

Indonesian Migrant Worker (PMI) in the Agriculture Sector: Opportunities and Challenges

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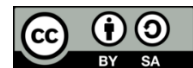
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ABSTRACT

Worker migration occurs for various reasons, one of which is economic. In migration, there are push factors and pull factors. The demand for worker in more developed countries and higher wages is pulling factors, while the lack of job opportunities and inadequate wages in the country are push factors. In recent years, the agricultural sector in Japan has become attractive to job seekers in Indonesia. This study aims to explore the opportunities for former agricultural migrants in addressing the challenge of farmer regeneration. The research employs a qualitative approach, utilizing data collection methods such as interviews, observations, and document analysis. Informants from BP3MI, SBMI, and prospective PMI were involved. The findings indicate that no such efforts have been made, and innovative policies are needed to bridge the gap between the two.

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1. INTRODUCTION

The history of the region shows that economically open countries such as Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand have, since the 1970s, developed migration policies that support economic growth through trade and migrant workers. Worker migration in Southeast Asia is a phenomenon driven by economic needs and supported by state policies oriented toward cross-border labor management [1], which then becomes a driving factor in the region of origin in the concept of migration.

In 2023, the Indonesian Migrant Workers Protection Agency (BP2MI) added the agricultural sector to the Government to Government (G to G) scheme for the placement of Indonesian migrant workers (PMI) in South Korea and Japan [2]. In addition, during the migration process, pull factors in the destination area are also an important element. During a meeting between BP2MI and the Deputy Director General of the Management Improvement Bureau, Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries of Japan in October 2023, it was conveyed that there are ample job opportunities in the agricultural sector. They

hope that more workers from Indonesia will work in the field of agriculture [3]. In addition to opportunities, salary levels are also attractive. In South Korea, the monthly salary for plant and machine operators and assemblers is around 3,100,000 KRW, or the equivalent of Rp. 36,704,000 [4].

The Akari Jawa Indonesia Vocational Training Institute (LPK) announced on its official website in December 2024 that the average monthly salary for workers in the

agricultural sector is JPY 100,000 – JPY 130,000 or approximately Rp 10 million – Rp 13 million. The scope of work includes planting, harvesting, and processing agricultural products. In addition to salary, the employer provides the following benefits: free accommodation, transportation allowance, meal allowance, and health and accident insurance [5].

Table 1. Data on the Placement of Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) in the Agricultural Sector for 2022-2024

No	Type of Position	2022	2023	2024	Amount
1	Agriculture	0	25	1.203	1.228
2	Agriculture Labor	685	2.725	1.152	4.562
3	Agriculture Farming	817	1.108	1.043	2.968
	Total	1.502	3.858	3.398	8.758

Source: Proceed data from BP2MI, 2025

The agricultural sector in Asia has long been an important source of employment, especially for migrant workers from countries such as Indonesia, the Philippines, and Thailand. Table 1 shows the dynamics of the number of Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) working in the agricultural sector in the last three years.

Job vacancies in the agricultural sector have also continued to experience a dramatic increase in demand over the past three years. Even in 2024, the total number of agricultural sector PMI successfully placed compared to the number of available job vacancies (Graph 1) only met about 65.6% of the existing needs in the agricultural sector (Agriculture).

