



## Lost in the Garden City:

Singapore's Migrant Worker System in the Age of the Sustainable Development Goals



# Executive Summary

“We are committed to achieving sustainable development in its three dimensions – economic, social and environmental – in a balanced and integrated manner” (United Nations 2015, 3/35). This quote is at the heart of the 2030 agenda declaration, ratified by Singapore and the rest of the global community in 2015. It highlights the need for a balanced and integrated approach, which is exemplified by the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). However, the approach of the SDGs to sustainability is significantly undermined by the practice of cherry-picking goals based on existing state priorities (Forrestier and Kim 2020). Singapore, though committed to the 2030 agenda, abstains from engaging with SDGs and targets that do not promote its existing development priorities. One such area of sustainability that Singapore has historically turned a blind eye to is the realm of migration management. Singapore hosts roughly 1 million low wage migrant workers each year (MOM 2022), nearly 20% of the economic population. This report examines the experiences of Bangladeshi and Tamil work pass holders in Singapore, gathered through interviews and an on-line questionnaire. Qualitative analysis was used to uncover the barriers imposed by Singapore’s migration system to achieving SDGs 1, 10, 8 and 16.

The report is broken into four sections, each discussing one of the four identified SDGs and their accompanying targets. In the case of SDG 1 (the eradication of poverty) migration has the ability to effectively mitigate global poverty. However, the migrant worker system in Singapore is undermined by debt traps in origin countries and the precarity of employment in Singapore. The section on SDG 10 explores how this debt and the lack of migrant worker agency perpetuates inequality. The discussion of SDG 8 centres on the ways in which inequality is used to exploit workers and the repercussions for worker well-being. Both SDG 10 and 8 are subject to international standards that Singapore fails to meet. SDGs 1, 10 and 8 are symptomatic of Singapore’s failure to achieve SDG 16: peace, justice and strong institutions. As the primary means of operationalising state priorities, institutions, and the way that they manage migrants, and their employers are fundamental to achieving sustainable development. An assessment of Singapore’s core institution for managing migrant workers, the Ministry of Manpower, showed it failed to meet the criteria for a strong, just, and accountable institution. Singapore’s state priority of economic development first, worker well-being second, can be seen in its approach to the SDGs (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018), the operations of the Ministry of Manpower and the treatment of workers by their employers. Key recommendations identified in this report centre on providing more rights to migrant workers - especially the right to change employers without permission - and reassessing the state priorities of Singapore both in terms of sustainable development and migration management.



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# 1.0 Introduction

Singapore and the rest of the global community endorsed Agenda 2030 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in 2017. In order to achieve these goals, a state must commit itself to all aspects of sustainable development: environmental, economic and social (Forestier and Kim 2020). Singapore's growth model, and by extension, its economy, is currently predicated on the use of cheap, low-skilled migrant labour. These workers are sourced and managed in a manner that is not in line with the principles of social sustainability, as outlined by the SDGs. In order for Singapore to consider itself a part of the global community working towards sustainable development, Singapore must address all aspects of sustainability; this includes the migrant worker system.

This report examines whether Singapore's migrant worker system is being managed in a manner that pursues sustainability in line with the SDGs. To this end, the analysis was carried out through the lens of the migrant worker's experience of this system. Four SDGs (SDGs 1,8,10, and 16) identified through our literature review (McGregor 2020; Piper 2017; Srinivas and Satya 2020; Yeoh 2020) will be used to frame the discussion. This report will begin with the contextual factor of debt carried by migrant workers entering Singapore and develop a narrative that will explore how it is used for coercion, exploitation, and mistreatment. It will then explore how socially unsustainable practices are perpetuated and enabled by the institutions and policies of the state. To conclude, a short list of meaningful strategic changes will be presented for how Singapore might better align its migrant worker system with the SDGs.

We are committed to achieving sustainable development in its three dimensions – economic, social and environmental – in a balanced and integrated manner

-United Nations 2015, 3/35

**1** NO  
POVERTY



**10** REDUCED  
INEQUALITIES



**8** DECENT WORK AND  
ECONOMIC GROWTH



**16** PEACE, JUSTICE AND  
STRONG INSTITUTIONS



# 2.0 Background

## 2.1 Sustainable Development Goals

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a set of goals and associated indicators that lay the groundwork for international cooperation for achieving sustainability in the future. The SDGs are the core of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, adopted by all United Nations member states in 2015. The SDGs fundamentally differ from earlier global commitments to sustainable development, primarily due to their scope, scale, and holistic nature. Where earlier iterations of global agreements on sustainable development, notably the Millennium Development Goals, were criticised for being overly simplistic and emphasising vertical interventions (Fehling, Nelson, and Venkatapuram 2013), the SDGs replace this with granularity and a holistic, integrated approach. In this way, the SDGs address all three pillars of sustainability being economic, environmental, and social. They recognise that they are not separate, requiring trade-offs for sustainability to be achieved in one area over another: instead, addressing each aspect of sustainability as a part of an interconnected system of challenges and opportunities. To this end, historically marginalised aspects of the sustainability discussion, like migration management, have found a home in the SDGs. To ensure that the SDGs achieve their desired outcome, their underlying philosophy must be engaged. If nations begin to cherry-pick goals and indicators based on pre-existing development agendas, it will undermine Agenda 2030 (Forestier and Kim 2020). Countries must engage all aspects of sustainability in a manner that is true to the nation and the spirit of the SDGs.



## 2.2 SDGs and Singapore

The SDGs do not just function as aspirational goals for which states to strive; but also, as a means of assessing a state's practices and systems regarding future sustainability (Pope, Annandale, and Morrison-Saunders 2012). In this way, the SDGs are a sustainability assessment tool or framework, a tool that has gained traction as a preferred method over earlier environmental, social, or economic assessment tools. Where these effectively siloed the core aspects of sustainability away from one another, sustainability assessment tools attempt to address not only all three but the relationships between them (Pope, Annandale, and Morrison-Saunders 2004).

Following the ratification of the 2030 agenda, countries began to apply the SDGs as a sustainability assessment tool. Singapore engaged proactively with the SDGs, completing its initial assessment in 2018 through voluntary review (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018). Prime minister Lee Hsien Loong writes a glowing endorsement of the SDGs as the foreword to the report and asserts that many of the goals are well on their way to being achieved in Singapore. He also notes that as "a resource-poor developing island nation", Singapore must develop a unique approach to the SDGs. In this vein, Singapore leads south-south capacity-building programs with other developing nations providing training and education in environmental sustainability (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018). These voluntary international partnerships are at the heart of what Agenda 2030 was developed to achieve; when a country does not have the resource capacity, they move towards sustainable development in another way.

## 2.3 Migration and the SDGs

The granularity of the SDGs has allowed for engagement with issues that have been historically marginalised. One such issue is migration management. Historically framed within the context of more extreme human rights violations, human trafficking and asylum seeking, migration for more mundane purposes such as employment has been marginalised in the social and wider sustainability discussion (Piper 2017). The connection between migration management and the SDGs has been the subject of a sizeable academic discourse since their inception (Piper 2017; McGregor 2020; Klein Solomon and Sheldon 2019; Hennebry, Hari, Piper 2019; Gammage, Stevanovic 2019; Moniruzzaman, Walton-Roberts 2017). To date, connections have been established between all seventeen of the SDGs and migration management.

