

*At the Grassroots Level of Diplomacy: A Research on the Perception of Indonesian Migrant Workers on Indonesian Diplomatic Corps*

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Abstract

This research addressed the perception of Indonesian migrant workers on Indonesian diplomatic corps. This study also investigates the correlation between the proximity of the workers with the diplomatic corps and the impact on their perception on Indonesian diplomatic corps. These are important issues because Indonesian migrant workers have been a challenge for Indonesian diplomacy lately. Using Principal-Agent theory, this research was conducted in Malang areas, East Java Province, Indonesia, which is one of the main supplier provinces of Indonesian migrant workers. This research was combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative method is used to describe the trends of the perception while the qualitative method is used to explain the relations between “the proximity between the workers and the diplomats” and “the perception of the workers on the diplomatic corps.” This research shows the proximity between the workers and the diplomatic officers influences the perception of the workers. The more actively involved a workers is, the more positive the perception they hold on the diplomatic corps. The less involvement, and no interaction at all, lead to stronger negative perception of the workers on the diplomatic corps. Thus, it is important to notice that there is a need for the diplomatic corps to build the closer proximity to the workers in order to improve their image since even those who never directly interact with the diplomatic corps have a tendency to build their negative perception through prejudice and words of mouth reflecting the failures of Indonesian diplomatic corps.

Keywords: diplomacy, perception, migrant workers.

## Introduction

Diplomacy is a domain of state activities that only includes certain actors who really have the authority to determine the state behavior at the international level. Therefore, it is uncommon to discuss about the role of layman in such an exclusive enterprise. But, that is a traditional view. Nowadays, diplomacy is no longer sufficient to be conducted only by official diplomats. The shifting of international focus from “high politics issues” to “low politics issues” requires the involvements of people from various backgrounds to support official diplomats dealing with various issues.

Indonesian migrant workers (*Tenaga Kerja Indonesia* = TKI) have been a challenge for Indonesian diplomacy because it has caused some diplomatic tensions between Indonesia and the host countries to where the workers migrate. There are various issues related to TKI that brought the diplomatic relations into crisis. These issues are mostly related to the mistreatment of the employer on TKI, such as: violation on the contract, unpaid salary, physical violence, and sexual harassment (Kompas 2010 in Irianto). In some cases, the mistreatment (especially physical violence and sexual harassment) leads to a tragedy of murder that finally put a worker into serious legal charges.

This problem complicates the responsibilities of the Indonesian diplomatic corps since the solution does not only require diplomatic rules to adopt, but also how to deal directly with the workers (TKI) who are mostly do not have sufficient knowledge about how to work as expat. Most of TKI work abroad through a recruitment system which also organizes all the administrative affairs for them, including passport, visa, and the contract itself. And the TKI mostly understands neither their rights nor their responsibility to be expat (Irianto 2011: 57-9).

Therefore, the diplomatic corps not only responsible to the workers’ legal position but also they have to deal with citizen who has lack of understanding of their position as a non-citizen worker abroad. TKI who works in domestic sectors and other low-wages occupancies are those in a situation of needing a job that cannot sufficiently be provided by their home country. So, the diplomats are not only facing the diplomatic issue but also sociological issue that basically not their main responsibility. It is the responsibility of the state as a whole. In this point the meeting of the diplomat with the citizen (TKI) is in a situation that is not only critical, but also ‘fragile’ since the diplomatic corps might lack of both understanding and authority to handle the issue alone. At the same time, the diplomat is seen as the main party who has the responsibility to handle any situation related to the protection of the citizen abroad.

The main point of the explanation above is that the diplomatic corps has been burdened with responsibilities that should not be their own. At the same time, for the workers (TKI) the diplomatic corps is the party who should protect them abroad especially when they are in legal situation. Handling citizen’s problems in host country is basically a usual event for the diplomatic officers. What unusual in this case is that the number of the case is plenty.

