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**“My future depends on how many fruit bunches I can harvest”. Migrant workers in the palm oil sector in the wake of a Malaysian Bioeconomy**

By Janina Puder

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## **“My future depends on how many fruit bunches I can harvest” . Migrant workers in the palm oil sector in the wake of a Malaysian Bio- economy**

### **Abstract**

Malaysia is one of the few countries worldwide, which launched a comprehensive national Bioeconomy strategy. The state program involves far-reaching plans to transform the national economy into a bio-based, knowledge-driven growth model. These efforts are interlinked with the long-term goal to develop Malaysia into a high-income country and by that, significantly improve the working opportunities and conditions of workers especially from rural areas. The targeted transformations depend particularly on the economic success and further development of the palm oil sector. The sector is characterized by a high share of low-skilled migrant workers performing dirty, dangerous, and degrading tasks, while higher paid jobs with better working conditions are mostly reserved for Malaysian citizens.

In dealing with the societal processes that accompany the Malaysian plans to establish a Bioeconomy, it is of special interest from a socio-economic stance to understand which occupational groups in the palm oil sector are addressed and which are excluded when we examine the progress in the advancement of living and working conditions in the country. The present paper argues that migrant plantation and mill workers employed in the Malaysian palm oil sector are structurally excluded from the national goal of enhancing the living and working conditions of the population by transforming into a Bioeconomy. It is assumed that this exclusion intersects with a specific precarity caused by the socio-economic status of low-skilled migrant workers. Furthermore, it is to discuss in what way certain forms of social exclusion in the Southeast Asian Oil Palm Complex are re-/produced transnationally.

### **Biographical Note**

Janina Puder is a trained sociologist and researcher in the Junior Research Group “Bioeconomy and Inequalities. Transnational Entanglements and Interdependencies in the Bioenergy Sector” funded by the German Federal Ministry of Education and Research (BMBF) at the Friedrich Schiller University Jena, Germany. In her PhD project she observes transnational rural labor conditions in the context of the emerging Bioeconomy in Malaysia exemplified by the case of migratory labor.

**Keywords:** Bioeconomy, palm oil, working conditions, social mobility, labor migration

Janina Puder

## **„Meine Zukunft hängt davon ab, wie viele Früchte ich ernten kann“. Arbeitsmigrant\_innen im Palmöl-Sektor im Zuge einer entstehenden Bioökonomie in Malaysia**

### **Abstract**

Malaysia gehört weltweit zu den wenigen Ländern, die eine umfassende Bioökonomie-Strategie verabschiedet haben. Im Rahmen dessen forciert der Staat die weitreichende Transformation der Wirtschaft, die zukünftig auf einem bio- und wissensbasierten Wachstumsmodell beruhen soll. Damit verbunden ist das Ziel Malaysias zur sogenannten Ländergruppe mit hohem Einkommen aufzusteigen. Der Staat strebt in diesem Kontext eine deutliche Verbesserung der Beschäftigungsmöglichkeiten und Arbeitsbedingungen in ländlichen Regionen an. Die anvisierten Transformationen hängen dabei besonders von dem ökonomischen Erfolg und Ausbau des Palmöl-Sektors ab. Der Sektor ist durch einen hohen Anteil an niedrig-qualifizierten Arbeitsmigrant\_innen gekennzeichnet, die in der Regel für sogenannte *dirty, dangerous* und *degrading* Tätigkeiten eingesetzt werden. Höher bezahlte Jobs mit besseren Arbeitsbedingungen sind hingegen fast ausschließlich malaysischen Staatsbürger\_innen vorbehalten. In Konzentration auf die sozialen Prozesse, die mit dem malaysischen Programm einhergehen, ist es von besonderem Interesse zu verstehen, welche Beschäftigungsgruppen im Palmöl-Sektor von den Plänen zur Verbesserung der Arbeits- und Lebensbedingungen durch die Transformation hin zu einer Bioökonomie berücksichtigt und welche davon ausgeschlossen sind. Das vorliegende Working Paper legt dar, inwiefern migrantische Palmölplantagen- und Mühlenarbeiter\_innen strukturell von den sozio-ökonomischen Plänen des malaysischen Bioökonomie-Programms exkludiert werden. Es wird davon ausgegangen, dass diese Exklusion mit einer spezifischen Prekarität einhergeht, die durch den sozio-ökonomischen Status niedrig-qualifizierter Arbeitsmigrant\_innen in Malaysia bedingt wird. Zudem stellt sich die Frage, inwiefern spezifische Formen sozialer Exklusion im sogenannten *Southeast Asian Oil Palm Complex* transnational re/produziert werden.