At the last count (June 2022), Singapore had 1.3 million work pass holders of all visa types working in the country, more than 20% of the population, 5.637 million (Department of Statics 2022). Of these work pass holders, 943,000-1.11 million were low wage migrant workers (Ministry of Manpower 2022a). This report focuses on low wage labourers in Singapore, however, Hennebry, Harri and Piper (2018) state that Foreign Domestic Workers in Singapore (primarily women) are also left behind by the state's approach to the SDGs. Although not included in this study, further research should include their perspective.

With the substantial presence of migrant workers in Singapore, a recognition of the migrant population and the systems that influence their lives are fundamental to the achievement of the SDGs. If Singapore wishes to consider itself a part of the global community working towards sustainability - and bring itself in line with the SDGs - migration management must be addressed.



# 3.0 Glossary of Terms

Origin/Host Country	The origin country is where a worker has migrated from, whereas a host country is where a migrant worker will settle and work for the migration cycle.
Circular Migration (positive migration)	Circular migration refers to “repeated migration experiences involving more than one emigration and return” (Wickramasekara 2011, 9). This report will apply this term to the migration patterns of workers migrating to and from a host country. A migration cycle is simply one trip from the origin country to the host country and back again. A positive or successful migration cycle is a cycle where the debts of a worker are re-couped, and the trip has been profitable
Migrant Worker	A migrant worker will refer to workers who have migrated from their origin countries to seek employment in a host country. In the context of the report, and for brevity, “migrant worker” refers to low-wage workers on work permits or S-Pass visas, as these workers are the primary focus of the following research. This report was based on interviews and data collected from construction workers, specifically Tamil and Bangladeshi. As such “migrant worker”, unless otherwise expanded upon, will refer to these demographics.
Debt Trap (debt cycle)	A <i>debt trap</i> is a term referring to situations where an individual is forced to take on debt to repay existing debt. In the context of this report will be referring to migrant workers who have had to pay exorbitant fees and loans in order to fund their migration, the precarity of migrant labour means workers are at risk falling into a debt trap. Debt cycling refers to a debt trap the persists across multiple migration cycles.
Ministry of Manpower (MOM)	The Ministry of Manpower is an institution of the state that manages all aspects of the labour force in Singapore. Of course, this includes the migrant workforce. MOM is in charge of approving visas, mediating conflict, and prosecuting crimes committed in this field.
Work Permit	A work permit refers to a visa given by MOM. A work permit is the most restrictive of all the work passes and is typically given to those completing semi-skilled labour in construction, manufacturing, marine shipyard, processing or services sector. Work permits are also given to foreign domestic workers.
Transfer letter	In Singapore, a work permit holder does not have the right to transfer to a new employer without being released by their current employers first. This permission is given in the form of a transfer letter.
In-Principle Approval Letter (IPA)	Before coming to Singapore, a worker must obtain an in-principal approval letter. An IPA recognises that an application for a worker to come to Singapore has been approved. It will outline the details, such as the company hiring the worker, the worker’s basic monthly salary, working hours, allowances, and deductions.
Remittance	Money that a foreign worker sends to their country of origin.
Precautionary Assets	Simply assets, such as gold, jewellery, and land, that can be liquidated in response to emergency financial stresses and that infer a degree of financial security.

# 4.0 Methodology

## 4.1 Overview

The objective of this research was to collect qualitative and anecdotal evidence to assess Singapore's commitment to sustainable development goals through the lens of its migrant worker experience. Figure 1 explains the process of our research. This study included a questionnaire to inform the direction of interviews rather than provide quantitative data. Bangladeshi and Tamil Indian workers were selected because they make up the lowest-wage labourers in Singapore and are two of the most vulnerable groups to exploitation (Hamid and Tutt 2019; Ye 2016; Rainwater 2020). TWC2 also deals primarily with workers from Bangladesh and the Tamil region of India; accordingly, the most readily available information centred on these two groups.

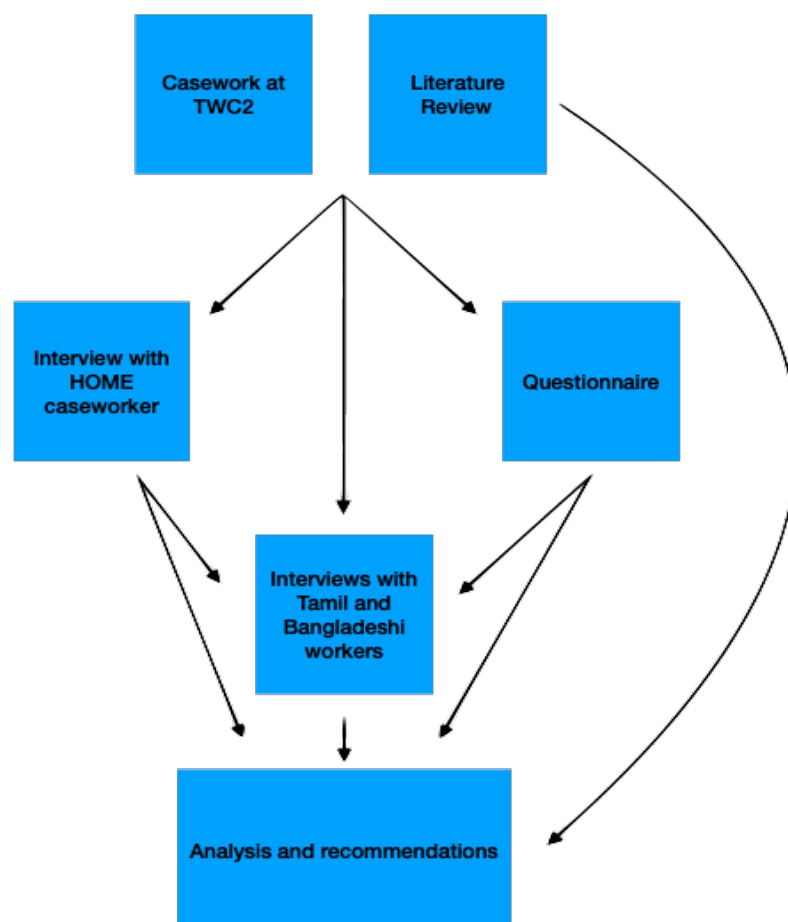


Figure 1: Research Process

## 4.2 Casework

The background research began with volunteer casework at TWC2, lasting 3 Months. Casework provided insights into Tamil and Bangladeshi workers' common issues in Singapore. Regular discussions with workers and TWC2 staff provided individual and systems perspectives on Singapore's migration scheme. Additionally, a caseworker and migrant advocate from a different NGO in the migrant space was interviewed to gain a broader perspective on the systematic migration issues in Singapore.

## 4.3 Questionnaire

TWC2 clients and reviewed literature (Hagen-Zanker, Postel and Vidal 2017; Moniruzzaman and Walton-Roberts 2017; Platt et al. 2017) made extensive references to debt as the compounding factor to migrant worker issues. TWC2 casework has established that workers often have to take loans to pay agent fees to come to Singapore; however, we wanted to clarify if this was an issue faced by all Tamil and Bangladeshi workers. Therefore, the questionnaire inquired about loan amounts per migration cycle. This clarified whether a worker only needs a loan on the first trip to Singapore or if debt persisted through multiple migration cycles. The questionnaire also explored where the loan originated and whether workers sold precautionary assets to come to Singapore.