**Table. 1 Distribution of TKI and Their Cases (2008)**

Country	Number of TKI	Number of Cases
Saudi Arabia	960.000	22.035
Taiwan	130.000	4.497
Uni Arab Emirates	75.000	3.866
Singapore	100.000	2.937
Malaysia	2.000.000	2.476
Hongkong	120.000	2.245
Qatar	25.000	1.516
Oman	12.000	1.146
Bahrain	16.000	373
Suriah	80.000	161
Brunei Darussalam	33.000	84
South Korea	33.000	10

Total number of the Case: 45.626

Total number of TKI: 4,3 million

Notes: excludes illegal (without documents) migrant workers

Source: BNP2TKI 2008 in Sulistyowati Irianto 2011: 15-6

The massive number of case related to TKI has created a situation where the diplomatic corps lack of resources to handle every case appropriately. The treatment for TKI who facing working cases requires the diplomatic corps to provide extra services such as shelter (since they may lost their documents that make their being illegal), legal advocacy, psychological counseling, and so on. These services cannot be provided by the diplomatic representation abroad without domestic support since those are not seemingly as a standard services in a diplomatic representation. These services have been provided by the representation where such cases are common (like in Middle East countries) as a 'spontaneous' response to the cases. However, the absence of state's systemic policy to handle such cases leaves the diplomatic corps at the very front of the display of Indonesian unconvincing protection on TKI. As a consequence, while needing the understanding of TKI to build good relationship to face difficult situation, the diplomatic corps cannot set aside their being as part of the administration.

This research addressed the perception of Indonesian migrant workers on Indonesian diplomatic corps. This study also investigates the correlation between the proximity of the workers with the diplomatic corps and the impact on their perception on the performance of the Indonesian diplomatic corps. These are important issues because Indonesian migrant workers have been a challenge for Indonesian diplomacy lately as explained above.

## **Literature Review**

### **The Formation of Perception**

How people perceive the world will determine their behavior and stance upon an issue. The formation of perception is involving complex mechanisms. However, it can be

simplify into two main views: direct (bottom-up) and indirect (top-down) theory. James Gibson's direct theory argues that perception is formed through ecological experience where information from the environment supplies (sufficient) materials to form certain perception (Albon, nd). Thus, the perception might change when the surrounding changes and this lead to adaptation to social behavior (Arthur and Baron, 1983: 215). Meanwhile, Richard Gregory's indirect theory proposes that perception is actively constructed through stored information and knowledge that has already stored in the brain (Albon, nd). Therefore, information from the environment might not dominantly influential in the formation of perception. They will be interpreted according to the stored information and knowledge in the brain. Thus, perception is not something easily change when the surrounding changes.

To sum up, perception can be formed through basic perception (character) that has built during someone's life or through information from the environment. This research will prove which factor is more influential in forming TKI's perception on Indonesian diplomatic corps. The TKI's perception can be a parameter of success for the corps. In addition to that, the relations between the two parties are important since they are met by the inadequacy of the systemic TKI management.

#### **(P-A Theory)**

According to a theory of diplomacy the position of the diplomat and TKI can be understood in Principal-Agent relations (P-A theory). P-A theory states that in the context of representation, diplomat as agent acts based on a mandate determined by the principal (Jonsson and Hall 2008: 103). In a narrow view, we can perceive the administration as the principal. But in a wider and a more comprehensive view, the citizen is the ultimate principal since they are who basically represented by the legislative that in turn produced regulation implemented by the executive (the administration). Indeed, this confirms that the role of citizen in imposing a mandate to the agent depend on the form of the political system. The more the system open to public participation, the better the aspiration of the public be reflected in a mandate to the agent.

Indonesian political system, or decision-making procedure in practice, has put the diplomatic corps and the citizen at the widest gap. The workers have been socially weak since the existence is a result of the incapability of their country to provide sufficient number of job. Therefore, TKI is also alienated from the possibility to generate a mandate since they are technically do not have political access to do so. Meanwhile, the diplomats alienated from domestic decision-making process on policies related to migrant workers. Thus, in this context, the citizen do not involve in generating the mandate while the diplomat has been normatively asked to fulfill the (citizen's) mandate to protect them. This means while the workers and the diplomat must meet in person, they are alienated to one another in the decision making process. Consequently, this opens a potential space for "misunderstanding." Indeed, understanding between the two is crucial in handling the case in the field while the national policy is not good enough in protecting the workers. Thus, it is important to investigate the relations between the two at the individual level.

## **Methodology**

This research was combining quantitative and qualitative methods. The quantitative method is used to describe the trends of the perception while the qualitative method is used to explain the relations between “the proximity between the workers and the diplomats” and “the perception of the workers on the diplomatic corps.” The proximity is defined here as the existence of direct and/or direct interaction between the workers and the diplomats (Bryman, 2004: 19-21).

There were two stages of data collection procedure:

1. Survey on the perception of TKI on Indonesian diplomats; and the correlation between the interactions and the trend of perceptions.
2. In depth interviews on the pattern of interactions between TKI and Indonesian diplomats.