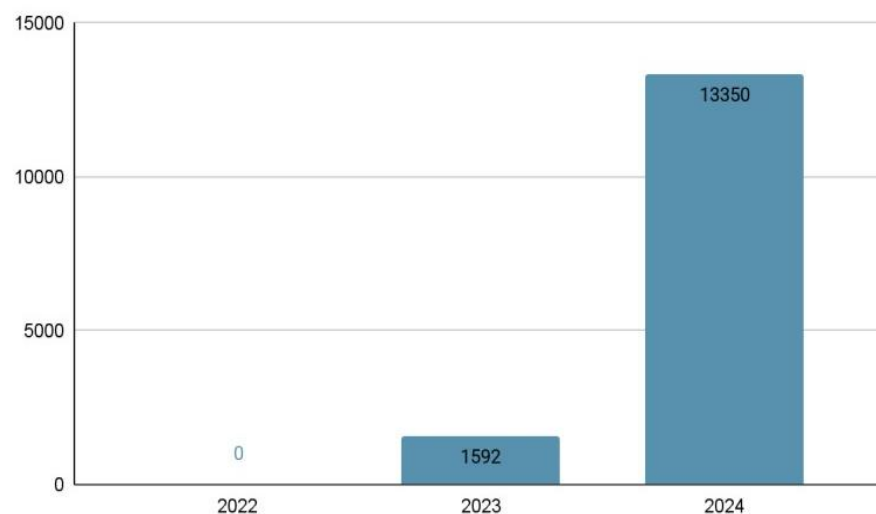


Figure 1. SIP2MI Issuance Data Based on Position and Number of Job Vacancies Available in the Agricultural Sector in 2022-2024

Source: Proceed data from BP2MI, 2025

The high demand for worker is not accompanied by protection for them, including migrant workers in the agricultural sector. Migrant workers, especially those working in the agricultural sector, face vulnerable working conditions, including exploitation, debt, and unpleasant treatment from employers. Many of them are "overstaying their visas" or working in the informal sector due to economic pressures and high recruitment costs at the time of departure. This situation has been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which has led some workers to flee due to low wages, excessive workloads, and discrepancies between the work performed and the initial agreement, ultimately increasing the risk of arrest and deportation [6].

Initially, the Internship Program in Japan aimed to enhance the skills of interns from Vietnam, the Philippines, Indonesia, and other countries. However, many view the program as a tool for exploiting low-wage labor, despite the Japanese government issuing guidelines for agricultural work for farm owners in 2020. Many foreign workers still face poor working conditions. Similarly, the challenges faced by Indonesian migrant workers include language proficiency, cultural differences in work practices, and extreme weather conditions in certain regions [7].

From the outset, these migrants have worked abroad to achieve upward social mobility or change their fortunes, improving the economic situation of their families in their home regions. On a macro level, the improved economic conditions of migrant households in rural areas will drive the local economy, spending, investment, job creation, and so on. This is one of the keys supports for rural economic development.

Furthermore, when both family (micro) and community (rural) economic conditions are favorable, more comprehensive development can be achieved. This study aims to map and categorize the opportunities and challenges faced by migrant workers in the agricultural sector to provide a comprehensive overview

that can be used as a basis for further policies or interventions so that the departure of migrant workers abroad is not in vain.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 *The Concept of Development and Public Administration*

Development is defined as a change towards improved conditions through planned efforts[8]. In the context of national development, Seers poses three fundamental questions: "What has been happening to poverty? What has been happening to unemployment? What has been happening to inequality?" According to Seers, "If all three of these have declined from high levels, then beyond doubt this has been a period of development for the country concerned" [9]. The objectives of development are multifaceted, encompassing not only the enhancement of economic production and consumption levels but also fundamental freedoms, justice, security, and the basic integrity of human beings [10].

To realize these human-centric development goals, development activities must be governed effectively. This necessitates an administrative system capable of managing them. In *Public Administration: A Comparative Perspective*, a general overview of administration in developing countries highlights several key characteristics. First, the basic model of public administration is often imitative rather than indigenous. Developing nations, both those formerly colonized and those not, tend to adopt the models of Western countries. However, the administration in the colonizing country (e.g., the Netherlands) differed significantly from the colonial administration imposed on its colonies (e.g., the Dutch East Indies), which was elitist, authoritarian, paternalistic, and disconnected from the populace. Remnants of these characteristics persist in various regions today. Second, bureaucracies in developing countries are often deficient

in the skilled human resources required to manage development, particularly in terms of quality. Third, the bureaucracy is frequently oriented towards objectives other than genuine productivity. Bureaucrats are more inclined to pursue personal interests over programmatic goals, a situation Weidner terms a preference for "personal expediency" over "public-principled interest" [10]. This fosters nepotism, where performance evaluation is based on kinship rather than merit. Fourth, there is a significant gap between stated principles and actual practice, a characteristic Riggs labels "formalism." Fifth, the bureaucracy in developing nations is often autonomous, operating largely free from political processes and public oversight (summarized from Heady [11], pp. 297-301; Kartasasmita [8], pp. 31-32).