The online questionnaire was advertised through TWC2's social media pages, with a \$10 phone plan top-up as a reward for participants. The survey was limited to 100 Bangladeshi and 100 Tamil respondents -the survey received 196 responses-. As a result, the questionnaire was primarily used as an instrument to identify the themes surrounding migrant debt and agent fees rather than for quantitative analysis.

## 4.4 Interviews

Thirteen worker interviews were conducted, ten with TWC2 clients with ongoing cases and three with workers who had undergone successful migration cycles. Each interview lasted between 20 and 30 minutes and followed a semi-structured interview schedule. Although the schedule was followed, interviews often followed tangents of the worker's specific experiences and predominantly focused on the areas of the schedule relevant to the worker. The first set of questions established the worker's background, time in Singapore and overall experience. Then the interviewee was asked specific questions for each of the 4 SDGs focused on in this report. The ten TWC2 clients were interviewed at the Cuff Road Project, TWC2's free meal program and shelter for workers with active cases. The three successful workers were identified by a migrant lead partner organisation called Overseas Foreign Workers in Singapore (OFWS). OFWS provided contacts to migrants who had experienced several positive migration cycles. The selected three migrants were provided lunch as an incentive to be interviewed.



Figure 2: Discussions at the Cuff Road Project



# 5.0 SDG1: Poverty Eradication

## 5.1 Overview

Poverty eradication is arguably the most critical Sustainable Development Goal for reducing global inequalities. Its enshrinement in the SDGs, frames it as a cross-border issue that requires collaboration for completion (United Nations 2020). To this end, Migrant worker schemes have cross-border implications and directly affect the poor. As a result, migration policy and foreign worker rights are intrinsically linked to SDG 1: safe and orderly migration can effectively reduce global poverty. Notably, 79% of those living in global poverty are currently employed (United nations 2020), so more than simply offering work is required to achieve this goal.

Circular migration is an opportunity to alleviate poverty. Wages in Singapore are generally higher than those in origin countries, and remittances add significantly to origin countries' economies. For example, 7% of Bangladesh's GDP comes from migrant worker remittances (Bowmic 2022). In 2007, Harvard economist Dani Rodrik claimed, "A guest worker program is the most effective contribution we can make to improving the lives of the world's working poor". Circular migration also contributes to a productive economy, reducing poverty in receiving countries such as Singapore (Hagen-Zanker, Postel and Mosler Vidal 2017).

Not only do remittances add to an origin country's GDP, but Bangladeshi and Indian workers spread their new-found wealth across their home communities, enhancing the potential poverty reduction. The majority of interviewed workers proudly disclosed all the close and distant members of their family who were receiving money or education due to remittances. A similar phenomenon of remitted money dispersing across rural communities was observed in Haiti (Clemens and Postel 2017). A devastating cyclone struck Haiti in 2010; in response, the United States piloted an agricultural migrant worker program. Clemens and Postel (2017) found that the program resulted in a 1400%

increase in workers' wages and was more successful in mitigating the effects of the disaster in rural communities than direct aid. This is particularly relevant to a developing city-state like Singapore as the country does not have the capacity to give aid, as described in section 2.2 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018). However, its need for migrant labour can contribute to a reduction in global poverty.

## 5.2 The Debt Trap

The single most significant barrier to migration aiding in the eradication of poverty is debt cycling. It is common practice for workers to pay more than a year's salary in agent and training fees before coming to Singapore (Hagen-Zanker, Postel and Mosler Vidal 2017). Additionally, a study by Moniruzzaman and Walton-Roberts (2017) found that migration through the Bangladesh-Singapore corridor costs, on average, 4.3 years of a worker's remittances. The 196 workers surveyed in this study took an average of \$4246.5SGD debt per visit to Singapore (see figure 3). TWC2 (2023a) found that interest rates for Bangladeshi workers can be as high as 70% per annum.

	Mean Loan Amount (SGD)	Median Loan (SGD)
1st Company	\$4955	\$3880
2nd Company	\$2152	\$1600
3rd Company	\$4364	\$2540
4th Company	\$3041	\$2286

Figure 3: Loans per migration cycle.

We recognize that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development.  
The United Nations 2015, 3/35





# 5.0 SDG1: Poverty Eradication

## 5.2 Continued

It is also common practice for workers to sell land and other precautionary assets - such as gold and jewellery - to pay agent fees or settle loans, reducing their economic resilience. 22.7% of surveyed workers had sold their land for this purpose, and the more migration cycles a worker goes through, the greater the likelihood of assets being sold, see figure 4. Moniruzzaman and Walton-Roberts (2017) discuss how the selling of precautionary assets increases the financial precarity migrant worker families. The sale of land in particular is damaging as it tends to narrow income diversity to a singular stream: migratory work. TWC2 has seen examples of intergenerational migration in their casework: In 2008 TWC2 assisted with an injured worker named Selim. The injury meant Selim could no longer work, and as a result, his son Ashik is now a migrant construction worker in Singapore, earning the same low wage of \$18 per day his father did (TWC2 2023). One of the workers interviewed in this study, Kumar, is preparing to return injured to India after 22 years working in Singapore, stating he is no better off than when he first left India in 1997. “Same problem... No money have. No money for children to get married.” Kumar has never sold land to come to Singapore or pay off debts, so he will depend on agriculture when he returns home. If he did not have land Kumar would have no backup income source and arguably be more impoverished than when he first departed India.

A different worker, Jahangiri, who originally sold his family land to come to Singapore, had two successful migration cycles lasting six years each. Stable employment for 12 years allowed him to pay back his loans and buy a small investment shop. However, he told us his most recent four companies were “bad” companies, engaging in exploitative practices such as non-payment of salary and illegal work. As a result of four short, unsuccessful migration cycles, two sets of agent fees, and six months of no salary from his current job, Jahangiri fears the bank will seize his

	Less than 1 year	1-3 years	4-6 years	7+ years
Never sold assets	80%	55.6%	47.1%	44.7%
Sold land	0%	11.1%	25.5%	29.4%
Sold other precautionary assets	20%	33.3%	27.5%	25.9%

Figure 4: Assets Sold to fuel migration against time in Singapore.

investment property as it is the collateral for his loans. “Actually now got problem because this after the shop must sell because no money give back bank...When I take loan I sign property paper.” A short string of bad luck should not result in a return to poverty. If Singapore’s migrant worker system is to mitigate poverty, policy must be implemented to better insulate foreign workers against unforeseen economic shock.

With debt hanging over their heads and little agency in their lives, the likelihood of a positive migration cycle is in many ways down to the luck of the draw. Another interviewee, Imran discussed why he thinks he had successful migration cycles: “So that’s why I am really blessed and fortunate that I work for good Companies. [I] Never faced this kind of issue, but I know, I know so many people they are facing salary issues, accommodation issues, transportation issues, so many thing.”