Respondents were selected based on their experiences and no limitations on the duration of the work (active and non-active workers). Respondents are TKI who experienced as domestic workers. Direct or indirect interactions were both covered considering the possibility that it could be explanative to the formation of perception. Respondents are limited to TKI who did not experience any working problem (having no case). They are considered as the most possible respondents who convey positive perception on Indonesian diplomatic corps considering the fact that there are actual weaknesses in Indonesian protection policy on TKI.

Research was conducted in Malang area (covering Malang Regency and Municipality), East Java Province, Indonesia. Malang is one of the central locations for migrant recruitment and East Java is one of the main TKI supplier provinces. The research was covering 19 spots located in Malang area. However, this does not mean that all respondents are Malang residences. They come from Malang and other areas in Java (mostly East Java). Researches met them in various location in Malang: their house, their working place (the current employer’s house) to meet those who are working as a maid in Malang, at the Agency to meet those who are trying to get another job abroad, at the immigration office to meet those who are preparing documents for another departure.

## **Findings and Discussions**

The survey shows that from 23 respondents, most respondents (52%) hold positive image toward Indonesian diplomats. This is the normal response as predicted. However, it is interesting that 48 % did not hold such perception. Please bear in mind that the respondents are selected based on the absence of case, which means these respondents are assumed as those who own the biggest possibilities to hold positive perception since they are having no issue during their stay abroad. The latest group is divided into two categories: those who hold negative and mixed perception. There are six (6) respondents (26%) are holding negative perception and five (5) respondents (22%) are having mixed perception. The latest ones are those who have both positive and negative perception towards Indonesian diplomatic corps (Table 2).



**Table. 2 TKI’s Perception on Indonesian Diplomats**

<b>Image</b>	<b>Numbers</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
<b>Positive</b>	12	52 %
<b>Negative</b>	6	26 %
<b>Mixed</b>	5	22 %
<b>Total</b>	<b>23</b>	<b>100 %</b>

The data above shows that the absence of negative experiences during the work abroad does not guarantee that a TKI will hold positive perception on Indonesian diplomatic corps. In the context of diplomacy, this could be counterproductive for Indonesian diplomatic corps because even this ‘unharmed’ citizen could potentially damage their reputation both domestic and abroad. These workers are potential communicator in helping the diplomat building a network with the workers abroad to maintain the relations with them, especially when they work in a host country where violence is part of its culture. What is more important than that is how the diplomat can truly see the position of TKI as the true principal for the diplomat. If that can be done, the diplomat could also see that there is a gap between what TKI want and what is the actual mandate instructed by Indonesian government. Indeed, if such view can be hold by the personnel of Indonesian diplomatic corps, they could work side by side with the workers in urging changes at the national level in orders to improve protections for TKI abroad.

Looking at the importance for TKI and the diplomats to work together, at least in maintaining their own relationship, this research also assessed the correlation between workers’ perception and the form of interactions. Direct interaction is indicating close proximity while indirect contact is indicating distance (Figure 1).

Figure 1. TKI’s Perception and Forms of Contacts

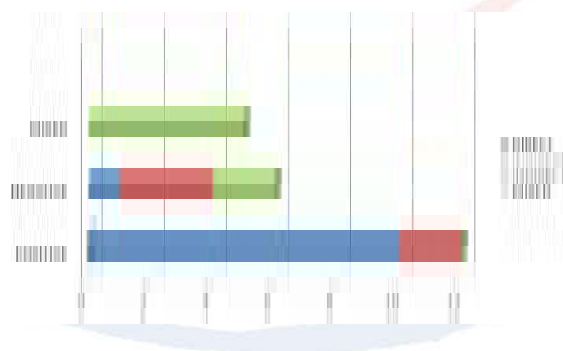


Figure 1 shows different pattern of interactions that form each trend of perceptions.

**Positive perception** is mostly conveyed by respondents who had experienced direct interaction with Indonesian diplomatic corps (10 respondents). Respondents was having direct interactions by experiencing administrative and consular affairs procedures regarding documents like passport or visa, periodical checking by the

diplomatic corps, and/or joining the Embassy's social events and gathering (celebration of Indonesian independence day, Holy month pray, Muslim Holiday). Only two (2) respondents held positive perception without experiencing any direct interactions with the corps. However, those two have misunderstood the function of diplomatic representation. They thought that someone needed to come to the embassy only when they have serious problem generating legal issue (lawsuit). Since they always had their documents settled by the agency or the employer, these workers was kept away from the possibility to have direct contact with the diplomat.