2.2 *Reassessment of State Functions and the Migrant Worker Context*

In his writings, Rondinelli [12] identifies two primary factors prompting a reassessment of state functions and public services. First, is globalization and its impacts, which compel governments to adapt to and address rapid economic, social, political, and technological changes at the international level. This includes massive labor migration flows, facilitated by modern advancements in information technology, communication, and transportation. Second is the growing dissatisfaction among citizens in many countries with government performance and the services provided.

Within this context, the issue of migrant workers involves three distinct phases: pre-placement, placement, and post-placement. Mapping the challenges within these phases can inform the government's efforts to build or enhance its organizational capacity, ensuring that formulated policies effectively address the core issues.

2.3 *A Typology of Human Mobility and Migration*

Geographical population mobility can be distinguished by

territory: international (cross-border) and internal (within a single country), such as rural-to-urban movement or transmigration [13]. The demarcation typically follows administrative boundaries. Furthermore, horizontal population mobility can be classified by duration: non-permanent (circulation) and permanent (migration)[14],[13] elaborates on this distinction based on the initial intent of the move. If individuals do not intend to settle in the destination area, the movement is termed non-permanent (circulation). Conversely, migration is the movement of people across a regional boundary with the intention of settling in the destination area [15],[16]. This non-permanent mobility includes commuting (*nglaju* or *ulang alik*)[14] [13].

In the context of international migration, the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) defines temporary migrants as those who stay in a country for no more than three months [13]. Recognizing that temporary movement can also cross national borders, the United Nations (UN) has refined the definition of an international migrant by developing the concept of a long-term immigrant, which includes any person who arrives in a country for a year or more and resides there for over a year (Kraly and Warren as cited in Weeks [15]). An individual engaged in migration is called a migrant; they are an emigrant from the perspective of the country of origin and an immigrant in the country of destination. Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI), who work abroad on contracts, fall within this UN definition. They are individuals working outside Indonesia's administrative territory who do not initially intend to settle in the destination country but reside there for more than one year.

Furthermore, migrants can be categorized by their mode of entry into the destination country: legal (with documents compliant with regulations)

or undocumented/improperly documented. For legal migrants, their documents clearly state their purpose, such as work, study, or tourism. In contrast, undocumented migrants are those who cross borders without the knowledge of authorities or who overstay their visas [13]. Improperly documented status refers to migrants holding documents for one purpose (e.g., tourism) but engaging in another (e.g., employment).

Finally, migration can be distinguished as forced or voluntary. Forced migrants are those compelled to move, such as asylum seekers, refugees, and those escaping poverty, subsistence-level wages ("economic migration"), disease outbreaks, or environmental disasters. Conversely, voluntary migrants are those who move by choice, typically for reasons such as marriage, family reunification, specific employment opportunities, or the desire to experience another culture [13].

2.4 *Theories and Strategies of Migration*

People employ various strategies to migrate, often based on risk assessment. Chain migration occurs when individuals move to a destination where relatives or community members are already established, providing an initial support system. This is common, for example, among Indonesian workers in Saudi Arabia. Another strategy is step migration, where individuals first move to a nearby area (e.g., from a village to Jakarta) and later to a more distant location (e.g., from Jakarta to Malaysia), using the initial experience as a stepping stone [15].

The reasons for migration, beyond forced displacement, are often explained by push and pull factors, a conceptualization by Ravenstein that primarily links migration to the prospect of higher wages in the destination area compared to the origin. This aligns with the neoclassical economics approach, which posits that migration is a labor adjustment process driven by differences

in labor supply and demand. Prosperous countries with labor shortages and high wages attract individuals from low-income nations. At the micro-level, migration is viewed as an individual investment to improve one's standard of living.

The dual labor market theory argues that developed countries have two distinct labor markets. The primary sector offers jobs with adequate education requirements, good wages, security, and benefits. The secondary sector, characterized by low-skilled jobs and precarious working conditions, was historically filled by domestic minority groups. As these groups achieved upward mobility, the secondary sector became increasingly occupied by immigrants from developing countries [15], [13].

Institutional theory highlights the role of institutions that develop to facilitate (and profit from) the continuous flow of migrants. These institutions can range from legitimate organizations providing protection to exploited individuals to illicit operations engaged in human smuggling and providing fraudulent documents. Such organizations help sustain migration flows, often in the face of government attempts to restrict them (Aguinas as cited in Weeks)[15].

