



## ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL ASPECTS OF BENGKALIS INTERNATIONAL SEAPORT: INDONESIA-MALAYSIA MIGRATION FOR ASEAN ECONOMIC CONNECTIVITY

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### *Abstrak*

*Kesejahteraan menjadi tujuan masyarakat dunia, termasuk ASEAN. Integrasi ekonomi regional bisa dicapai melalui konektivitas laut mengingat lokasi geografi antara Bengkalis, Indonesia dengan Malaysia (Muar, Malaka, Kuala Lumpur). Bandar Sri Setia Raja dapat mengurangi biaya transport dan menyediakan pelayanan yang lebih efisien. Konektivitas pelabuhan memengaruhi kehidupan sosial dan ekonomi penduduk Bengkalis. Riset membahas secara mendalam peranan penting pelabuhan untuk kegiatan sosial dan ekonomi imigran, tantangan-tantangan, dan prospeknya. Metodologi yang digunakan adalah campuran kuantitatif dan kualitatif tentang kegiatan 30 migran pulang balik di perbatasan Malaysia-Indonesia untuk bekerja, rekreasi, dan pergi berobat. Pengalaman, tantangan, dan harapan para migran data lengkapnya didapatkan melalui wawancara mendalam. Hasil studi menunjukkan bahwa pelabuhan mampu menciptakan kemajuan masyarakat ekonomi ASEAN dan memberikan keuntungan sosial. Penduduk Bengkalis bisa menghemat uang, waktu, dan energi ketika pergi ke Malaysia untuk bekerja, berobat, dan bisnis kecil-kecilan. Hambatan-hambatan konektivitas seperti aturan-aturan yang ketat terhadap bawaan barang perlu ditinjau kembali oleh kedua negara.*

**Kata Kunci:** ASEAN; aspek ekonomi dan sosial; Bandar Sri Setia Raja; Bengkalis, migrasi; pelabuhan laut

### **Abstract**

Prosperity is the goal of the world community, including ASEAN. Regional economic integration can be achieved through sea connectivity given the geographic location between Bengkalis, Indonesia and Malaysia (Muar, Malacca, Kuala Lumpur). Bandar Sri Setia Raja can reduce transportation costs and provide more efficient services. Port connectivity affects the social and economic lives of Bengkalis residents. The research takes an in-depth look at the port's importance for immigrants' social and economic activities, challenges, and prospects. The methodology used was a mix of quantitative and qualitative on the activities of 30 return migrants at the Malaysia-Indonesia border for work, recreation and medical treatment. The migrants' experiences, challenges and expectations were fully captured through in-depth interviews. The study results show that the port is able to create progress in the ASEAN economic community and provide social benefits. Bengkalis residents can save money, time and energy when traveling to Malaysia for work, medical treatment and small businesses. Connectivity barriers such as strict rules on goods should be reviewed by both countries.

**Keywords:** ASEAN; Bandar Sri Setia Raja; Bengkalis; economic and social aspects, migration, seaport

## Introduction

The issue of economic connectivity among countries in the same region for better relations and prosperity is prevalent. This trend inspires a majority of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN)'s stakeholders. Several decisions and measures have been conducted to accomplish connectivity for wealth and peace among the country members. Sharing land and sea borders between Indonesia and Malaysia lie in several places, particularly Bengkalis (Indonesia)–(Muar), Malaysia. The Sea Highway program is very important in managing people and goods transportation in archipelago countries like Indonesia. Sea toll/highway has great benefits to support Indonesia's economy as a maritime nation. Literature and evidence showed the United States first developed sea tolls, or they call it a marine highway system many years ago. Concepts of the sea highway and implementation suffer from a conflict of interests and goodwill in Indonesia (Manti, 2019).

Bengkalis Island functions as a bridge interconnecting Indonesia and Malaysia territories for economic, personal, and social interdependence. Issues of the authorities of Regional Government Autonomy, costly investment, and many interest interventions hampered infrastructure development for seaports. The sea highway in Bengkalis Island is interconnected between Indonesia and several ASEAN countries through Muar. Bengkalis Island is a medium of interaction that enjoins the natural bridge of Nusantara and its neighbors. Bandar Sri Setia Raja in Bengkalis serves as a bridge interconnecting and uniting the various lands and people of the Malay. Malaysia often states that Indonesia is his big brother. The Strait of Malacca can be a fence, divider, and even a connector between Indonesia and Malaysia. Indonesia is well-known for *Orang Laut* (Sea People)'s inheritance. It is said *nenek moyangku orang pelaut* (my ancestors were sea voyagers). *Orang Laut* until the nineteenth century dominated much of the maritime zone surrounding the Straits of Melaka, including parts of the east Sumatran coast and the Islands of the Riau-Lingga and Pulau Tujuh groups responsible for the carrying trade across the region and beyond (Sather, 1999). Malacca's strategy resulted in competition for hegemony over the straits among Portuguese and local powers i.e., Malay Johor-Riau. At that time the straits were fragmented into three competing zones of influence: Aceh in the north. Portuguese Melaka in the center, and Johor-Riau in the south. The latest in the present day becomes Johor, Riau or Bintan, Klang, Muar, Batu Pahat, Singapore, Pulau