In addition to the fortune of a ‘good’ or ‘bad’ company, successful migration cycles were also skewed towards workers who did not take bank loans, instead relying on savings, family and friends to fuel migration. Questionnaire respondents who took a loan from family were 50% more likely to have cleared their debts. Hagen-Zanker, Postel and Mosler Vidal (2017) found that the poor and the rural pay the most elevated agent fees, take the largest loans and have the highest interest rates.

A system that relies on luck to reduce poverty and is harshest on the least well-off is deficient in achieving SDG1.

## 5.4 Evaluation

In Constrained Labour as Instituted Process, Sarker (2017) argues that Singapore is complicit in endemic poverty in Bangladesh, choosing to neglect migration reform out of fear that it could affect the abundance of cheap labour - cheap labour that falls between free and forced, with poverty, debt, and few worker protections, as its driver (Sarker 2017). Our research cannot speak to the motive of Singapore’s migration policy. However, we have found ample evidence that the current system has the ability to exacerbate poverty. Singapore is often described as the global city but is yet to take steps to tackle the cross-border issue of exorbitant agent fees and never-ending debt. These two issues affect one of the most vulnerable sections of Singapore’s economic population and, for some workers, compound poverty in a system that should reduce it. Singapore must find collaborative solutions with origin country governments and implement more financial protection mechanisms for workers to achieve SDG1.

# 6.0 SDG10: Reduced Inequalities

## 6.1 Overview

SDG 10 refers to inequality in a manner that reflects the holistic and systems-based approach of Agenda 2030. The targets for SDG 10 address all facets of inequality, be they economic, financial, political, legal, or social. Within SDG 10, there is also an explicit acknowledgment of migration's role in the discussion of inequality and the vulnerability of migrants themselves to inequality. Target 10.7 urges countries to "facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies" (UN 2016). This inclusion of migration management into the SDGs would coalesce with the context of the European refugee crisis to result in the "Global Compact on Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration (GCM)" (Klein Solomon, Sheldon 2019). The GCM is the highest level prescription of what safe and orderly planning involves. For analysing safe and orderly planning within the context of Inequality in Singapore, the GCM will provide a blueprint on several matters.

Within the context of Singapore, SDG 10 is unique among the goals. Singapore's status as a developing country exempts them from a number of the targets laid out in SDG 10 (Ministry of Foreign Affairs 2018). Singapore asserts that as a developing nation, it cannot provide direct development assistance to other developing nations. It is attributed to Singapore's unique context as a resource-poor island state. Singapore provides the same reasoning for abstaining during the adoption vote for the GCM, and from withholding from other global agreements on migration management. As noted in section 2.1, the SDGs require holistic engagement from the state, and neglecting goals and indicators undermines the value of the nation's effort as a whole (Forestier and Kim 2020). How a country does so is their prerogative. A unique context such as Singapore must be recognised as a challenge, not a barrier.

To this end, the following analysis will include ideas from the GCM and SDGs from which Singapore has been exempted. These will only include those ideas that do not directly conflict with Singaporean policy regarding foreign policy and development.

## 6.2 Inequality Coming In

Inequality is a part of the migrant worker process from the beginning, and pre-migration inequality in origin countries can persist through multiple migration cycles without seeing alleviation. As established in section 5.2, workers who must borrow money to fund their trip to Singapore are less likely to have a successful migration cycle. It is important to establish this observation within the broader context of what kinds of workers tend to borrow. Our interviews with migrant workers showed that those who borrowed came from lower socioeconomic, typically rural, backgrounds (Hagen-Zanker, Postel, Vidal 2017; Yeoh 2020). Sabin, a successful worker, explained that many workers from the aforementioned background struggle to reap all of the benefits of migrant work. He states, "They belong to very poor family, so they come to Singapore to earn....This money he sent everything to his family....so they cannot do any kind of course." Course here refers to up-skill training. One of the benefits of circular migration is workers moving to a host country receive training and education in the host country (Castles and Ozkul 2014). Sabin suggests that workers with families in vulnerable circumstances are unable to spare the money or time to complete further training. Sabin comes from a family who could afford to fund his initial trip to Singapore and absorb the cost of early skills training. He noted this as a reason for his success, citing his financial freedom to go and take courses. *Continues next page.*

Sustainable development recognises that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, combating inequality within and among countries, preserving the planet, creating sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and fostering social inclusion are linked to each other and are interdependent. The United Nations 2015, 3/35

1 NO POVERTY



10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES



8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH



16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS





# 6.0 SDG10: Reduced Inequalities

## 6.2 Continued

He also explained that agent fees were lower on his second trip due to his increased value as a worker. On his third trip, after completing two courses and becoming a safety supervisor, his employer bore the cost of migration.

Indicator 10.7.1 refers to recruitment costs borne by migrant workers as a percentage of their monthly earnings and the aim to reduce them. Sabin is fortunate among workers due to his professional development; his recruitment costs have diminished. For other workers, reduced recruitment costs may happen. Still, for most, they will remain an ever-present pressure throughout their migrations to Singapore (see section 5.2). Our survey results found 87% of workers had to take loans to cover agent fees and other associated migration costs on each trip to Singapore. Interviews with other workers reflected these findings, with each citing loan repayments and a need to support their family as a reason for being unable to do courses or save money. The survey results and interviews suggest that the achievement of indicator 10.7.1 is currently reliant on the worker's professional development. Professional development is, in turn, informed by pre-migration inequality. The GCM makes specific mention of preventing public or private agents from being able to shift recruitment fees onto workers to ensure the protection of workers from debt bondage (UN 2018, 13); the core mechanism through which inequality can persist through multiple migration cycles.

Pre-migration inequality should not be considered the responsibility of a host nation. However, a migration system that allows inequality to persist and even be exacerbated by a migration cycle does bear examination.

## 6.3 Inequality in Singapore

While circular migration has long been heralded as a means of reducing inequality, its effectiveness can be substantially diminished without the proper policies and practices at the state level (Wickramasekara 2011). A common feature of our interviews with workers was a feeling of helplessness and a lack of agency. When interviewing a caseworker and researcher from another NGO, they stated that Singapore has “a system that does not centre around the agency and the humanity of the individual worker”. This phrase highlights the key friction between Singaporean policies and practices, and Agenda 2030 and the SDGs.

It has long been understood that an over-reliance of an employee on an employer can result in inequality of power that allows for exploitation (Blades 1967). Debo Des, a Bangladeshi worker we interviewed stated “here I have no mother, no father to look after me... all I have here is company.” This sentiment is encouraged by Singapore's migrant worker system, which as noted limits worker agency. Singapore laws place workers completely in the care of their employers. Workers rely on their employers for their upkeep (EFMA 2010) and employment. Workers also cannot move between companies without the permission of their employer<sup>1</sup>, permission that companies often leverage. This control over worker mobility creates a situation where workers must decide between staying in the job on the one hand, or quitting, going home, and beginning a new migration cycle on the other hand. The latter is rarely feasible for those already in debt due to migration costs.

<sup>1</sup> Other limited avenues do exist for transfer, MOM can grant permission and a no-consent period exists. However, these have their own shortcomings and are further discussed in section 8.

