



COMMENTARY

Guest workers: Enduring questions and policy controversies

Martin Ruhs 

Migration Policy Centre (MPC), European University Institute, Fiesole, Italy

Correspondence

Martin Ruhs, Migration Policy Centre (MPC), European University Institute, Convento di San Domenico, Via delle Fontanelle 19, 50014 San Domenico di Fiesole (FI), Italy.

Email: martin.ruhs@eui.eu

As Germany marks the 60th anniversary of admitting its first *Gastarbeiter* (guest workers) from Turkey in 1961, it is important to recognize that guest-worker policies have a long and global history that predates Germany's post-war policies (e.g. Hahamovitch, 2003) and that they are, despite various 'obituaries' (e.g. Castles, 1986), still very much alive today. While the terminology and aspects of policy design have evolved over time – from 'guest-worker programmes' (e.g. Martin & Teitelbaum, 2001) to 'temporary labour migration programmes' (e.g. GCIM, 2005), 'circular migration programmes' (e.g. European Migration Network, 2011) and, most recently, 'international skills partnerships' (e.g. Clemens, 2015)¹ – the fundamental idea of admitting migrant workers on a temporary basis to help address perceived labour and skills shortages has become an enduring feature of the migration policy landscape of the world's rich countries (Ruhs, 2013). This is unlikely to change in the near future, given that permanent labour immigration programmes (that provide migrant workers with permanent residence and work permits on arrival) are typically limited to the most highly skilled workers and have declined in importance in countries where they used to play a large role.

Despite their ubiquity, temporary labour migration programmes (TLMPs) have been controversial, especially in liberal democracies, because they involve an inescapable trade-off between global justice and domestic justice (e.g. Bauböck & Ruhs, 2021): On the one hand, TLMPs expand opportunities for workers in poor countries to access labour markets of rich countries and they improve the situation of origin countries through, for example, remittances. At the same time, TLMPs violate the principles of domestic equality because they afford migrant workers more restricted rights than those enjoyed by citizens and long-term residents of the host country. TLMPs thus raise important and highly contested questions about how competing policy objectives and moral principles should be balanced, and how policy design can mitigate some of the inescapable trade-offs involved.

What research is needed to help inform and advance policy debates about these difficult and enduring questions? What, if any, *new* questions about TLMPs have arisen in recent years? In this commentary, I briefly identify three broad areas where I believe research can make an important difference to the future politics and policies on temporary labour migration. I focus on the regulation of temporary labour migration to high-income countries

This is an open access article under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits use, distribution and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited.

© 2021 The Authors. *International Migration* published by John Wiley & Sons Ltd on behalf of International Organization for Migration

where over two thirds of the world's migrant workers are employed (ILO, 2021). My short list of examples is highly selective and subjective; its purpose is to illustrate the important role research can, and in my view should, play in this policy field. Some of the research needs I highlight relate to long-standing policy questions about TLMPs, while others are new issues that have emerged during the Covid-19 pandemic and the recently intensifying debates in many rich countries about how to cooperate with lower-income countries to reduce irregular migration.

A need for (temporary) migrant labour?

A central question in any TLMP is how to link the admission of migrant workers to 'labour shortages' and 'skills needs' of the host country's national labour market. How to assess and respond to shortages is usually a highly contested question, partly because there is no universally accepted definition of a labour or skills shortage, and no single 'optimal' policy response. Whether the best answer to a shortage is more labour immigration, higher wages, greater automation or other alternatives depends, at least in part, on whose interests policy is meant to serve, and how competing interests are evaluated. Research can play an important role in understanding better the nature of labour and skills shortages (e.g. Waldinger & Lichter, 2003), its determinants and how they are influenced by prevailing socio-economic institutions (e.g. Afonso & Devitt, 2016; Ruhs & Anderson, 2010), and the effects of different policy responses (e.g. Migration Advisory Committee, 2020).