Tinggi off the east coast of the peninsula to the Karimun islands, Bulang, Lingga, and Bungaran islands, and territories on Sumatra, that of Bengkalis, Kampar, and Siak (Gin, 2022).

History tells us that Bengkalis and Malaysia have close relationships and interactions due to their geographical location and brotherhood. Mobility between the two entities tends to be more intensive. The closing of Bengkalis Seaports as well in Malaysia sites during the pandemic for about 18 months affected the activities of local residents for recreation, family visits, work, and visits for treatments. Bengkalis Island can be a principal maritime route for East-West trade and the social-cultural 'bridge' across the Malay world. The study explored the disadvantages and advantages of Bandar Sri Setia Raja closing during the pandemic and opening for operation on June 28, 2022. The economic and social aspect of Bengkalis residents of the availability of local seaports was discussed rigorously.

The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) established in 1967 declared its broad seven objectives: to accelerate the economic growth, social progress, and cultural development in the region as well as to promote active collaboration and mutual assistance in the economic, social, cultural, technical, and administrative spheres (ASEAN, 2011). Histories of conflicts between Malaysia and Indonesia were long and bitter, especially when Indonesia took Malaysia to the International Court of Justice over its claim to two islands, Sipadan and Ligitan, and lost. Border crossing is also a big issue between the two nation-states (Strangio, 2023). Neighboring countries are more likely to trade, have citizens from one go to the other, and otherwise interact. This can lead to peaceful coexistence, or it can generate disputes and disagreements. Indonesian President Joko Widodo and Malaysian Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim have signed two landmark treaties on the delimitation of the nation's territorial seas in parts of the Straits of Malacca. Both parties also signed pacts that included plans to improve border crossings, strengthen border trade, and promote investment. Protection of the bulk of over two million Indonesian workers in Malaysia in plantations, industries, and as maids was agreed by the authorities (AP, 2023).

Bilateral agreement between Indonesia needs to be strengthened considering illegal activities often occur on a long sea border. The bulk of over two million Indonesian workers, particularly the illegal ones, continues to be a source of bilateral friction for Malaysia-Indonesia relations. The undocumented migration flow of Indonesians into Malaysia is arguably the second largest flow of illegal immigrants after the movements across the USA-Mexico border (Liow, 2003). Heavy labor palm oil plantation industries, unemployment, and relatively higher wages were major pull factors (Abdullah, 1993). Location proximity that only takes 1 hour 45 minutes by ferry, shares much in terms of language, culture, and even ethnicity would be the obvious choice. Bengkalis, Indonesia provides one of the gates to go working in plantations, constructions, and domestic service sectors in Malaysia legally and illegally. The Malaysian Government's less commitment to putting in place a concrete and clearly defined policy on migrant labor has hampered close monitoring and aggravated the negative impact of the Indonesian migrant labor problem on bilateral relations. Malaysia Institute of Economic Research (MIER) revealed that Indonesians accounted for up to 70 percent of construction workers, and 80 percent of these Indonesians were undocumented (Migration News, 2002).

Indonesia and Malaysia hold a long-held belief that they share a “special relationship” as a fellow ASEAN member and as a society that shares cultural and religious traits. Collaboration and mutual assistance for economic development are on the agenda for the two neighboring countries. Citizens of ASEAN members are already exempted from having to apply for visas to visit other member states, similar to the European Union. Malaysia and Singapore offer a visa-free stay of up to 30 days for ASEAN residents. Visa-free stay for up to 30 days in Malaysia is misused by illegal workers. Evidence showed that visa-free stays for up to 30 days and tourist visas have been scammed by holders and criminals. Tourist visas and visa-free stays up to 30 days in any country cannot be and will not be recognized as work visas or permits in any country. Scammers deceive tourist visa holders that the visa will be recognized as work visas upon arrival in the country (Newswire, 2022). Malaysian laws punish scammers, illegal workers, and employers who hire illegal ones. Under the proposed Recruitment of Foreign Workers Act, employers could be fined up to RM 50,000 for each illegal worker employed, imprisoned for five years, or both. Scammers (*cukong*) are punishable under

the law with a prison term of not more than 5 years and a fine of not more than Rs. 200,000.