Finally, the theory of cumulative causation posits that each act of migration alters the social context in both the sending and receiving regions, influencing subsequent migration decisions. Remittances sent home increase family income, motivating other families in the community to follow suit. Over time, migration can become ingrained in the culture, leading to repeated trips and increasing the overall volume of migration. In the receiving country, the concentration of migrants in specific job sectors (often termed "immigrant jobs") can create a sustained demand for more migrant worker. Research indicates that these theoretical

approaches are often complementary, each providing explanatory power for different aspects of migration phenomena observed in practice [15].

3. METHODS

This study uses a qualitative approach, beginning with an examination of the issues faced by Indonesian migrant workers (PMI) in the agricultural sector. Primary and secondary data were collected through interviews with several informants consisting of BP3MI, the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (SBMI), and Indonesian migrant workers who work or have worked in the agricultural sector, particularly in East Asia, as well as through observation, documentation, and literature review. Subsequently, the team compiled theories and data, then analyzed them using an interactive model to map out the

opportunities and challenges faced by PMI in the agricultural sector.

4. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When discussing the agricultural sector PMI, it is closely related to the issue of farmer regeneration in Indonesia. This is a phenomenon that deserves attention, considering that Indonesia is an agrarian country and agriculture is one of the sectors that contributes to meeting the basic needs of the community, such as rice. Opportunities and challenges can arise from factors that act as drivers and pullers. Based on data from the Central Statistics Agency (BPS)[17], open unemployment in Indonesia in 2024 increased from 7,194,862 people in February to 7,465,599 people in August. This increase of 270,737 people shows the great challenge of absorbing labor in Indonesia.

Table 2. Number of Open Unemployment Based On Highest Level of Education in 2024

Highest Level of Education	February 2024	August 2024
No schooling/ never attended school	13598	12651
Did not complete Elementary School	394364	361769
Elementary School	857486	853738
Junior High School	1154255	1091015
Senior High School	2107781	2293359
Vocational High School	1621672	1840162

Source: BPS cited from Goodstat, 2025

Based on the data in Table 2, the largest increase in unemployment occurred among high school graduates (185,578 people) and vocational school graduates (218,490 people). This shows that the labor market in Indonesia has not been able to absorb workers from these educational levels.

4.1 Push Factors

The driving factors that cause migrant workers to choose to work in the agricultural sector abroad in East Asia such as in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, include:

- (a) Limited employment opportunities in rural areas/villages

Employment opportunities, particularly in rural areas, tend to be more limited compared to those

available in urban areas. Generally, rural communities rely heavily on the agricultural or plantation products they produce or work on neighboring farmland. The shrinking of agricultural land and the increasing population growth have led to fewer employment opportunities. Limited skills and low education levels motivate them to break the cycle of poverty by working as migrant workers. Research conducted by Hartini (2013) and Indramiski (2014) in Rochaniyah (2019) shows that the level of education has a significant impact on the socioeconomic status of the community. The majority of people who work as migrant

workers have only completed elementary school.[18]

(b) Low wages

Research conducted by Rochaniyah and Indrayati (2019) states that the mobility of migrant workers is generally due to financial issues, whether it be for business capital or to survive.[18] Furthermore, research by Setijaningrum, et. al. (2023) shows that the high migration rate of workers is due to their low educational background, which limits their job opportunities. This forces migrant workers to take whatever jobs they can find and receive lower wages than they would if they stayed in their home regions.[19]

(c) Technology and communication that make it easier to find work opportunities abroad

The ease of access to information about overseas job opportunities allows job seekers or Indonesian migrant workers to find work that matches their qualifications. Generally, job vacancy information is shared by the Job Training Agency (LPK) or BP2MI, such as the Indonesia-Japan and Indonesia-South Korea Government to Government (G to G) program schemes. Job vacancy information typically includes required qualifications such as gender, age range, language proficiency certificate standards, the job position offered, salary amount, benefits provided to workers, and the deadline for submitting job applications.