### **Kurzbiographie**

Janina Puder ist Soziologin und wissenschaftliche Mitarbeiterin in der BMBF-Nachwuchsgruppe „Bioökonomie und soziale Ungleichheiten“. In ihrer Dissertation beschäftigt sie sich mit transnationalen ländlichen Arbeitsverhältnissen im Kontext der entstehenden Bioökonomie in Malaysia am Beispiel der Wanderarbeiter\_innen.

**Schlagworte:** Bioökonomie, Palmöl, Arbeitsbedingungen, soziale Mobilität, Arbeitsmigration

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## 1 Introduction

With the implementation of the *Bioeconomy Transformation Programme* (BTP) in 2012, Malaysia joined countries such as Germany, South Africa and the USA dedicated to establish Bioeconomy as a way to create a holistic sustainable, green growth model. The programs' main economic targets include the promotion of downstream-activities especially in the field of biotechnology and processing, the more efficient valorization and use of existing biomass, the industrial modernization of the agricultural sector as well as a significant upscale of investments in research and development (cf. BiotechCorp/MOSTI 2013). In realizing these ambitious goals defined by the government, Malaysia heavily depends on the performance and the industrial upgrading of the palm oil sector. Malaysia is, after Indonesia, the second largest producer of palm oil worldwide (cf. USDA 2018) and the financially strongest companies in the sector on a regional scale are mostly Malaysian (cf. Hai 2013: 20; Pye 2008: 435). In the fourth quarter of 2017 agriculture made up the third largest share of Malaysia's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) with 8,3%; significantly driven by the performance of palm oil (cf. DOSM 2017). The competitiveness of palm oil on the global market for vegetable oils and the considerably low salaries in the agricultural sector make palm oil particularly attractive for state and private investments (cf. Cramb/McCarthy 2016a: 33; Pye et al. 2012: 331). Another important concern of the BTP lies in the objective to develop Malaysia into a high-income country by 2020.<sup>1</sup> In that, it stands in continuation with the long-term development plans of the state targeting the advancement of living and working conditions of Malaysians through the creation of new employment opportunities and the training of skilled workers (cf. BiotechCorp/MOSTI 2013: 7).<sup>2</sup> Closer inspection, however, reveals that a significant share of the Malaysian work force seems to be neglected by the promise of an encompassing social upgrade through the transformation of the national economy into a knowledge-driven, bio-based economy – namely labor migrants. As the biggest net-importer of foreign labor in Southeast Asia (cf. Ford 2014:

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<sup>1</sup> Expert interviews with two academic scholars studying Bioeconomy in Malaysia as well as with a representative of the Malaysian Palm Oil Certification Council (MPOCC) and the Bioeconomy Corporation (BiotechCorp) revealed that the target to develop Malaysia into a high-income country by 2020 will not be achieved. Nevertheless, policy makers have not yet dismissed this goal but postponed it indefinitely (cf. 180221\_0001, academic scholar Universiti Teknologi Malaysia; 180408\_0001, academic scholar Universiti Sains Malaysia; 180410\_0001, BiotechCorp; 180413\_0001, MPOCC).

<sup>2</sup> In order to capture the socio-economic dimension of the BTP, the program must be analyzed in context of the long-term policy pathway of national development. In terms of economic and socio-economic development, the program complements the 2010 launched *Economic Transformation Programme* (ETP) focused on industrial upgrading to become a high skilled high-income nation boosting green growth (cf. BiotechCorp/MOSTI 2013: 7). It also indirectly links to the *New Economic Policy* (NEP) issued in 1971 targeting (rural) poverty reduction by supporting the development and growth of the "ethnic Malay middle and business classes" (Gomez/Sundaram 1997: 1).

311), migrant workers make up at least a quarter of the total work force in Malaysia.<sup>3</sup> In the labor-intensive palm oil plantation sector, migrant workers are the dominant source of wage labor (cf. Cramb/McCarthy 2016a: 43), with estimated 90 percent coming from Indonesia (cf. Pye 2013: 10). In 2012 approximately half a million registered and presumable just as much unregistered foreign workers were employed in the palm oil sector (cf. Pye et al. 2012; Pye et al. 2016). With that said, "Malaysia's hugely successful palm oil industry relies almost entirely on migrant labour." (Pye et al. 2012: 330)<sup>4</sup> Low-skilled migrant workers are mostly deployed to perform basic operational, physically demanding and dangerous tasks, compared to higher skilled and paid workers engaged in the downstream activities in the sector holding Malaysian citizenship. The Malaysian migrant labor regime in the palm oil sector is generally characterized by low wages, a high availability of foreign wage labor and most often by a state of constant precarity concerning working and residence permits (cf. Garcés-Mascareñas 2012; Pye et al. 2012).

