are not allowed to venture beyond the facility after work.
- v. Many paid \$315 a month for three meals a day but the food is of poor quality.
- vi. Many say dormitories are overcrowded and rooms are cramped.

After a tip-off from a member of the public, the Housing Enforcement Branch of MOM Foreign Manpower Management Division inspected a few dormitories at the Kaki Bukit Industrial Terrace on May 15 2013 and found that "four of the factory-converted dormitories were clearly overcrowded, had poor ventilation and unacceptable housekeeping standards." They also found that "in the other unit, two workers were staying in a makeshift shed at the entrance with no proper sanitary facility." MOM has since taken the employers responsible to task and has given them notice to move their workers to proper accommodation. They have also encouraged members of the public to continue to blow the whistle on errant employers.¹⁷

However, this solution, as well as MOM's suggestion that workers blow the whistle on their employers if housing provided is inadequate, is itself inadequate.¹⁸ Workers' work permits are tied to employment by existing employers and complaining about conditions can often lead to workers being sent back home for

¹⁶ <http://twc2.org.sg/2012/12/19/only-150000-dorm-beds-for-over-700000-workers/>

¹⁷ MOM made 300 inspections on foreign worker housing this year -

¹⁷ <http://news.asiaone.com/News/Latest%2BNews/Singapore/Story/A1Story20130515-422732.html>

¹⁸ Foreign Workers To Be Educated On Proper Housing Standards - <http://www.humanresourcesonline.net/news/32805>

making trouble. Their premature departure from the country often leaves workers with debts they have not saved enough money to pay back. Many workers are hence discouraged from speaking out against their employers, and MOM cannot and should not depend upon workers to be the source of information on employers' wrongdoing. Members of the public have little contact with workers' dormitories and their chance encounters should not be relied upon too heavily by MOM either.

Some workers can choose to live in housing not provided for by their employers. These housing estates are not subject to regulation the same way that hotel providers are. While there is a Dormitory Association of Singapore, membership is voluntary and members voluntarily subscribe to the standards in place. More measures need to be taken to ensure that standards of living are adequate.

Recommendations:

TWC2 welcomes the announcement that more dormitories are to be built for migrant workers.¹⁹ However, we are concerned by the suggestion from various ministers that Singapore house migrant workers on offshore islands. Then Minister for Foreign Affairs, Mr George Yeo, first suggested this in 2008, and Minister for National Development, Mr Khaw Boon Wan revisited this idea in 2013.²⁰ We think this segregation is extreme and unnecessary. However, the idea that migrant workers are deserving of specific living spaces built with them in mind is something we agree with. Rather than house migrant workers on offshore islands or other isolated locations, Singapore should consider building low-cost satellite towns. These should be built with amenities that are within reach for migrant workers and that have adequate transport services, such as feeder services that connect the dormitories to the workplace. Workers would then be able to buy items for their daily use, without having to venture to town. Food stalls can also be set up, so as to offer the workers a choice in food at affordable prices.

These low-cost satellite towns can also be open to Singaporeans who desire low-cost housing. If they are built with migrant workers in mind, then Singaporeans who move in will be less likely to complain as they knowingly move into that neighbourhood. This addresses the concern that Singaporeans and migrant workers are unable to live in the same spaces.

The sooner Singapore acknowledges that we require a minimum number of migrant workers, the sooner we can build better infrastructure to accommodate them. Whilst their stays might be temporary, the solutions and infrastructure we have to accommodate them cannot be seen as such. We should see them as colleagues with an equal stake to locals in a company, and very much part of the social and economic landscape.

Foreign domestic workers

¹⁹ More dormitories for foreign workers to be built over next 2 to 3 years: PM Lee

¹⁹ <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/more-dormitories-for/922638.html>

²⁰ S'pore open to idea of housing foreign workers at offshore islands: Khaw - <http://www.channelnewsasia.com/news/singapore/s-pore-open-to-housing/631856.html>

All foreign domestic workers live with their employers, but their accommodation varies depending on how well-off their employers are. Some employers need domestic workers to care for their young children and elderly parents while they work, and have insufficient money or space to ensure that their domestic workers have a room of their own. Some domestic workers even sleep in the kitchen. While we empathise with employers who barely have enough for themselves, we believe it is equally important for domestic workers to have a place to rest. In fact, domestic workers' living arrangements are arguably more draining than those of male migrant workers, because foreign domestic workers may be deprived of their privacy. In addition, they may be isolated from their peers and more susceptible to abuse.