4.2 Pull Factors

The pull factors that cause migrant workers to choose to work in the agricultural sector abroad, such as in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, include:

(a) Higher wages

The significant difference between wages in Indonesia and in

East Asian countries is an attraction for migrant workers to work abroad. Rianawati (2013) in Rochaniyah (2019) mentions that high parental income allows them to set aside part of their income for education. The high wages they earn are sent to their families as remittances from working in the destination country.[18]

(b) The destination country's government is opening more job opportunities in the agricultural sector

The G-to-G program for the agricultural sector has great and significant potential for migrant workers with a minimum high school education to work in the agricultural sector.

(c) Significant demographic changes due to low birth rates and an aging population (especially in Japan)

The population of countries like Japan continues to decline, directly proportional to the low number of working-age people. Additionally, the increasing number of non-working-age people, namely the elderly, also poses a burden on governments in East Asian countries like South Korea and Japan. Therefore, the demand for workers from other countries increases, benefiting both parties (the employer country and the job-seeking country).

(d) Labor shortage

Labor shortages, such as in the agricultural sector, are feared to hamper economic growth in East Asian countries. Some low-skilled workers, such as those in the agricultural sector, are currently less desirable to the local population, resulting in labor shortages and the need to absorb foreign workers, including migrant workers. In fact, Japan reformed its Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act, which was enacted in December 2018 and came into effect in April

2019. The new visa status was designed to accept foreign workers with specific skills or knowledge to replace them. Due to a serious domestic labor shortage, the Japanese government reformed the Immigration Control and Refugee Recognition Act. Through this amendment, Japan aims to bring around 340,000 migrant workers to the country under a new scheme called 'Specified Skilled Workers' (SSW) over the next five years. The Indonesian government is willing to deploy 70,000 skilled migrant workers for this target (Tempo, 2019).

- (e) A supportive and friendly work environment

Although not always and not for everyone, a supportive and friendly work environment is also one of the factors that encourage migrant workers to work abroad. In a study by Setijaningrum, et.al. (2023), it is mentioned that a supportive and friendly work environment for workers, especially migrants, can even open opportunities to improve their potential, advance their careers, and provide adequate accommodation.

4.3 Opportunities and Challenges of Working Abroad

The opportunities that lead migrant workers to choose to work in the agricultural sector abroad, such as in Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, include:

- (a) The government of the destination country officially informs workers of job opportunities in the agricultural sector in that country

Cooperation between the governments of East Asian countries, such as Japan through the G-to-G program, demonstrates a serious effort to address employment issues between the two countries.

- (b) There are several schemes that can be pursued

In addition to the G-to-G program, in Japan, for example, there are other schemes such as the TIT (Training Intern Training Program) and SSW (Specified Skilled Worker), specifically for Japan, which officially open opportunities for migrant workers to work in the destination country.

- (c) There is cooperation between the country of origin and the destination country.

Official cooperation efforts continue to be developed by the Indonesian government by building partnership networks with East Asian countries to open opportunities for migrant workers to work officially and avoid human trafficking.

4.4 Opportunities and Challenges After Returning to Indonesia

Migration has been known for thousands of years. In Indonesia itself, the sending of workers or Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI) only began to be structured and managed by the state during the New Order era as one of the solutions to overcome unemployment in Indonesia by making PMI heroes of foreign exchange. Advancements in technology and the breakdown of borders between countries have made migration and working abroad increasingly accessible. This can have both positive and negative impacts on a country, particularly developing nations like Indonesia. After discussing the opportunities and challenges faced by PMI who are planning to or are currently working abroad, the next discussion is about the current conditions, particularly related to human resources (HR) in the agricultural sector.

The issue of farmer regeneration is an interesting topic to explore. The massive migration of young people in Indonesia seeking work abroad, particularly to East Asian countries such

as Japan, South Korea, and Taiwan, highlights the phenomenon of “brain drain” or the migration of skilled workers from one country to another. As mentioned in the above discussion, several driving and pulling factors are the reasons behind productive-age residents choosing to work abroad. Economic incentives such as higher wages, better career opportunities, and more stable economic conditions in the destination country.