These factors combine to create a clear power disparity between workers and employers. Each factor is compounded by the ever-present threat of repatriation (Ye 2016). In the case of each worker whom we interviewed for this report and who had filed a case against their employer, the employer attempted to repatriate them to stymie the claim. One worker we interviewed, Ashraful, was even awoken by his supervisor, then forcibly removed from his dormitory room and told he must take a flight back to Bangladesh. This exchange occurred because he was seeking medical treatment for a workplace accident that required surgery for his hand. The employer's insurance should cover the cost of the treatment. Like this employer, many find it easier instead to replace a worker, sending them home broken and indebted.



**Figure 5:** Migrants with cases line up for assistance from TWC2. The Fargo program provides funds to workers who cannot afford transport appointments.

# 6.0 SDG10: Reduced Inequalities

## 6.3 Continued

It has been established that there is already a power imbalance between workers and employers. We see this imbalance leveraged most aggressively by employers in cases of salary disputes where a mediation process is triggered. Generally, labour legislation around the world aims to provide protection to workers and mitigate this inequality. The issue is a combination of the aforementioned vulnerability of workers and the practices that Singapore uses to address violations of workers' rights. For example, Singapore employs a mediation process involving the Tripartite Alliance of Dispute Management (TADM) which manage a session with both parties. When choosing to employ a mediation process, it must be recognised that it can not even ameliorate existing inequalities (Mayer 1987).

The first key disadvantage for worker in the mediation process is time (Dutta 2021). With pressures to repay debts and provide for their families, workers may feel immense pressure to finish their case and return to work<sup>2</sup>. If achieving a conclusion expeditiously is a priority for one party, mediation runs the risk of being abused by the other party to achieve a result favourable to the latter. Marshel (1990) ascribes this abuse to the nature of mediation, benefiting the “power holders” (employers) in society. The second key disadvantage for a worker in the mediation process is the need for permission to return to work. As a result, employers can offer a combination of a low settlement and transfer letter, in the hope workers will be desperate enough to accept<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>2</sup> MOM may provide a transfer letter upon the conclusion of a salary case, but this is not guaranteed.

One of the interviewees who had been through the mediation process, Jahangiri, provides an example of the outcomes seen from this process. Jahangiri was offered only \$2,000SGD on what he calculates to be a \$10,000SGD claim and the opportunity to return to work at the company that committed wage theft against him. A company that could then repatriate him upon his return work. Jahangiri noted that he would have been willing to take less than his full claim if he was provided the security of a transfer letter. The combination of the too low amount of \$2000SGD and the lack of employment security, in the form of a transfer letter, offered by the deal meant he was left little choice but to go to the Employment Claims Tribunal, a far lengthier process that involves a higher burden of proof. It is worth remembering that all this time Jahagiri has not been able to work, and his debts discussed in section 5.2 must still be paid. The longer this process takes the further the drain on his resources, further increasing his precarity.

Employers wield their advantage over workers leveraging it to quash the claims of workers who seek to exercise their rights. This practice has instilled a culture of fear that permeates the migrant worker community. Workers are aware that the process of making a salary claim, regardless of outcome, can break them financially. As is the case with Jahangiri, what seemed a reasonable salary case and an opportunity to leave a company that was stealing from him, turned in to a lengthy process that could see all his work in Singapore made redundant.

## 6.4 Evaluation

As noted earlier, the circumstances of a worker in their country of origin are not explicitly the responsibility of a host nation. A host nation's responsibility in the eyes of SDG 10 is, however, the fair provision of opportunities for upward social and financial mobility. In this report's assessment, Singapore instead perpetuates inequality through the migration cycle. Singapore has failed to adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies, that progressively achieve greater equality (Indicator 10.4).

Most egregiously, however, Singapore's failure to institute policies and practices that promote safe, orderly and regular migration —evidenced by the number of indicators included in the GCM that they have failed to meet. These include 6. facilitate fair and ethical recruitment and safeguard conditions that ensure decent work, 7. address and reduce vulnerabilities in migration, 15. provide access to basic services for migrants, and 16. empower migrants and societies to realise full inclusion and social cohesion. Already recognised in this report is the complexity of Singapore's situation as a “developing” and resource-poor island nation. As such, there is little expectation of direct capital investment in migration management. However, an opportunity does exist for collaboration with neighbouring and origin countries similar to the environmental capacity-building partnerships of which Singapore is so proud.



# 7.0 SDG8: Decent Work

## 7.1 Overview

Migrant workers are essential to Singapore's workforce and contribute immensely to the country's economic growth. Covid-19 drew back the curtains on Singapore's dependence on transnational labour and exposed that holding workers in a transient state does not foster economic resilience (Yeoh 2020; Srinivas and Sivaraman 2021). Therefore, including migrants in any discussion around the achievement of SDG8 is essential to ensure a 'clean' supply chain and a sustainable workforce in times of crisis. A report by the International Organisation for Migration exploring the sustainability of Singapore's workforce (Yeoh 2020) suggests the idea of longer stays without high agent fees or the uncertainty of early termination. Yeoh (2020) states that a less precarious workforce would result in improved labour productivity and safer workplaces.

## 7.2 Debt Backed Exploitation

As established in SDG10, migrant workers in Singapore are provided very few freedoms; in many cases, their employer controls their food, accommodation, and ability to change companies. Migrant rights reflect the prevailing neoliberal ideology in Singapore, which views transient workers as a resource first and human second. Hathaway (2020) discusses how neoliberal governance gives companies the agency and freedoms of individuals. In line with this, the policies and practices in Singapore often presume employees and employers to be equal: If a company repatriates an employee without proper notice, then the basic salary of the notice period must be paid to the worker. Thus, if an employee gives a resignation letter with a date before the end of the notice period, the employer can sue them for the equivalent salary of the notice period. In the same vein, a company can ask an employee to sign a reduction in salary because the employee has the right to

say no, but this right is significantly undermined by the overshadowing threat of repatriation. The current system disregards the fact that workers usually take out large loans to come to Singapore, requiring a long tenure to have a successful migration cycle. As was established with Jahangirri in section 5.2, early repatriation is a looming fear for many migrants.

Employers can harness migrant fears of repatriation and use it as a tool for bullying, intimidation, and exploitation. Like many workers coming to Singapore for the first time, Muscat, a worker interviewed in this study, was charged recruitment and training costs reaching nearly \$10000, paid for by a \$6000 loan and the selling of family land. When Muscat arrived, he was greeted with a stack of papers to sign: "First day once I come Singapore that day they give some papers to sign. like this many [gesture an inch high stack] papers." Muscat sat at a table with ten men and the pile of papers written in English, not his native Bangladeshi. The men told him to sign or be sent back home. "I didn't check also...I just sign." Now that Muscat's employment has ended due to a police case (migrants cannot work in Singapore while under investigation), his blind signing is returning to haunt him. "[In his second month at the company] They started cutting [paying less] my salary. \$150 each month... They told me that this is my deposit money. Once I go from this company back Bangladesh then will get [the owed money]." However, Muscat's employer now claims that the \$150 a month deduction was for housing and that Muscat signed an agreement to this when he arrived in Singapore. Muscat's IPA (initial contract) does not include such deductions; however, MOM allows salary to be renegotiated after arrival in Singapore (MOM 2019). *Continues next page.*

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8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH



16 PEACE, JUSTICE AND STRONG INSTITUTIONS



# 7.0 SDG8: Decent Work

## 7.2 Continued

TWC2 often sees workers pressured into signing documents such as resignations, reduced salaries and contract extensions. The International Labour Standards on Migration, which guide SDG target 8.8 (ILO 1949; 1979) underline the importance of information and contracts being provided in a way that is understandable and not misleading. The standards (ILO 1979) also classify signing documents under duress as a form of forced labour. Singapore allowing employers to coerce workers into signing documents in a language that is not understood under the threat of repatriation does not satisfy the ILO standards, and there for SDG8.8.