Bengkalis Island is the entry and exit of cross-border trade with neighboring countries Malaysia through the Seaport of Bandar Sri Setia Raja (BSSR) located in Selat Baru, Bantan. Prihartono (2015) claimed that ports have an important transportation infrastructure for archipelago countries like Indonesia that are surrounded by the sea (waters). For international- scale service functions, the existence of transportation infrastructure at the BSSR Seaport provides economic and social advantages. Located at the estuary of Liong River and Malacca straits enables Bengkalis Island to build up closer connectivity through cross-border trade. Closing of Sri Setia Raja Seaport in 2020 to June 28, 2022, disadvantaged local residents both in Bengkalis Indonesia, and Malaysia for family gatherings, working, medical tourism, and doing business (Frislidia, 2022). Social and economic disruptions of the closing of Bengkalis international seaports during covid-19 were elaborated for achieving better social and economic lives of peoples living in the border areas.

Three fundamental factors to implementing connectivity are infrastructure connectivity for people, goods, and services movement, institutional connectivity to coordinate processes among various task forces of the governmental institutions from each member state, and people connectivity for all social interactions. Seaports will facilitate people mobility among ASEAN nations, particularly Indonesia-Malaysia bordering the Malacca Strait. Tourism involves social, behavioral, economic, cultural, and environmental consideration that requires good service quality by decent transportation (Ramphal & Nicolaidis, 2014). Contemporary human activities through tourism today are regular activities for a majority of communities leading to fundamental changes in the economy, culture, and tradition. Sri Setia Raja seaport's closing during the pandemic time discourages Indonesia-Malaysia connectivity for economic development and social wealth. The definition of connectivity currently refers to building common economic efforts by two or more countries on the basis of geographic proximity. Malaysia is developing a medical tourism industry and makes Indonesia one of the tourist targets



that are expected to bring foreign exchange to the country. Data shows that Indonesians are the largest contributor of tourists visiting Malaysia for treatment (Damayanti, Dida, Hidayat, 2021). The cheapest and fastest way from Bengkalis Island to Malacca is taking a direct ferry departing from Bengkalis and arriving at Jeti Shahbandar, Malaka. Services depart once daily and operate Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday. The journey takes approximately 3 hours. The cheapest way to get from Pulau Bengkalis to Kuala Lumpur is by ferry and bus which costs 680,000 IDR-720,000 IDR and takes 6 hours 36 minutes (Rome2Rio, 2023). The operation of Bengkalis Sri Setia Raja facilitates residents' movement for finding jobs, medical recreation, family visits, and micro and small business developments. Elaboration of the advantages of international seaport for people living in the border countries need to be researched to avoid nationality erosion by Indonesians.

### **Methodology**

Data was collected in July-August 2023 on Bengkalis Island. The individuals approached to participate in this study included medical tourists to Malacca, Malaysia, local residents' visitors to families living in Malaysia for recreation or small trade as well as illegal workers finding jobs in construction, gardener assistants, or domestic helpers. Because of the small sample size, since only a total of 15 participants were interviewed, the study can at most be considered exploratory. Prior to the interview, the questionnaire as well as a letter detailing the purpose of the research were sent out via email or WhatsApp to the participants. Before the interviews took place, informants were reminded of the purpose of the research and the data being gathered. It was planned that qualitative research would be adopted since it would shed light on the real-world experiences of the participants (Gobo, 2008; Roller & Lavrakas, 2015) as well as how they would see the world (McCracken, 1988). Participant interactions and experiences are part of what informs our worldview.

In reaching out to low-educated illegal workers, the researchers contacted a female alumnus to be the informant and enumerator since she grew up there. The informant contacted her families, friends, and neighbors who have worked illegally in Malaysia and did in-depth interviews. In-depth interviews gathered data about going to Malaysia for any reason. Visiting the Bandar Sri Setia Raja and meeting with several persons

experiencing being in Malaysia enables data collection for the importance of seaport facilities and infrastructures as well as their complaints and suggestions regarding the regulations and procedures.

The team also interviewed five female tourists and travelers to Kuala Lumpur and Jakarta. The goal was to understand their reasons for choosing ferry transportation from Bengkalis Island to Jakarta or Kuala Lumpur. Face-to-face interviews with local administrative staff in the Indonesian Department of Transportation. Interviews were conducted with the purpose of understanding the number of passengers using the ferry at Sri Setia Raja seaport and the challenges. The informants and enumerators provided detailed data on the cost, challenges, and personal experiences of the local/Bengkalis overseas travelers.

All interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia even in *Bahasa Jawa* (Javanese) since several participants communicate in this language in their daily lives; interviews were conducted in Bahasa Indonesia and occasionally in *Bahasa Jawa* (Javanese), as this is the daily language of many participants. The interviews were audio-taped, transcribed, and translated into English. Data validity was gained by the team sending the transcriptions to the participants for checking. The participants were informed that their identity would be confidential, although their statements during the interview, if cited, would be presented in publications using pseudonyms.

Achieving better lives economically and socially through migration is natural. Convenience from cultural bonding and locations will be the main reason. Indonesian citizens in Bengkalis prefer to go to Malaysia since more than half of the Malays in Malaysia have ancestry from various ethnic groups in Indonesia. Indonesian passport holders can stay in Malaysia for a short period of time (for 30 days). Visa-free stay up to 30 days to ASEAN countries, availability of Bandar Sri Setia Raja's seaport, and wages four to six times as much money in Malaysia than at home. Research questions elaborated how the advantages of economic and social aspects of migrating to Malaysia utilizing Bandar Sri Setia Raja for non- authorized workers, medical treatment seekers, and tourists

as well as why the goal and targets of ASEAN connectivity between Indonesia-Malaysia grew under expectation.

### ***Bandar Sri Setia Raja for Indonesia-Malaysia Connectivity***

Bengkalis Island functions for maritime connectivity between Indonesia and Malaysia for economic, social, and cultural reasons. Many people of Bengkalis travel to Muar, Malacca, and Kuala Lumpur for various reasons such as finding jobs, medical treatment, transit and traveling, and family reunions. The most popular reason for traveling to Malacca is to get a medical examination (medical treatment) due to some considerations such as better customer service, cheaper cost, and shorter distance. The closing of Sri Setia Raja seaport because of the Covid-19 pandemic hampered low-level job seekers working in palm oil plantations or construction, be gardeners, or domestic workers in Malaysia.

**Table 1: Reasons to take the Ferry from Bengkalis to Malaysia**

No.	Reasons	Number of people
1.	Working in palm oil plantations	5
2.	Working for constructions	7
3.	Finding odd jobs	4
4.	Domestic workers	2
5.	Family reunions	10
6.	Medical treatment	6
7.	Transit/traveling in Kuala Lumpur	2
8.	Study	1

Ideally, people-to-people connectivity which supports and revives the economic corridor between the countries is reciprocal, which means the number of Indonesians attending Malaysia balances with Malaysian to Indonesia. History showed that geographic proximity between Indonesians and Malaysians resulted in intermarriage, so they have family relationships as well as cultural, ethnic, and language similarities. Many Bengkalis residents could have family reunions while working low-level jobs at palm oil plantations, being gardeners, or serving domestic workers. Some of the causes of illegal migration are land fragmentation, poverty, drought, the need to join friends and relatives, income generation, the search for jobs, and urban amenities. The trend of migration to



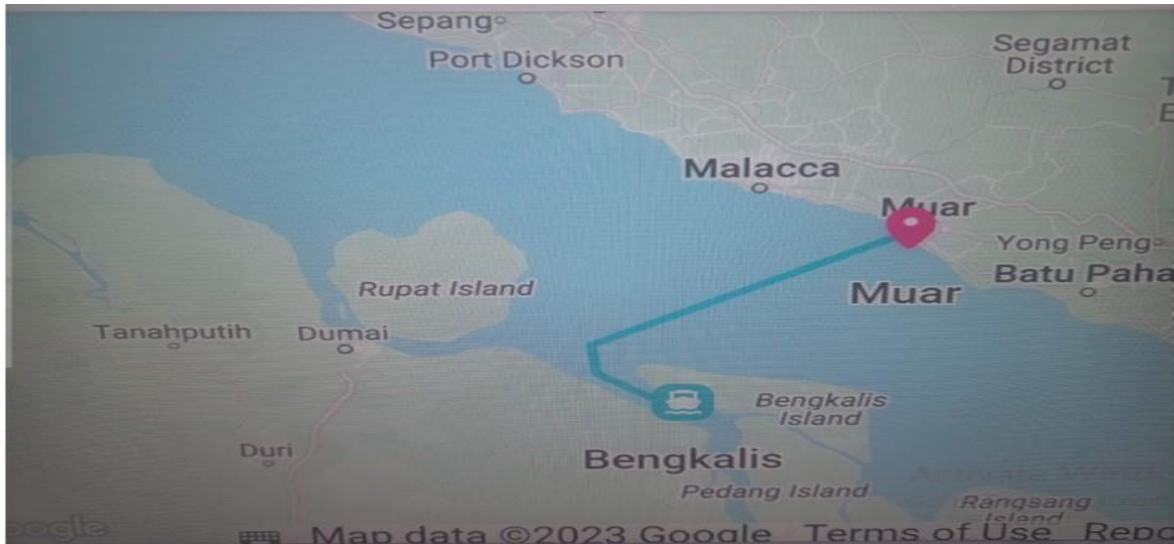
Malaysia for better income generation accessing sea borders in Riau areas is prevalent for Indonesians. Around 2.7 million migrant workers in Malaysia, only 1.6 million went through regular channels.