The migration of young talent abroad, particularly in the agricultural sector, could serve as a resource for Indonesia, especially in terms of developing human resources that are currently underutilized domestically. If managed effectively, this could present a strategic opportunity for Indonesia to achieve its vision of “Indonesia Emas 2045.” The following is a summary and analysis of the opportunities and challenges for agricultural migrant workers upon their return to Indonesia, based on interviews with several informants (Mr. Tymu Irawan - Chairman of the Indonesian Migrant Workers Union (SBMI)) Branch in Lampung, and Mr. Ahmad Robby - Head of Placement at the Lampung Migrant Workers Placement and Protection Agency (BP3MI)) and literature reviews.

A. Opportunities: Strategic Assets for Village Development

(a) Human Capital

PMI in the agricultural sector who have worked abroad for some time (e.g., more than 6 months) certainly bring human capital in the form of knowledge and skills regarding modern agricultural practices and technology, work culture and ethics, as well as networks.

(b) Financial Capital Support

PMI returning to Indonesia bring financial capital that can be allocated or used as initial capital to establish businesses through investments

such as land or new agribusiness ventures.

(c) Shift or Change in Perception (Re-branding) About Farmers and Agriculture

With the majority of returning PMI still in their productive age (under 50 years old), this is expected to bring positive value and perception about the profession of young and modern farmers, thereby increasing and attracting the interest of the younger generation to become farmers.

B. Challenges: Policy Disparities and Structural Barriers

(a) Disparities in Focus and Resource Allocation

The disparities in focus and resource allocation by the government between the pre-placement and post-placement phases still need to be addressed. The government remains overly focused and far more intensive in managing prospective migrant workers (PMI) who are about to depart compared to managing the potential and addressing the issues of PMI who have returned to their home country. However, Law No. 18 of 2017 on the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers (PMI Law) explicitly mandates that both be addressed fairly and equitably.[20] Articles 41 and 42 of the law explicitly mandate social and economic empowerment for former migrant workers and their families, which should be carried out from the central government to the village government.

(b) Non-Integrated Data

During the pre-placement phase, data on prospective migrant workers is continuously improved and organized each year.

Unfortunately, this has not been fully implemented in the post-placement phase. Data on the return of migrant workers and their potential skills is often not managed properly. As a result, local governments face difficulties in mapping human resources assets, particularly returning migrant workers who have returned to their villages.

(c) Lack of Access to Services

Returning migrant workers often face difficulties in accessing basic services that should serve as a bridge for them. For example, access to business capital from banks, market access for entrepreneurs to penetrate local or broader markets, and access to information regarding further training to enhance their skills or domestic job vacancies that match their expertise remain limited. Even if training is available, it is often initiated by third parties such as Non-Governmental Organization (NGOs) concerned with migrant workers and former migrant workers.

5. CONCLUSION

The migration of young workers in the agricultural sector faces challenges during the placement and post-placement stages. Political goodwill from district and village governments is needed, especially during the post-placement stage. Generally, returning migrants bring back remittances (money), knowledge, and skills. These resources can serve as an opportunity for farmer regeneration. Currently, the agricultural sector in Indonesia is dominated by the elderly population. Policy innovations are formulated as a bridge between the opportunities presented by young returning migrants and the challenges of farmer regeneration.

There needs to be a paradigm shift by the government in its view of Indonesian migrant workers (PMI), particularly those who have completed their work in the agricultural sector. We must stop seeing them only as “foreign exchange heroes” whose cycle ends when remittances are sent and start seeing them as “agents of innovation” whose cycle only begins when they return. Their decision to work, whether abroad or domestically, is often not based solely on economic calculations but on human factors such as feeling valued, a supportive environment, and opportunities for growth. Therefore, policy reintegration must shift from a single model that forces everyone to become entrepreneurs toward a flexible ecosystem with diverse pathways: providing facilities for those who wish to become entrepreneurs while also creating avenues for them to become industry experts, mentors for the next generation, or drivers of cooperatives and farmer groups in rural areas. Concrete policy interventions from the Government must start at the grassroots level, by empowering Village Governments and optimizing the role of Village Facilitators to connect the potential of former migrant workers with real-world needs on the ground. By building this robust policy bridge, we not only empower individuals but also systematically transform the migration phenomenon into the primary driving force for the modernization and regeneration of Indonesia’s agricultural sector.

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