## 7.3 Forced Labour

In addition to worker rights, debt cycling, combined with neoliberal governance, can result in forced labour. The ILO (2014) includes “migrants trapped in debt bondage” in its classification of forced labour. It (ILO 2014) also refers to employers holding documents such as passports, providing incorrect work and nonpayment of salary as forced labour. Although technically illegal, it is common practice for employers to hold passports in Singapore against the will of the employee. It’s important to note that all interviewed workers are happy to work in Singapore and did not believe they were victims of forced labour. Exploited migrant workers in Singapore more likely fall into the category of coerced labour as described by Sarker (2017) or unfree labour as described by Yea and Chok (2018). For example, Muscat’s situation, can be described as unfree labour because he had no choice but to work overtime for fear of destitution. Muscat’s salary before overtime was \$460 per month, yet his monthly loan repayments were \$500: \$40 more.

As a result, he had no choice but to work long overtime hours to make the loan repayments plus money for his family. Interviewed workers view lots of overtime and few rest days as a feature of a “good” job: salaries are so low and loan interest so high that working long hours is essential for positive migration cycles

## 7.4 Workplace Safety

Construction and marine shipyard are the most dangerous industries in Singapore. Hamid and Tutt (2017) assert that this associated risk is not reflected in the value placed on these workers. Especially as they risk fatality rates triple that of Singapore’s average, and much higher chance of workplace injury. This is of course an inherent aspect of the industry to some degree. In fact, our interviews with injured workers suggest that safety regulations in Singapore prescribe a high standard of occupational health and safety. Toh, Goh and Guo (2017) attribute injuries to organisational and individual failures to effectively follow the regulations. Our anecdotal evidence suggests individual failures that result in injuries are influenced by debt and poor worker rights. As established, early repatriation has devastating consequences for many migrants; hence workers are in a perpetual state of uncertainty, affecting their ability to focus (Lee et al. 2017; Toh, Goh and Guo 2017). This is compounded by bullying and abuse in the workplace. Shamime, whose company was often abusive and did not provide adequate housing (see figure 5), tore a ligament in his knee after falling down stairs at a worksite: “I [was] walking on level 4 and our managers call me...I need to come ‘Quickly, quickly!’ [his manager yelled] because there is a problem. I fall down [the] stairs”. The nature of Shamime’s relationship with his employer,

his substandard living quarters and the precarity of his situation as a migrant worker, were likely contributing factors to his injury. A quantitative study by Lee et al. (2017) found that worker treatment and stress directly relate to exhaustion, burnout and injuries. The paper states that workers with a high level of psychological fatigue are less productive, attentive, and physically able. Therefore, less precarious employment for workers would increase not only workplace safety but also the productivity of Singapore’s economy.



Figure 6: Inside Shamime’s dorm room



# 7.0 SDG8: Decent Work

## 7.4 Continued

Sabin, a safety supervisor, believes the current system encourages workers to work long hours and take unnecessary risks. Sabin spoke to us about the sentiments of other migrant workers he had observed: “He got target [working hours]. ‘I must earn this kind of salary. I mean if I earn this salary then I can send to my family’...So in that case can happen accident.” Kumar, another interviewed worker, is a prime example of long working hours resulting in injury. “This [was a] busy week...I not get much sleep, then cutting my hand,”. Workplace safety is complex and qualitative information provided in this research points to the perceived safety issues in Singapore. However, it is undeniable that the precarity of migrant labour negatively influences a worker’s ability to work safely and efficiently. Workplace injuries are usually not because of a singular factor, for example, there is evidence that the high turnover of migrant workers results in an inexperienced, injury-prone workforce (Hui Min 2022). The high turnover of migrant workers is an additional symptom of Singapore’s precarious migration system.

## 7.5 Child Labour

Similarly, to the effects of migration on other SDG indicators, Migrant worker schemes can both improve and worsen child labour. Yeoh (2020) reported that globally, children of migrant workers have lower rates of attending school than their peers. Contrarily to this finding, our interviewees were proud to disclose their ability to send children to school via remittances. Yeoh (2020) attributed an increase in migrant worker families engaging in child labour and a reduction in school attendance to the economic shock of the pandemic. Our research supports the notion that when an unsuccessful migration cycle occurs, children of foreign



Figure 7: Worker Removing Glass with Bare Hands

workers may have to drop out of school due to the cost of tuition and the need for income. Kumar’s oldest child has had to drop out of school as a direct result of Kumar’s workplace injury. The precarity of migrant work in Singapore, combined with the limiting of revenue streams for migrant families (as discussed in section 5.2) can result in child labour. Greater employment and fiscal protections for foreign workers would likely reduce the likelihood and shock of unsuccessful migration cycles, reducing child labour.

## 7.6 Evaluation

Increases in workplace safety regulations and enforcement, although welcome, will not address structural issues that marginalise foreign workers in Singapore. If the concept of decent work is to be achieved, a systems approach must be undertaken, the International Organisation on Migration describes such an approach as follows:

“This opens a window of opportunity to reframe transient labour, not only within the economic logic of use-and-discard, but also as an integral part of national labour supply to be safeguarded for more sustainable growth and development. Incorporating migrant workers into national safety nets that provide health care and income protection will not only have a positive effect on migrant welfare but could be a means of future-proofing the economy against the crippling effects of pandemics and other global crises” Yeoh (2020, 26-28).

Greater financial and employment security in Singapore for foreign workers would increase compliance with the ILO and SDG 8, while also effectively reducing the psychological stress many face. As explored by Lee et al. (2017), a reduction in overwork and stress can reduce injuries and result in a more productive workforce. A more productive, less prone to injury and ethically sound working environment for migrants, would help to ensure an economically sustainable Singapore.

# 8.0 SDG16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

## 8.1 Overview

“In order to achieve a rights-based approach to migration governance, functioning institutions that can deliver and realise such an approach are essential” (Piper 2017, 235). The above quote refers to SDG 16, which is to “Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”. SDG 16 differs from the others discussed earlier in this report because the failure of Singapore to achieve SDGs 1, 8, and 10 is symptomatic of its failure to achieve 16. Institutions focused on protecting workers’ rights and equipped with the powers to do so would make a substantial difference in achieving the SDGs discussed to this point. For Singapore to consider itself a sustainable nation in the global community, substantial institutional and ideological change is required.