Low-economic Bengkalis residents are more likely to misuse visa-free stay for up to 30 days in Malaysia to work low-level jobs illegally. Cheaper and faster transportation from Bengkalis to Malaysia areas such as Muar, Malacca, and Kuala Lumpur as well as family or friend connections encouraged local residents to be unauthorized workers. Economic issues for finding decent and regular jobs as well as reuniting with families were the main reasons for migrating to Malaysia legally and illegally. Experiences of Bengkalis residents who work low-level jobs illegally in Malaysia shared:

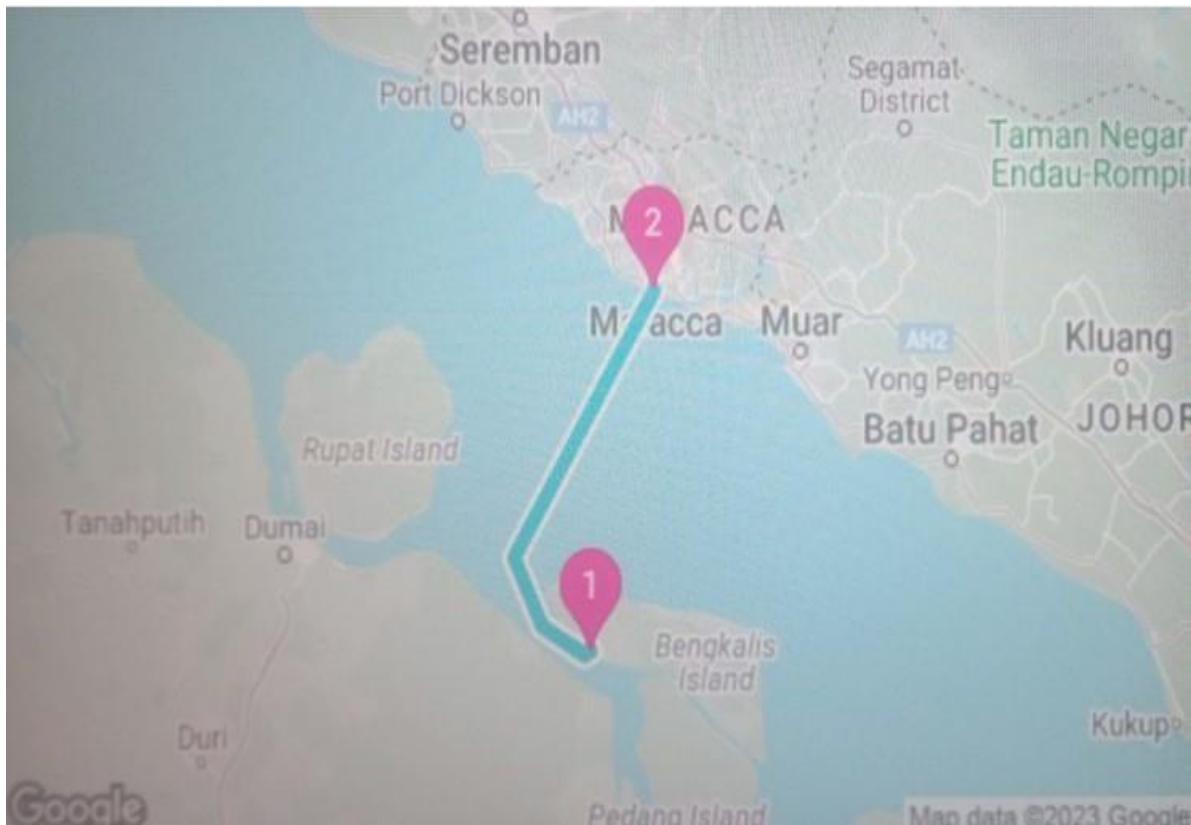
Finding jobs in Malaysia is lucrative, even though I can just work a maximum of 25 days to avoid a visa-free stay of up to 30 days. Overstay violation means problems to enter Malaysia for several reasons. By doing that my chance to work legally and illegally in Malaysia will be closed. I am not able to visit my family and friends in Malaysia for reunions or parties. I know the risks of working illegally as several of my friends had it. Searching for illegal persons by police officers forced me to hide in dark places. However, a net income of 3,000,000-4,000,000 IDR for being gardeners, working at palm oil plantations, or serving domestic workers is more lucrative and promising than in Bengkalis. My friends who are working in construction (*tukang bangunan*) even have a net income of around 7,000,000 IDR for less day work. Bengkalis seaport has helped me to go to Malaysia for work and to visit friends and families cheaply and fast.