The Covid-19 pandemic has raised important new questions about the 'need' for migrant labour. Protecting the provision of essential goods and services, for example health and social care services, quickly became one of the central public policy challenges during the pandemic. Covid-19 has shone a light on the fact that migrants play an important role in the provision of essential services in many high-income countries. As a consequence, migrants doing essential work, including those typically considered lower-skilled workers such as care assistants and food processors, have in many countries been declared 'key workers', whose employment needs to be protected and in some cases even expanded. New research is needed on how the employment of temporary migrant workers affects the resilience of essential services across different institutional contexts (e.g. Anderson et al., 2021), and on whether public attitudes towards migrants in low-paid yet essential jobs are changing (e.g. Dražanová, 2020). It is possible – although certainly not a given – that the pandemic will encourage at least some countries to rethink the impacts of migrant workers and the design of temporary labour immigration policies in a way that moves beyond the conventional shortage approach, and adopts instead a more long-term and strategic outlook.

Towards enhanced mobility rights for temporary migrant workers?

Migrants working under TLMPs in low-skilled jobs can find themselves in highly precarious employment and exploitative situations. One important source of temporary migrants' vulnerability is their restricted labour market mobility. The vast majority of TLMPs issue work permits that limit the employment of the admitted migrant to the employer specified on the permit. Changing employers may be possible after some time, but it usually requires a new work permit application. This 'tying' of the worker to a specific employer can make it difficult or impossible for migrants to escape adverse working conditions unless they are willing and financially able to return home. The challenge is that restricted labour market mobility is also a critical policy element that makes the admission of migrant workers beneficial for host countries. From the host country's perspective, a fundamental rationale of TLMPs is to help reduce labour and skills shortages in specific occupations and/or sectors. If the admitted migrants were free to take up employment in any occupation or sector, TLMPs would not be able to meet one of the fundamental objectives of such programmes for the host country.

A potential policy innovation, which some countries such as Ireland have already implemented, would be to allow migrants to change employers within certain sectors or occupations (i.e. those considered to be in

shortage of labour and skills and thus in 'need' of migrant labour) after a relatively short period of time (e.g. after 6–12 months after admission). From the host country's point of view, it is important to limit migrants' employment to certain sectors or occupations, but not to specific employers, as most TLMPs currently do. We have little systematic evidence, however, on the effects of enhanced labour mobility rights for employer demand for migrant labour, and for migrants' labour market outcomes more generally. While there is a growing body of research on the effects of legalization (i.e. acquiring legal status) and naturalization (i.e. acquiring citizenship) on the outcomes for migrants and host communities (e.g. Fasani, 2015; Peters et al., 2020) there has much more limited work on the impacts of changing labour and welfare rights for temporary migrant workers (with few exceptions such as Naidu et al., 2016). This is an area where more research could provide an important basis for more evidence-based debates about how best to protect the rights and outcomes of temporary migrant workers in different institutional contexts.

A new politics of transnational cooperation?

Most TLMPs around the world are (largely) unilateral policies designed by destination countries. While bilateral agreements on temporary labour migration have increased over time, most of the bargaining power in the design of such agreements has remained with host rather than origin countries. One recent development that *may* be changing the politics of international cooperation on labour migration is many high-income countries' intensifying concern with reducing irregular migration which, it is widely and increasingly accepted, requires the support of lower-income origin and transit countries. Most existing policy cooperations vis-à-vis irregular migration between low- and higher-income countries have fundamentally been based on a 'tit-for-tat exchange of cash for migration control' (Adamson & Tsourapas, 2019, 121). This involves high-income countries providing financial assistance to lower-income transit and origin countries to restrict outflows of migrants.