## 8.2 Ideology

As noted previously, Singapore employs a system that is not centred around the agency and rights of the worker. This system is perpetuated by the institutions charged with managing the migratory workforce in Singapore, most notably MOM. Achieving a rights-based approach is not simply a case of regulatory design - although certainly necessary - but of dominant interests and political will at the state level (Chi 2007). Neoliberalism has been a core aspect of the Singaporean identity, born from an ideology of survivorship (Dugo 2022). From neoliberalism, the institutions that govern the everyday lives of Singaporeans and migrant workers have been moulded. The ideological basis of institutions is particularly important to this

discussion as it is the mechanism for the state to establish and reproduce certain moulds of behaviour and action” (Mann 1984). In this way, Liow (2012) asserts that institutions can essentially be viewed as technologies of the state developed to perpetuate state priorities. In the case of Singapore, one of these priorities is employer-centric management of migrant labour. Given this, we will look at the practices of the most relevant state institutions involved in the lives of migrant workers, MOM and, by extension, the TADM.

## 8.3 Institutions in Practice

The Ministry of Manpower is the primary government institution that migrant workers will be exposed to regularly. Charged with foreign labour force management, they approve IPAs, handle work passes, and resolve disputes between employers and workers. Handling so much of the migrant experience in Singapore, they have a great deal of influence when establishing the moulds of behaviour and actions of workers and employers. As such, it is concerning that they run afoul of three indicators for the achievement of SDG 16. 16.3, promote the rule of law and ensure equal access to justice for all; 16.6, develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels; and 16.B, promote and enforce non-discriminatory policies and practices.

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# 8.0 SDG16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

## 8.4 TADM and Mediation

As noted in section 6.3, the mediation process employed by MOM is deeply flawed. It allows employers to impose their advantages to exploit migrant workers legally. The failures of the mediation process are compounded by an overarching institutional issue: the low incidence of penalties imposed on companies relative to the number of valid cases filed by workers. While MOM does have a prosecuting branch meant to enforce labour laws, it could be utilised more. We will limit the discussion to the failure to pay salaries to workers as it is one of MOM's more commonly prosecuted cases. Noting that non-payment as well as delayed and underpayment of salaries is a criminal offence under the Employment act (1968). In 2022 MOM prosecuted 27 companies for this offence (MOM 2022b) In the same year, TWC2, just one NGO, handled 141 salary dispute cases. This report will refrain from assessing Singapore's justice system and its effectiveness in deterring criminal behaviour by its companies. However, we will note that this means the majority of TWC2's clients settled their cases at mediation -without necessarily receiving full restitution - which does not trigger prosecution for the employer's offences. The issue is that MOM pushes for resolution at the mediation stage, while workers often need to get back to work as fast as possible.

Additionally, there need to be stronger protections for workers who come forward to make a salary claim. While MOM may allow a worker to transfer to a new company after a successful salary claim, this is a discretionary policy. As such, workers fearing repatriation will often not come forward for fear of repatriation. In the case of Najmul, a victim of wage theft, the company made small deductions over a long period of time. The relatively small amounts didn't warrant the risk of making a salary claim and potentially being repatriated.

The prevalent use of mediation and comparatively rare prosecution of companies for illegal behaviour has resulted in a "why not try" sentiment towards exploitation. As the primary institution representing the state in this field, the onus is on MOM to establish norms of behaviour that do not allow for widespread exploitation in order to be considered an accountable institution. While the mediation process functions as an effective barrier to justice for workers with their circumstances and lack of resources weaponised against them by companies. NGOs have consistently advocated for stronger enforcement of labour laws by MOM in order to realise the changes (Bal 2015).

## 8.5 Special Pass

A special pass is a pass that allows a foreign worker to stay in Singapore for a specific reason after the termination of a work pass. With migrant workers, this is typically an injury, police, or salary case. The challenge with special passes is that they do not allow a migrant to work. Where a regular citizen would be free to change jobs and continue working, a migrant worker must now wait for the case to be handled before they return to paying off their debts. As a policy employed by MOM and ICA, special passes are discriminatory. Kamali (2008, 234) describes "General institutional discrimination, [as that] which entails the routine operation of rules and procedures [in this case special passes] that reproduce the privileges of the 'Us' and disadvantage the 'Others'". Special passes satisfy this definition as they divide those with financial security and those experiencing financial precarity (Platt et al. 2017).

This division happens on two different planes - first is the perpetuation of the disadvantages of migrants as a whole compared to citizens. As migrants are inherently disadvantaged in labour markets and in accessing justice (Dame-lang, Ebensperger and Stumpf 2021), special passes serve to perpetuate this disadvantage. Secondly, special passes disproportionately affect low-income migrant workers, who often lack the financial capacity to persist without consistent work.

Those with the means might be inconvenienced by being on a special pass. However, for those without, special passes ingrain inequalities by depriving them of resources. While the special pass policy persists, Singapore's migration policy and two core institutions, ICA and MOM, fail to promote non-discriminatory laws and policies.

## 8.6 Lack of Repercussions / Employee Protections

Yea and Chok (2018) found that Singaporean businesses employ coercive practices to place migrant workers in positions of unfree labour. These practices typically serve to erode workers financially, physically, and mentally. Some common strategies mentioned by Yea and Chok, and observed by case workers regularly include illegal deductions of salary, exceedingly long work hours, coercion under threat of repatriation, the threat of blocking workers from returning to Singapore, physical bullying, and finally, withholding of important documents. *Continued Next Page.*

# 8.0 SDG16: Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions

## 8.6 Continued

Typically, these practices are employed in combination and work to put migrants in situations where they are overwhelmed and do not wish to exercise their rights for fear of retribution. As mentioned in section 7.2 Muskat was coerced into signing documents under false pretences that ended with his salary being reduced - a man already in substantial debt when coming to Singapore. Companies often withhold payslips and other evidence from workers while making deductions, so it is difficult for workers to provide evidence for a salary case. All of these are illegal to some degree, but the looming threat of repatriation means workers are too scared to file complaints and seek remedies. Many of these issues could be substantially reduced if workers had the right to move jobs. With the freedom to do so, they could move to another company ensuring their financial security before pursuing a case or escaping abuses. In our discussion with a case worker and advocate researcher, worker mobility was identified as the most substantial step towards improving the welfare of workers. There have been some steps to improve worker agency at the surface level.

The 40-21 day rule introduces a window before the expiry of a work permit when a worker can transfer without their employer's permission called the non-consent period<sup>3</sup>. This policy, at face value, seems like headway is being made, but, does little to improve the circumstances of migrant workers. Not only does it fail to reduce the potency of repatriation as a threat, but employers can circumvent the rule to some degree. TWC2 has found that companies can repatriate workers at any point including the non-consent period. While notice of termination periods might provide some protection from this, they too can be avoided. Like in the case of Farhad's.

Farhad's employer used his personal information to illegally apply for an IPA on his behalf at the start of the 40-21 day window. Workers can only have one active IPA, hence Farhad could not apply for a different company. This practice used here to prevent Farhad from using his non-consent period has been observed in other cases, and has created an impression among workers that companies have the means to effectively blacklist workers from future jobs in Singapore, since an unsolicited IPA (that they did not apply for) can block workers from taking up jobs that they want. As noted earlier in section 8.2 MOM is the primary representative of the state in matters regarding migrant workers. Therefore, they are the primary mechanism by which the state informs and replicates preferred behaviours (Mann 1984). Given the prevalence of exploitative practices, it is difficult to assert that Singapore is interested in leveraging MOM's institutional power to better migrants' lives.