The geographic proximity between Bengkalis-Muar, Bengkalis-Malacca, and Bengkalis-Kuala Lumpur for connectivity affects economic, social, and cultural activities. Cost and time became the main considerations for utilizing seaport to Malaysia as shown in the map and ferry route.

**Map 1: Bengkalis-Muar Ferry Route**



**Map 2: Bengkalis-Malacca Ferry route**



Map 3: Bengkalis-Kuala Lumpur Ferry route

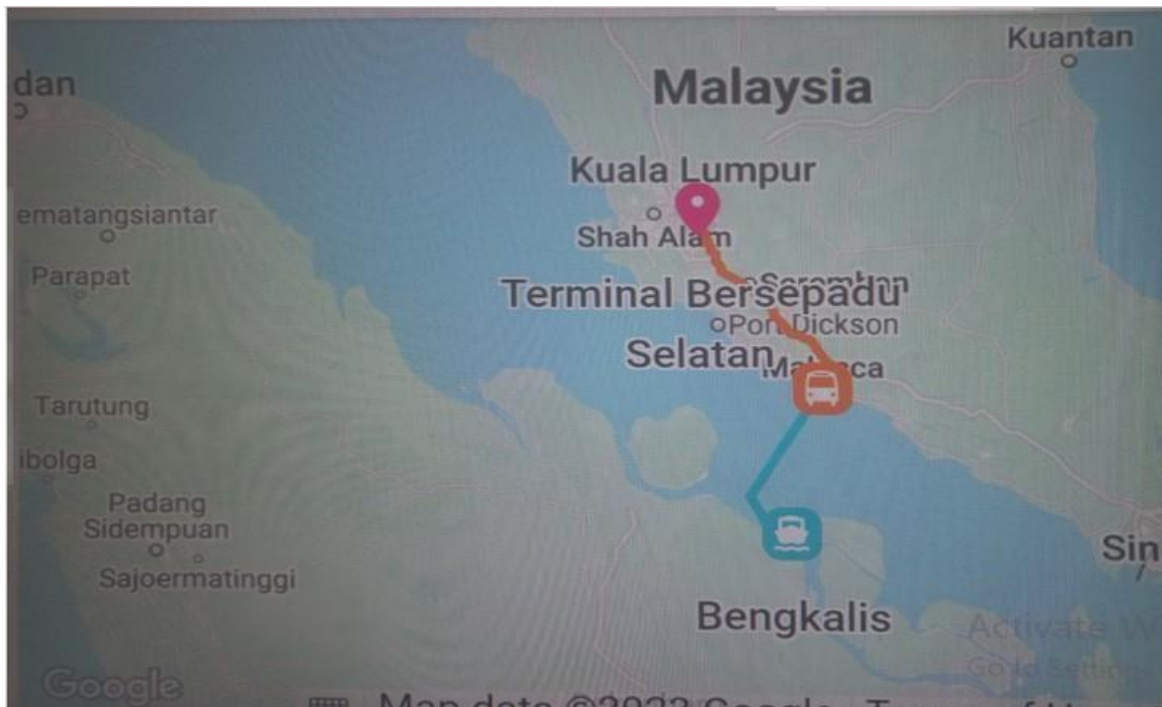


Table 2: Price and Time Comparison from Bengkalis to Muar, Malacca, and Kuala Lumpur

	to	Muar	Malacca	Kuala Lumpur
<b>Bengkalis</b>	Price IDR	329,615 IDR one way or 650,000 IDR to and from	650,000 IDR one way	680,000-720,000 IDR (ferry and bus) one way
	Time	1 hour 45 minutes	3 hours	6 hours 36 minutes

Bengkalis residents had an agenda to Jakarta, preferring to take the ferry from Bengkalis to Muar connected by bus to Kuala Lumpur and had a direct international flight from Kuala Lumpur to Jakarta that snacks were provided. My two participants stated that travelers prefer to take the ferry from Bengkalis continuing with the bus to Kuala Lumpur then fly to Jakarta. This option is more convenient in terms of on-time schedule since the ferry is rarely late and international flights maintain their good service.