Recommendations:

We recommend that foreign domestic workers be allowed to live outside of their employers' homes. This addresses the domestic workers' need for privacy and space away from their employers. It also reduces the likelihood of overwork and abuse as there is a clear end to their working day and they have the opportunity to seek advice or help if needed. The government can use the levies charged to employers to fund foreign domestic workers' accommodation, while poor, dual income families can still fork out just the sum needed to engage their services.

C. Access to public transport

In addition to decent accommodation, Singapore should also factor in migrant workers in their planning for public transport. Migrant workers should be able to use public transport to get to work as well as to access leisure. Recently, Singaporeans have made an increasing volume of complaints that public buses and trains are too crowded.²¹ Even as the Ministry of Transport tries to increase the transport infrastructure, this is not done with migrant workers in mind.²² In 2013, the Land Transport Authority (LTA) published statistics on the use of public transport in Singapore, including statistics about the ratio of buses to persons in Singapore. Though the LTA stated that the total population in Singapore, including migrant workers was 5.312 million in 2013, its ratio of public bus fleet to persons does not seem to use this 5.312 million persons as its basis for calculations.²³

Stated 'Public bus fleet/million persons' - over 750

Average Bus Fleet operation - 3516

Population - 5.312 million

Actual 'Public bus fleet / million persons' - 663

This discrepancy may suggest that the LTA presumes that certain segments of the population will not use public transport. Public transport should be planned with migrant workers in mind, including work permit holders. This planning should encompass not just the number of buses but also the routes planned. A lot of workers' dormitories are currently not serviced by many public buses and this

²¹ No. 1 Pet Peeve: Packed Trains and Buses <http://www.hss.ntu.edu.sg/News/Documents/Packed%20trains%20and%20buses.pdf>

²² Frequently Asked Questions about the Population White Paper <http://population.sg/whitepaper/faqs/#.Us-tkNIW19o>

²³ LTA Stats 2013

http://www.lta.gov.sg/content/dam/ltaweb/corp/PublicationsResearch/files/FactsandFigures/Stats_in_Brief_2013.pdf

isolates them from public amenities to which they should have access. The LTA should acknowledge that migrant workers as a segment are as deserving as Singaporeans of the use of public transport and plan accordingly. It should be recognised by all, when complaints directed against migrant workers using public transport are made, that they pay their fares like anyone else and thus contribute to the maintenance of the public transport system.

D. Access to information

One key aspect of a worker's transition to life and work in Singapore is the briefing he or she receives upon arrival. Currently, MOM produces a booklet entitled 'A Guide For Foreign Worker' (sic) in six languages: English, Bahasa Indonesia, Mandarin, Thai, Bengali and Tamil.²⁴

The pamphlet details information about workers' employment, such as the conditions of their work permit and safety measures, as well as about life in Singapore, including local customs and information about getting around.

While having a pamphlet is necessary and an important aspect of orientation, it is still lacking in information, and is insufficient without a pre-work briefing.

Currently, MOM works with various parties to prepare migrant workers prior to their employment. For foreign domestic workers, MOM outsources this briefing to Grace Management & Consultancy Services Pte Ltd (GMCS) and the Foreign Domestic Worker Association for Social Support & Training (FAST).²⁵ Various agencies may also conduct their own training outside of that provided by MOM, but this is not standardised. For other migrant workers, MOM does not require that they attend any briefings. If the migrant workers do attend briefings, it is only because their companies, usually the larger ones in construction, decide to organise them. The optional briefings which are held are usually jointly organised by MOM, NEA, the police and several other government bodies. These briefings include information similar to that found in the pamphlet mentioned above.

In December 2012, MOM announced that it would look into "pre-departure briefings" for migrant workers to brief them about working conditions in Singapore before they arrive here.²⁶ The focus of these briefings is to give workers accurate information about expected pay, so as to prevent foreign agents from cheating potential migrant workers by charging them exorbitant fees to work in Singapore. This is a step in the right direction, but like the existing briefings done within Singapore, there is room for improvement.

Firstly, TWC2 would like to recommend that MOM makes pre-work briefings compulsory for all migrant workers regardless of the companies they work for. We believe that all workers must have access to this information, and should not be deprived of it because their companies are smaller. MOM can look at a mix of

²⁴ MOM - Publications for Foreign Workers <http://www.mom.gov.sg/statistics-publications/others/publications/Pages/workpass-foreignworker.aspx>

²⁵ MOM - Work Permit (Foreign Worker) - Upon Arrival <http://www.mom.gov.sg/foreign-manpower/passes-visas/work-permit-fdw/after-you-apply/Pages/upon-arrival.aspx>

²⁶ MOM plans 'pre-departure briefings' for foreign workers <http://news.yahoo.com/mom-plans-%E2%80%98pre-departure-briefings%E2%80%99-for-foreign-workers-001316439.html>

legislation and incentives to ensure that companies send their migrant workers for training.