In focusing on the transformation processes that accompany the Malaysian plans to establish a bio-based economy, it is of special interest from a socio-economic stance to understand which occupational groups in the palm oil sector are addressed and which are excluded when we examine the state's strategy to advance the living and working conditions in the country through a "greening" of the national economy. The literature on Bioeconomy, as well as more broadly on Green Economy, often underexposes the effects green economy models could have on (trans-)national labor markets (cf. Birch 2019; Birch/Tyfield 2015; Brand/Wissen 2015; McCormick/Kautto 2013; Lamers et al. 2016; Levidow et al. 2012). Therefore, in order to capture (possible) structural changes in the work sphere, it appears necessary to explore the current socio-economic status of those occupational groups, most likely affected by the transitions of the economy to a Bioeconomy.<sup>5</sup> By observing different groups employed in the Malaysian palm oil sector it becomes possible to shed light on the extent to which corresponding economic policies and political strategies address existing or possible evolving patterns of social inequalities in the work sphere.

The present paper argues, that the aim of the Malaysian Bioeconomy strategy to develop into a high-income country providing better working conditions and a higher quality of life for Malaysians through the promotion of downstream activities and training structurally excludes the group of low-skilled migrant workers occupied in the palm oil sector. This exclusion becomes visible by investigating the current working

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<sup>3</sup> The share of migrant workers in the total work force in Malaysia can only be estimated. This is, among other factors, due to the high presence of undocumented workers (cf. Hwok-Aun/Yu Leng 2018: 2).

<sup>4</sup> There are no exact figures as to the concrete employment structure in the Malaysian oil palm sector. Nevertheless, migrant workers make up around 2/3 of the work force in the sector (cf. Cramb/McCarthy 2016a: 43).

<sup>5</sup> It is not assumed that the Malaysian Bioeconomy strategy will be transferred directly into political and economic practice. The level of implementation and the actual range of the economic transitions must be analyzed as open-ended, societally contested processes, bearing in mind the possibility of failure or revision.

and living conditions of these workers defining their socio-economic status. Furthermore, it is to discuss in what way certain forms of social exclusion of workers in the Southeast Asian palm oil sector are re-/produced or solidified transnationally.

The following discussion is of explorative nature. The paper intends to examine and sort out pertinent research literature, structure gathered data as well as discuss and contextualize preliminary findings with the objective to formulate a provisional line of argumentation. I will start by outlining the state of research on working and living conditions of migrant workers in the Southeast Asian Oil Palm Complex. Following this, I will discuss preliminary findings from interviews I conducted during my fieldwork in Malaysia between February and April 2018. I will contextualize these findings by giving an overview of crucial features of the Malaysian labor migration regime with regard to state policies striving towards a Bioeconomy. In the last section I will summarize key data, reflect on open questions as well as give an outlook on the following field research phase.

## 2 Working in the Palm Oil Plantation Sector

Outlining the current state of research on working and living conditions of low-skilled migrant workers employed in the Malaysian palm oil sector requires first a contextualization within the so-called *Southeast Asian Oil Palm Complex* (cf. Cramb/McCarthy 2016c). Hereby, a transnational perspective is stressed, emphasizing the manifold entanglements foremost between Indonesia and Malaysia

“in which land, labour, and capital, the various modes of production in which they are combined, and the value chains into which they are inserted are closely interconnected across the region, giving rise to a discernible pattern of economic, social, and environmental outcomes over time.” (Cramb/McCarthy 2016b: 1)

In stressing a transnational approach, the research on labor migration in the Malaysian palm oil industry seeks to move beyond a “methodological nationalism”<sup>6</sup>, by taking the dynamic context of global capitalism into account. Thus, it becomes possible to

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<sup>6</sup> The notion “methodological nationalism” evolved as a critique on social scientists studying society, culture, class relations, family households etc. from the perspective of (self-contained) nation-states, neglecting the impact of cross-border dependencies, interdependencies and interactions shaping societies (cf. Beck/Grande 2010: 190). In migration studies methodological nationalism expresses itself in the way in which societies are analyzed as “containers”. Here the question of migration is discussed predominantly in terms of citizenship, integration measures, state regulation policies or the relationship between “sending” and “receiving” countries of migrants (cf. Canan 2015: 39). In order to move beyond a methodological nationalism when analyzing labor migration, scholars plead to take for example the complex relation of internationally operating companies, regional accumulation regimes, a historically grown culture of workforce mobility and transnational regulatory mechanisms into account (cf. Geisen 2005b: 7; Pries 2018: 465; Wise/Veltmeyer 2016: 5 ff.).



embed the specific case of labor migration in the Malaysian palm oil sector into transnational labor markets, global competition and production networks as well as into the specifics of the “regional accumulation model” (Pichler 2014: 80 f.).