Table 3: Comparison of Time and Cost Departing from Bengkalis to Jakarta

Options	Time	Cost
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Bengkalis-Muar (ferry)-Kuala Lumpur (bus)- Jakarta (international flight)	6 hours 45 minutes (ferry and bus to Kuala Lumpur) + 1 hour (international flight)	680,000-720,000 IDR + 886,961 IDR (meal provided)
Bengkalis-Pekanbaru (travel)- Jakarta (domestic flight)	8 hours (if the ferry is on schedule) + 1 hour 46 minutes	200,000 IDR + 1,350,000 IDR (meal is not provided)

Ships crossing from Bengkalis-Muar (Malaysia) are scheduled on Monday, Wednesday, Friday, and Sunday for departure, and from Bengkalis-Malacca (Malaysia) on Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday, and Sunday each of which is only for one trip journey. The trip can be completed within only 1 hour 45 minutes to Muar and 3 hours to Malacca to benefit connectivity for local people. The crossing schedule that operates four times a week from Sri Setia Raja seaport of departure signifies the interest of people in crossing the sea. Many Indonesians trust to have medical checks and treatment in Malacca. Good transportation infrastructure in Bengkalis means a lot.

Complaints coming from Bengkalis residents traveling back Bengkalis-Malaysia are food, beverage, snack, and produce baggage limitations. Bringing traditional or local products such as a sweet snack of processed durian (*lempuk durian*), sticky rice crackers, *belinjo* nuts, and any other homemade snacks is absolutely limited and subject to confiscation. Excessive food baggage/luggage will be seized by seaport authorities. In several cases, passengers could get their stuff by bribing. Similarly, passengers arriving in Bengkalis from Malaysia also get weight baggage and luggage restrictions for foods and beverages made in Malaysia. Clearance of International Cross-border Trade practices in Bengkalis does not accommodate local people. According to Chapter 2 of the General Annex to the Revised Kyoto Convention, clearance is defined as the accomplishment of the Customs formalities necessary to allow goods to enter home use, to be exported, or to be placed under another Customs procedure.

### ***ASEAN Connectivity Master Plan 2025 and the Practices***

Peace is a need and goal of every nation. Regional integration could be a way to achieve it since regions tend to be more homogenous, so disputes are easier to handle locally (Haas, 1968). One vision, one identity, and one community launched by ASEAN has been written in the Master Plan on ASEAN Connectivity 2025. ASEAN connectivity would continue to benefit all its members' people-to-people linkage by promoting greater competitiveness, prosperity, inclusiveness, and a sense of community (ASEAN

Secretariat, 2016). Indonesia and Malaysia are strategic neighbors bordering lands and waters. Both neighboring countries play ASEAN's biggest economies and thus a close, stronger relationship between the two nations would not only be beneficial for both nations but would boost the region's economic strength overall (Kurniawan, 2023). Bengkalis is located in the triangle of economic growth of Indonesia- Malaysia Singapore (IMS-SG) and the economic growth area of Indonesia Malaysia - Thailand (IMT - GT) (Habibah et al., 2013). The Indonesia-Malaysia-Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT- GT) physical connectivity project aims to accelerate economic and social transformation in less developed provinces through seaports and does not include Bengkalis.

The Malaysia-Indonesia relationship is peculiar. Cultural history showed a blood ties relationship as Malay. However, social, economic, and even political conflicts are still being befallen. Bengkalis Island connects to other areas of Riau Province that can benefit economic activity to increase the standard of living of the people for the local community economically, socially, and culturally. This regency becomes one of the areas crossing border ports to break through the border between countries of Indonesia and Malaysia. The Indonesian Immigration Department revoked the closing of Bandar Sri Setia Raja during the pandemic Covid-19 on July 22, 2022. The beginning of the operation only allowed Indonesians to visit Malaysia, not vice versa. Regulation restricted Malaysians who traveled to Indonesia only access from Batam and Dumai not directly from Port Dickson, Muar, and Malacca to Bandar Sri Setia Raja, Bengkalis finally granted. Free visas between nations to boost tourism launched (Yaman, 2022) sometimes are abused.