Secondly, we would like to recommend that the existing pamphlet and briefings provided by MOM and other government bodies be improved by including more information than is currently given, including:

i. Information about transportation

- Currently, migrant workers are told that details of the bus and MRT service can be found at bus stops and stations.
- They should be given information about how to use public transport in Singapore, including how to purchase an EZ link card and details of bus services found near their accommodation and work place.
- They should also be given information on basic road safety, such as which side of the road cars drive on (a seemingly frivolous detail that is responsible for traffic accidents around the world)

ii. Information about scams/cons

Migrant workers may not have received any information about scams and cons prior to coming to Singapore. As a group, they are highly vulnerable to such scams because they are unfamiliar with local laws/rules, and are usually in some form of debt from coming to Singapore. As such, they may be more susceptible to ruses about money-making schemes, and more adversely affected by these scams. These warnings should also include information about the kickbacks that are rampant in certain sectors.

iii. Information about expected standards of living

In 2012, MOM's Alan Lum was quoted as saying that pamphlets would be distributed in local languages to workers on expected living conditions.²⁷ This information should be included in the pre-work pamphlets and briefings. In addition, the pamphlet does not make it clear who workers should contact if they encounter problems with their housing. In contrast, MOM has a far more extensive list of who can be contacted on its website.²⁸ Hence, the pamphlet should include the contact details of NEA, PUB, Civil Defence Force and the BCA.

The general focus of the pamphlet and the briefings should not just be about trying to bully workers into obedience, which is the impression it currently gives, but about providing them with information about their rights, and protecting them against the potential dangers that exist arising from working in a foreign land.

E. Access to representation in trade unions

²⁷ Hidden slums of Singapore revealed - <http://sg.news.yahoo.com/blogs/singaporescene/hidden-slums-singapore-revealed-021739643.html>

²⁸ MOM - Work Permit - Before you apply (Housing Requirements) <http://www.mom.gov.sg/foreign-manpower/passes-visas/work-permit-fw/before-you-apply/Pages/housing-requirements.aspx>

Under existing laws, migrant workers are able to join trade unions but unable to stand for office. However, only 11 per cent of migrant workers are union members.²⁹ The Migrant Workers Centre (MWC), an undertaking of the National Trades Union Congress and the Singapore National Employers Federation, was set up in 2009 “to champion fair employment practices and the well-being of migrant workers in Singapore.”³⁰ While the MWC was launched to supplement NTUC’s work, it cannot replace NTUC or make up for the fact that real representation is required to adequately look after the interests of migrant workers on a day to day basis. The need for migrant workers to have representation was highlighted in 2012 when Chinese bus drivers went on strike, citing frustration with unions as one reason why they eventually resorted to the strike.³¹

Recommendations:

Labour unions need to be able to do more than what they currently do at present in order to effectively protect the rights of workers, both migrant and local.³² The current organisational structure of the NTUC raises a possible conflict of interest. Leadership of labour unions needs to be independent of government in order for real tripartism to take place.

In addition, migrant workers should be able to stand for office in trade unions. As they speak the same language as their countrymen, they will be better able to represent the interests of their peers. Increased representation of migrant workers in Singapore can strengthen existing efforts to look after the interests of these workers. This can be supplemented with technological inputs to help workers who experience problems with language to have access to translation in real time. The government should increase funding for unions so that they have the resources to carry out activities such as safety briefings and spot checks.

F. Access to recreation and recreational spaces

In 2008, residents at Serangoon Gardens protested the housing of migrant workers in their estate.³³ The eventual solution included introducing a buffer between the migrant workers’ dorms and the main road, and rerouting the entrance of the dormitories to another road entirely. Such measures were designed to make workers as invisible as possible. Over the years, the public has on occasion complained about the presence of migrant workers in public areas. These include

²⁹ Educating foreign workers on unions - <http://www.stasiareport.com/supplements/saturday-special-report/story/educating-foreign-workers-unions-20121201>

³⁰ “Now Serving You...”, MWC information leaflet (No date)

³¹ SMRT Bus Service Drivers Blow the Whistle- <http://www.theonlinecitizen.com/2012/05/smrt-bus-service-drivers-blow-the-whistle/>