## 8.7 Evaluation

Institutions are the operational extension of a government's priorities in the day-to-day activities of the state. In order to achieve future sustainable development, it must be a priority at the state level—these priorities, when filtered through the technology of institutions, can begin to influence moulds of behaviour. However, as it stands, Singapore's priorities do not reflect a desire to achieve social sustainability. While the discussion has focused on MOM, it should be noted that our interviews and dealings with workers have suggested that other institutions similarly operationalise state priorities. Most notable, the Inland Revenue Authority of Singapore, the Police, and the judicial system. Special passes and the mediation process promote discriminatory outcomes for low-wage migrant workers while restricting their access to the justice system (indicators 16.3 and 16. b). The current state priorities and how MOM operationalises them make it difficult to assert that MOM is an effective, accountable and transparent institution at all levels (16.6) interested in promoting an inclusive society for sustainable development.

**Figure 8:** The Cuff Road Project:

TWC2s Cuff Road Project provides meals to workers who may otherwise not have access. The program specifically caters to special pass holders as they cannot work and at times are not provided food by their company. The Cuff Road Project is an example of how NGOs fill the gap between MOM policy and company practice.

<sup>3</sup> Notably this privilege is only extended to work pass holder working in the construction, marine and process sectors.



# 9.0 Strategic Recommendations

Strategic changes	Desired Outcome	Relevant SDG Targets
<b>Transfer of employment without employers' permission and the ability to work with an ongoing case.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A reduction in the Coercive powers of employers</li> <li>- The ability of workers to fairly negotiate salary, deductions, and contracts.</li> <li>- Market driven wages that are not artificially suppressed by coercion.</li> <li>- A higher proportion of successful migration cycles.</li> </ul>	1.1: Eradication of extreme poverty. 1.2 Reduce half of men and women living in poverty. 1.b Public policy to tackle poverty.
		10.1 Achieve income growth for the bottom 40% of the population. 10.3 Eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices. 10.4 Fiscal, wage and social protection policies to achieve equality. 10.7 Facilitate orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration.
		8.5 Full productive employment, decent work, and equal pay for equal value work. 8.7 Eradicate forced labour and child labour. 8.8 Safe and secure working environment for migrant workers.
		16.10 Access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms. 16b Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies
<b>Cross border strategy to reduce the reliance on debt in the Bangladeshi-Singapore and India-Singapore migration corridors.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A reduction in the coercive powers of employers.</li> <li>- Increased chances of positive migration cycles for the least advantaged.</li> <li>- Safer and more productive workplaces.</li> <li>- A higher proportion of migrants who hold precautionary assets.</li> <li>- Resilience for migrants to economic shock.</li> </ul>	1.1. Eradication of Extreme poverty. 1.2 Reduce half of men and women living in poverty. 1.4 Rights of the poor and vulnerable to land and economic resources. 1.5 Build resilience for the poor and vulnerable. 1a Cross-border partnerships to end poverty. 1b Public policy to tackle poverty.
		10.3 Ensure equal opportunities and reduce inequalities. Eliminate discriminatory policies. 10.5 The regulation of global financial markets and institutions. 10.7 Facilitate orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration.
		8.5 Full productive employment, decent work, and equal pay for equal value work. 8.7 Eradicate forced labour and child labour. 8.8 Safe and secure working environment for migrant workers.
		16.5 Reduce corruption and bribery in all its forms.

# 9.0 Strategic Recommendations

<b>Prosecution and penalties on employers infringing laws.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A reduction in exploitative practices and the bullying of workers.</li> <li>- A reduction in workplace injuries and non-payment of salary.</li> <li>- Increased likelihood of positive migration cycles.</li> <li>- Reduced workplace discrimination.</li> <li>- Less stressed, more productive workforce.</li> <li>- Cultural and ideological shift away from exploitative practices.</li> </ul>	<div>1.2 Reduce half of men and women living in poverty.</div> <div>10.3 Ensure equal opportunities and reduce inequalities. Eliminate discriminatory policies. 10.4 Fiscal, wage and social protection policies to achieve equality. 10.7 Facilitate orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration.</div> <div>8.2 High levels of economic productivity in labour intensive sectors. 8.5 Full productive employment, decent <u>work</u> and equal pay for equal value work. 8.7 Eradicate forced labour. 8.8 Safe and secure working environment for migrant workers.</div> <div>16.3 Equal access to justice for all. 16.6 Develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels</div>
<b>Review of policy priorities to better centre on the agency and welfare of migrant workers.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- A reduction in the coercive powers of employers.</li> <li>- Increased likelihood of positive migration cycles.</li> <li>- Compliance with ILO regulations on migrant workers.</li> <li>- Cultural and ideological shift away from exploitative practices.</li> <li>- Sustainable workforce that is adaptable to disasters, such as covid-19.</li> </ul>	<div>1.2 Reduce half of men and women living in poverty.</div> <div>10.2 Promote social, economic, and political inclusion for all. 10.3 Eliminating discriminatory laws, <u>policies</u> and practices. 10.4 Fiscal, wage and social protection policies to achieve equality. 10.7 Facilitate orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration.</div> <div>8.2 High levels of economic productivity in labour intensive sectors. 8.5 Full productive employment, decent <u>work</u> and equal pay for equal value work. 8.7 Eradicate forced labour. 8.8 Safe and secure working environment for migrant workers. Compliance with international labour rights.</div> <div>16.6 Develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels. 16.7 Ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels 16b Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies</div>



# 9.0 Strategic Recommendations

<b>Guaranteed protections for workers who report exploitative workplace practices.</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Safer, less exploitative workplaces.</li> <li>- Greater migrant worker agency.</li> <li>- Reduction in non-payment of salary cases.</li> <li>- Reduction in the coercive and intimidation powers of the employer.</li> <li>- Greater chance of a positive migration cycle</li> </ul>	1.2 Reduce half of men and women living in poverty.
		10.2 Promote social, economic, and political inclusion for all. 10.3 Eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices. 10.4 Fiscal, wage and social protection policies to achieve equality. 10.7 Facilitate orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration.
		8.2 High levels of economic productivity in labour intensive sectors. 8.5 Full productive employment, decent work, and equal pay for equal value work. 8.7 Eradicate forced labour. 8.8 Safe and secure working environment for migrant workers. Compliance with international labour rights.
		16.3 Ensure equal access to justice for all. 16.6 Develop effective, accountable, and transparent institutions at all levels. 16.10 Equal access to information and protection of fundamental freedoms. 16b Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies



# 10.0 Conclusion

The purpose of this report has been to illuminate a narrative, one based on the experiences of migrant workers. This narrative illustrates how pre-migration debt, poverty, and inequality persist through multiple migration cycles when migration is managed poorly and in an unsustainable fashion. In this narrative, we are confronted with exploitation, coercion, and mistreatment of the most vulnerable. We have also seen that this narrative, while not expressly constructed by state institutions, has been allowed to persist and even be perpetuated. If Singapore is “committed to achieving sustainable development in its three dimensions – economic, social and environmental – in a balanced and integrated manner” (UN 2015, 3/35), Singapore will need to reconcile itself with the narrative playing out in the lives of the most vulnerable section of its standing population. Should it wish to bring itself in line with the SDGs and be a part of movement towards sustainable development, Singapore must institute a number of changes. Because development, where human beings cannot fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment, is, by definition, not sustainable (UN 2015, 2/35).

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