Sea transportation is essential for Indonesia as an archipelago. It has both economic and social aspects. The Indonesian government is obligated to provide basic needs on transportation for locational accessibility and personal accessibility (Kementerian Perhubungan Direktorat Jenderal Perhubungan Laut, 2020). Ports are the main industrial and commercial tools for the economic and social development of countries. The orientations are customer satisfaction and service quality. The port is an institution with or without a legal personality, responsible for exercising public works, police, or other

powers in the geographical and legal space. Bandar Sri Setia Raja, Bengkalis is very close to Malaysia, so the cost is affordable, and it becomes the best place for departure and arrival by both Malaysian and Indonesian travelers for tourism, visiting, or healing. One of the big issues is that many migrants tricked the officers by pretending to be travelers to Malaysia. After arriving at the destination country, they instead worked without official documents issued by the Government of Indonesia (VOI, 2023).

Malaysia ranks well for its quality of life, affordable living, and digital connectivity. Juwai IQI ranked Malaysia in the top 10 as the most popular destination for the best place to live for expats due to being a multilingual country, so visitors from all over the world can feel comfortable here (Ariffin, 2023). People from other parts of the world see that life here is special and want to visit, spend money, retire, and work. Geographic proximity, family roots, cultural bonding, and economic advantages interest Bengkalis residents in going to Malaysia. Mutual benefits occurred since Indonesia suffers from chronic unemployment and low wages, Malaysia's economy depends on foreign workers that make up around 15 to 25 percent of the total labor force (Juliawan, 2028). Cooperation between the two countries by facilitating the movement of the workers worsened the case of the Indonesian workers' deportation from Malaysia for several reasons.

In Southeast Asia Malaysia is one of the friendly migrants' countries and the largest number of worker migrants authorizedly and unauthorizedly are Indonesians (Ministry of Foreign Affairs/MOFO, 2020). Around 1.1 million are irregular migrant workers who often work in very poor conditions in the domestic, construction, and agricultural sectors. Millions of Indonesian migrant workers in Malaysia have contributed to the livelihood, development, and the prosperity in Malaysia and Indonesia. Unfortunately, the mismanagement put them at the risk of labor rights' violations and trafficking.

The ambivalence between Malaysian Human Resources and other related ministries recognizes the importance of foreign labor to the economy and the Ministry of Home Affairs concerning the security issues for surveillance and controlling the number of migrants faced by Malaysia. Law no. 39 of 2004 on the Protection and Placement of the Indonesian workers and its subsequent replacement Law no. 19 of 2017 facilitates Migrant workers as "*pahlawan devisa*" or "heroes of foreign exchange."



Labor migration policies are a case in point framing the movement of people in terms of national interests including economic growth and border control (Linguist and Xiang, 2018). Ignoring the social and political dimensions of labor migration, especially social networks' context driving migration opportunities should be addressed. The Indonesia-Malaysia- Thailand Growth Triangle (IMT-GT) physical connectivity project aims to accelerate economic and social transformation but was not implemented well. Employment prospects in Malaysia, a relaxed attitude to irregularity among many state officials on both sides of borders, and family relationships motivated Indonesians to cross the border even without proper documents. Low-cost transportation, as well as income and employment gaps between the two neighboring countries and the proximity of location, bring the cross-border movement of people legally and illegally. The consulate also reminds Indonesian citizens intending to enter or work in Malaysian territory to always use official channels and comply with applicable laws to avoid legal actions by authorities (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2023). Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on the Placement and Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers in the Domestic Sector in Malaysia signed in 2022. However, both Indonesia and Malaysia are still faced with the implementation and operationalization.

## **Conclusion**

Bengkalis Island located on the east coast of Sumatra and Peninsular Malaysia has become an important gateway for the connectivity to the Malacca Strait. It facilitates local residents' movement for finding jobs, medical recreation, family visits, and micro and small business developments. Both Indonesia and Malaysia take advantage of economic and social aspects. Cheaper and faster mobility between the two nations for doing business, traveling, family reunions, and medical treatment is established as ASEAN commitments and goals. Unfortunately, this maritime connectivity advantage is more favorable to the Malaysian side. More Indonesians visit Malaysia for traveling and medical examination and treatment. Malaysia receives much foreign exchange from its medical tourism which attracts many Indonesians to have it in Malacca and Penang. From

the Indonesian side, Bengkalis maritime connectivity facilitates local people to work legally and illegally and visit and reunite with families and friends.

Advantage imbalance from Sri Setia Raja seaport activities should be addressed by both Indonesian and Malaysian authorities so a long-held belief that they share a “special relationship” as fellow ASEAN members and as a society that shares cultural and religious traits could be maintained and established. Economic connectivity should bring prosperity to the two neighboring countries that suffer from several political tensions and conflicts. Special regulations and measures need to be discussed for better economic development and social welfare.

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