³² The sorry state of unions in Singapore - <http://wagingnonviolence.org/feature/the-sorry-state-of-unions-in-singapore/>

³³ Petition against housing foreign workers in Serangoon Gardens
https://www.reach.gov.sg/TalkAbuzz/YourFeedbackOurResponse/tabid/108/mode/3/Default.aspx?ssFormAction=%5B%5BssBlogTHead_VIEW%5D%5D&tid=%5B%5B127%5D%5D

HDB corridors³⁴ and national parks³⁵ among others. Taking into consideration the state of some migrant workers' accommodation, as well as the living conditions of foreign domestic workers, it is understandable that they would not want to remain in their living quarters on their off days. While Singapore feels increasingly crowded, this is no reason to keep migrant workers out of recreational spaces. If anything, they are probably more in need of external recreational spaces than the average Singaporean.

Migrant Workers and Alcohol

The recent riot in Little India has resulted in harsh new measures that include increased police powers and reduced worker access to Little India. Stores have been prohibited from selling alcohol, and people have been prohibited from consuming it.³⁶ This takes little account of the fact that many workers go to Little India to socialise and meet their countrymen. We should not begrudge the workers their recreation or leisure. They, like us, deserve to rest. While TWC2 is heartened by the recent efforts to increase leisure activities available to migrant workers, which include stress relief workshops³⁷ and other recreational activities³⁸, we feel that migrant workers should be able to relax in a manner that they see fit. In addition to helping workers unwind after a long day, alcohol is also a means by which countrymen can come together and bond. Very often, drinking is an activity that evokes home, with familiar brands such as Kingfisher and MacDowell's. Migrant workers are no different from many Singaporeans in this respect and should not be prevented from having access to alcohol any more than Singaporeans should. If they are willing to spend their hard-earned money on it, they should be able to purchase it.

It might be noted in passing that, whatever other circumstances contributed towards the outbreak of the riot, its immediate cause was a traffic accident, and action to improve safety at pick-up/drop-off places might therefore be rather more effective at pre-empting a similar occurrence than some of the far-reaching measures contemplated or already implemented in response to what was, after all, an isolated event in some 25 years of large scale migrant worker employment.

Recommendations:

Beer gardens could be established in or near the dormitories. This could enable workers who wish to relax after a hard day's work to have access to their usual. If we are concerned about their behaviour, instead of restricting access to alcohol, we could instead educate them on responsible drinking. Better yet, if they do eventually have satellite towns, then these should come with areas where they can come together and share a drink.

³⁴ Cops to find out who noisemakers are - <http://news.asiaone.com/News/Latest+News/Singapore/Story/A1Story20120619-353800.html>

³⁵ Singapore's new sexual camping ground - <http://www.tnp.sg/content/singapore%E2%80%99s-new-%E2%80%9Csexual-camping-ground%E2%80%9D>

³⁶ MHA introduces Bill to enhance police powers at Little India <http://m.todayonline.com/singapore/mha-introduces-bill-enhance-police-powers-little-india>

³⁷ <http://news.asiaone.com/news/singapore/little-india-riot-free-stress-relief-workshops-migrant-workers>

³⁸ More recreational activities in store for migrant workers - <http://www.todayonline.com/singapore/more-recreational-activities-store-migrant-workers>

G. Increasing social interactions with Singaporeans

The friction between Singaporeans and migrant workers should not be tackled through keeping migrant workers out of view, but rather by normalising interactions between Singaporeans and migrant workers. Instead of dehumanising the workers and hoping for them to be as invisible as possible, we should accept that they are vital to Singapore's economy and should be valued as such. Having migrant workers in Singapore is hence inevitable and steps need to be taken to ensure that their time here is both comfortable for them as well as the Singaporeans who host them. In order to reduce this friction, we should work towards integrating them into our society.