Meanwhile, **negative perception** on TKI was conveyed by respondents from all pattern of interactions: one (1) respondents who experienced direct interactions, three (3) respondents who had indirect contacts, and two (2) respondents who encountered both interactions with the corps. A respondent who experienced direct interactions held negative perception because she felt that the officer at the Embassy had made the administrative procedure difficult. She blamed the officer as unhelpful in assisting her completing the contract while she could not show the working permit as one of the prerequisites. She also disliked when the officer asked her to fulfill the insurance form since she had already had insurance. So, the respondent was basically having no issue regarding the work and the employer. She held negative perception because she did not trust the officer about what should and should not do. Meanwhile, those who never experienced direct interactions held negative perception because they got information from various sources (other migrant workers, the employer, media) that Indonesian diplomatic corps has shown poor performance in protecting TKI abroad. These two communication mechanisms, words of mouth and media, have unpredictable impact on shaping public opinion since the spread is massive and part of the social process. That revealed why even those who never directly interact with the corps could already hold a prejudice to Indonesian diplomatic corps.

Finally, **mixed perception** is held by all respondents (5) that experienced both direct and indirect interactions with Indonesian diplomatic corps. The interesting point here is that positive perception is built along the lines of the respondents' experiences in dealing with the administrative procedures at the embassy and also the social events especially established by the embassy for the workers. At the same time, negative perception had been formed through the words of mouth among the workers, information from the employer, and off course, the role of the media about the mistreatments of TKI. This confirms the previous findings that direct interactions creates a bigger possibility in forming positive perception. In addition to that, the absence of contact between the workers and the diplomat open a bigger possibility for negative information either through the words of mouth or media to form the workers' perception over the diplomats.

Besides those findings, this research also displayed TKI's behavior as "inferior principals." They had a little comprehension about the duty or functions of the diplomatic representation. Many respondents could not describe the basic functions of a diplomatic representation. Some of them even did not know that such institution existed. This proved that TKI had been alienated from their own protection system. It was understandable then why most of them tend to see the diplomatic representation as a symbol of problem rather than protection. Indeed, that was

counterproductive for the representations since they had developed the basic functions with certain protection functions for TKI (Kemenlu.go.id).

Another problem was TKI's tendency to see Indonesian diplomats as elite rather than as their agent. This is a classic issue in the discussion of diplomats-citizen relations. However, TKI has created certain situation that requires the diplomatic personnel to be more sensible to the workers in person. This is what has been trying to be underlined in this research. Some respondents expressed their reluctance to meet the diplomats because they felt unwelcomed. One respondent even said that she would never come to the diplomatic office because she was afraid of the diplomats. She got unpleasant treatment when she asked for information the first time she arrived in Hongkong. Instead of explaining, the officer interrogated her.

Observing the host country of origin, it can be concluded that there is correlation between the host country and the perception. All TKI conveyed positive perceptions were those who had experienced working in Hongkong and Taiwan. Both were TKI's favorite working destination because they were quite safe and provide quite high salary. Meanwhile, most of those who conveyed negative perception were those who had experienced working Saudi Arabia and Malaysia. These were two host countries with the highest number of violation over TKI. Finally, those who had mixed perception were mostly those experienced job placements in Hongkong and Taiwan. Only one person was placed in Saudi Arabia. We can see that those who had good experiences had shown empathy to those who were unlucky.

Indeed, this again confirmed that it is important for Indonesian diplomatic corps to build good communication with their constituent (TKI). The ultimate goal is not to negate the lack of service they can provide, but to reduce misunderstanding while improving the service. The power of media and words of mouth are at great strength that neither the diplomat nor the public can control (Pigman 2010: 3). However, the closer proximity between the diplomat and TKI will generate TKI's positive perception on the diplomatic corps which in turn could be used to push systemic improvement on migrant workers protections.

## **Conclusion**

There is a correlation between the proximity between TKI and Indonesian diplomat and the TKI's perception on the diplomatic corps as a whole. Direct interactions with TKI open greater possibilities to build TKI's positive perception on Indonesian diplomat. The less involvement, and no interaction at all, lead to stronger negative perception of the workers on the diplomatic corps. Thus, it is important to notice that there is a need for the diplomatic corps to build the closer proximity to the workers in order to improve their image since even those who never directly interact with the diplomatic corps have a tendency to build their negative perception through prejudice and *words of mouth* reflecting the failures of Indonesian diplomatic corps.

TKI as an "inferior principal" is lack of capabilities to give a mandate to the diplomatic corps as their agent since they are marginalized in national political system. Therefore, the diplomats as an agent need to have better psychological or social