However, for understandable reasons, many origin and transit countries are often reluctant partners in such policy 'cooperations' and demand not only financial assistance but also expanded legal migration pathways, including new labour migration programmes that enable lower-skilled workers from their countries to access legally the labour markets of rich countries. The expansion of TLMPs, especially for lower-skilled workers, has thus become one of the policy elements increasingly discussed as part of wider cross-country policy cooperation on migration. In other words, the politics of TLMPs has become much more linked to the national and transnational politics of controlling irregular migration. Although this development is not new, it has, arguably, intensified in recent years. This type of 'issue-linkage' raises a series of questions for research, not only about the relationship between regular and irregular labour migration (a question that has been debated for a long time), but also about the potentially changing political feasibility constraints around TLMPs in high-income countries. For example, does the prospect of greater control over irregular labour migration flows raise public support for the legal admission of migrant workers, through expanded TLMPs, in high-income countries? The answer to this and similar questions will not only be relevant to the political dynamics and effectiveness of bilateral migration policy cooperation between high- and lower-income countries, but also to broader debates about the global governance of labour migration.

ORCID

Martin Ruhs  <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-6376-2414>

ENDNOTE

1. The term "international skills partnerships" has been used to describe a variety of training and mobility programmes that support temporary or permanent labour migration.

REFERENCES

- Adamson, F. & Tsourapas, G. (2019) Migration diplomacy in world politics. *International Studies Perspectives*, 20, 113–128.
- Afonso, A. & Devitt, C. (2016) Comparative political economy and international migration. *Socio-Economic Review*, 14(3), 591–613.
- Anderson, B., Poeschel, F. & Ruhs, M. (2021) Rethinking labour migration: Covid-19, essential work, and systemic resilience. *Comparative Migration Studies*, 9(45).
- Bauböck, R. & Ruhs, M. (2021) The elusive triple win: can temporary labour migration dilemmas be settled through fair representation?. Working Paper, EUI RSC, 2021/60, Migration Policy Centre
- Castles, S. (1986) The guest-worker in western Europe: an obituary. *International Migration Review*, 20(4), 761–778.
- Clemens, M. (2015) Global Skill Partnerships: a proposal for technical training in a mobile world. *IZA Journal of Labor Policy*, 4(2).
- Dražanová, L. (2020) Public attitudes to migrant workers: A (lasting) impact of Covid-19? Commentary no. 3 of the MigResHub at the Migration Policy Centre. RSCAS, European University Institute
- European Migration Network (2011) *Temporary and Circular Migration: empirical evidence, current policy practice and future options in EU Member States*. Brussels, Belgium: European Commission.
- Fasani, F. (2015) Understanding the role of immigrants' legal status: Evidence from policy experiments. *Cesifo Economic Studies*, 61(3–4), 722–763.
- Global Commission on International Migration (GCIM). (2005) *Migration in an Interconnected World: New Directions for Action*. Geneva: GCIM.
- Hahamovitch, C. (2003) Creating perfect immigrants: guestworkers of the world in historical perspective. *Labor History*, 44(1), 69–94.
- ILO (2021) *ILO Global Estimates on International Migrant Workers – Results and Methodology*. Geneva: ILO.
- Martin, P. & Teitelbaum, M. (2001) The Mirage of Mexican guest workers. *Foreign Affairs*, 80(6), 117–131.
- Migration Advisory Committee. (2020) *A points-based system and salary thresholds for immigration*. London: UK Home Office.
- Naidu, S., Nyarko, Y. & Wang, S.-Y. (2016) Monopsony in migrant labor markets: evidence from the United Arab Emirates. *Journal of Political Economy*, 124(6), 1735–1792.
- Peters, F., Schmeets, H. & Vink, M. (2020) Naturalisation and immigrant earnings: why and to whom citizenship matters. *European Journal of Population*, 36, 511–545.
- Ruhs, M. (2013) *The price of rights. Regulating international labor migration*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Ruhs, M. & Anderson, B. (2010) *Who needs migrant workers? Labour shortages, immigration, and public policy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Waldinger, R. & Lichter, M.I. (2003) *How the other half works: immigration and the social organisation of labour*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

How to cite this article: Ruhs, M. (2021) Guest workers: Enduring questions and policy controversies. *International Migration*, 59, 238–241. <https://doi.org/10.1111/imig.12938>