Recommendations:

Current integration projects by the National Integration Council are only targeted at permanent residents and citizens.³⁹ Similar funding should be made available to workers in Singapore. These activities can include sports events, where Singaporeans and migrant workers can participate together. Carnivals can also be organised where migrant workers can share more about their culture with Singaporeans. Events where migrant workers and Singaporeans come together to eat at local eateries can also be organised, such as the ones organised by The Hawker Sessions.⁴⁰ Migrant workers should also be incorporated into neighbourhoods through schemes like the Citizen Patrol.⁴¹ TWC2's own "Discover Singapore" initiative might be suggestive of other possibilities.⁴²

The Marriage Restriction Policy should also be abolished so as to allow migrant workers to marry each other as well as Singaporeans.⁴³ Part of acknowledging migrant workers as human beings is to accept that they are as deserving of love as any other person. Singaporeans have fallen in love with migrant workers and couples as well as families have been torn apart because of this law.⁴⁴ Singapore cannot hope to encourage more marriages and a higher birth rate if we continue to regulate who can marry and who cannot. Even marriages between migrant workers should not be regulated.⁴⁵ While it is true that migrant workers come to Singapore to earn a living, there is nothing wrong with them finding love as well. Concerns about marriage being used simply as a means to secure employment in Singapore are similar to those expressed in other developed countries, which have normally responded by introducing measures to minimise the problem: Singapore could do likewise.

Conclusion

³⁹ Community Integration Fund - <http://app.nationalintegrationcouncil.org.sg/CommunityIntegrationFund.aspx>

⁴⁰ Chill out at Friday night hawker sessions for a cause - <http://www.soshiok.com/content/chill-out-friday-night-hawker-sessions-cause>

⁴¹ Rise of the CITIZEN PATROL - The Sunday Times, HOME, 13 December 2009 - https://www.facebook.com/note.php?note_id=214673928696

⁴² See, for example, <http://twc2.org.sg/?s=Discover+Singapore>

⁴³ MARRIAGE RESTRICTION POLICY on Work Permit holders - <http://sgforums.com/forums/10/topics/99880>

⁴⁴ Two Singaporean women and their Bangladeshi lovers - <http://www.tnp.sg/content/two-spore-women-and-their-bangladeshi-lovers>

⁴⁵ MOM remains mum to approving marriage of long distance lovers - <http://news.asiaone.com/News/The+New+Paper/Story/A1Story20081022-95449.html>

The proposals we have submitted form elements of an overall policy orientation aimed to benefit both migrant workers and Singapore as a society. They are forward-looking, taking into account future development needs, not only a response to existing conditions.

We propose the replacement of a pattern of migrant worker employment that tends to promote a fairly quick turn-over of workers, with poor retention rates with one that encourages longer term stays and social integration.

Under this alternative pattern, Singapore, as a society, will benefit from having a migrant work force that is better placed to participate in raising its productivity level. Skills and experience acquired in Singapore will be much more likely to be applied within Singapore for extended employment periods, rather than within the economies of other developed countries. Workers who are present for a longer period of their working lives are likely to spend a larger proportion of their earnings within Singapore. They are likely to become more adapted to Singaporean norms, thus removing or easing some of the tensions observed in the recent past.

Migrant workers will have the opportunity to pay off initial debts and secure a good level of return for their labours: the phenomenon of workers returning home to destitution can be terminated. These workers will go home with a strongly positive impression of Singapore, which will enhance its regional standing.

Appendix: Victim-Centred Anti-Trafficking Action

Singapore is likely to adopt a new law to counter human trafficking within the next two years. Transient Workers Count Too welcomes the prospect.

We have argued that any new law should be victim-centred: it should seek to protect people who are trafficked and avoid criminalising them, when they had no real power to refuse to participate in illegal activities as part of the process of being trafficked. Special care will be needed in providing support to those who have been trafficked into sexual exploitation.

The costs of implementing a new act should not be great, since most of the appropriate agencies are already in place: the main challenge here will be crafting training programmes and practices that enable the new law to be implemented comprehensively and consistently.

However, there is one particular need for which we see no adequate response under consideration. This is the provision of a dedicated shelter for women trafficked into sexual exploitation.

It should be evident to all that these women should not be imprisoned, but should receive care and support until such time as they can return home safely, without risk of being re-trafficked or victimised. We believe that this care and support cannot be properly provided within a shelter intended for other women, whether those who have been subjected to violence within their families or domestic workers. The fact of having engaged in work involving sex bears a stigma which tends to make others unsympathetic towards any who have performed it or even contemptuous of them, regardless of the circumstances that led to it. It is also a fact that the traumatising impact of their experiences requires dedicated counselling by specialised workers, in an environment that is conducive to their recovery.

For these reasons, we believe that the establishment of a dedicated shelter, appropriately staffed, for women who have been trafficked into sexual exploitation is needed. It would be difficult for an NGO to establish one that is of the necessary standard and has reasonably secure year on year funding, and so we think that the best approach would be to look to establish a shelter with significant or full government financial support, in partnership with an appropriate NGO or NGOs, but constituted as an independent charitable institution with its own board and charter.