Current academic research on the social and socio-economic dimensions of the Southeast Asian Oil Palm Complex focus particularly on land dispossession of the rural population (cf. Li 2014; Peluso/Lund 2013) and the subsequent integration or exclusion of liberated landless peasants into the palm oil industry (cf. Cramb 2016; McCarthy/Zen 2016; Neilson 2016). In her study on the social effects of rural dispossession in Asia, Tania Li shows for example how in the course of this process rural communities relying on the access to land in order to sustain their livelihood gradually became surplus population excluded from the active labor force and unable to carry out subsistence work (cf. Li 2009).

In concentration on the socio-economic status of migrant plantation workers in Malaysia, empirical research work most commonly focus on the corresponding legal, social and political-economic regulating mechanisms. In this, studies have observed the specific vulnerability of migrant workers towards wage dumping and poor working and living conditions (cf. Pye et al. 2016), exposure to dangerous working tasks in respect to health concerns (cf. Tenaganita 2002), the illegalization of workers and their dependents (cf. Saravanamuttu 2013) as well as the separation of migrant workers from their social networks (cf. Li 2015; Sanderson 2016). Within this research scope, Oliver Pye examines individual strategies of migrant workers coping with their status-related problems, characterizing it as “everyday resistance” (cf. Pye 2013; 2017). Furthermore, in their empirical research on work biographies of labor migrants Pye et al. elaborate the idea of a “dual precarity”<sup>7</sup> of labor migrants in the palm oil sector, which results from the socio-economic position these workers occupy on the Malaysian labor market (2012). Thereby, they leach the concept of *precarisation*<sup>8</sup> from the European-centered context in order to apply it to the Malaysian migrant labor regime, as they frame it as a “precarious labour regime” which is “strategically and consciously brought about (...) as a particular political project” (ibid. 331).

For the purpose of this paper, another research line concerned with the overall phenomenon of migrant labor in Malaysia is of additional interest. Along this line, scholars analyzed migration flows within Southeast Asia (cf. Ford 2014), the political economy of labor migration in Malaysia (cf. Garcés-Masareñas 2012 Khoo 2001; Saravanamuttu 2012) as well as the history of Indonesian workers migrating to the neighboring state (cf. Kaur 2004, 2006). All studies emphasize the structural dependence of the socio-

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<sup>7</sup> In a latter paper Pye et al. extended this typology to a “triple precarity”, besides “social” and “political”, also including “psycho-social precarity” (cf. 2016). In the course of developing my own theoretical grasp, the dual-precariety model appears more compelling.

<sup>8</sup> Social scientists define precarity as life circumstances, which are essentially characterized by instability and insecure working and living conditions (cf. Dörre 2015: 520; see also: Bourdieu 2000; Castel/Dörre 2009; Marchart 2013). “To be precariatized is to be subject to pressures and experiences that lead to a precariat existence, of living in the present, without a secure identity or sense of development achieved through work and lifestyle.” (Standing 2011: 16)

economic development path of Malaysia on migrant labor as well as the specific discrimination of low-skilled migrant workers concerning legal rights, employment opportunities and residence status which characterizes the labor migration regime in Malaysia.

The academic research scope on the socio-economic dimensions of the Southeast Asian Oil Palm Complex currently lacks a perspective that reviews structural processes of social exclusion of migrant workers employed in the palm oil sector from the state's ambition to significantly improve the working and living conditions of the population through the establishment of a Malaysian Bioeconomy. In order to understand how these processes of social exclusion are socially conveyed, it is necessary to link mechanisms of structural discrimination of migrant workers employed in the palm oil sector to the question of how this discrimination finds expression in the everyday living and working conditions of this group. As the Bioeconomy program of Malaysia operates within the framework of existing social inequalities, which from a socio-economic point of view currently disadvantages migrant workers in an especially profound way, the state initiative must be analyzed against the backdrop of the described migration regime and the corresponding structuring of the labor market. Therefore, in the next section I will outline core features of the socio-economic dimension of the Malaysian Bioeconomy program emphasizing the impact of the palm oil sector and of the state's migrant labor regime.

### **3 Contextualization: The Malaysian Migrant Labor Regime in the Wake of the Nascent Bioeconomy**

In the 1990s Malaysia started to invest in biotechnology in order to capitalize the states rich biodiversity endeavors to turn it into "biobusiness and wealth" (Arujanan/Singaram 2018: 53). This included among others the modernization and industrial upgrading of the agricultural sector. In addition to macro-economic restructuring targets, Malaysia strove for the further development of rural areas, especially in the Eastern part of the country. In the following years, biotechnology and Bioeconomy became main pillars of subsequent economic development policies of the state (cf. *ibid.*: 53). With the launch of the *Bioeconomy Transformation Programme* (BTP) Malaysia stressed a new development paradigm which links green growth to the long-term objectives of the state to reduce poverty in rural areas and increase the overall human capital of Malaysians. In an expert interview with a representative of the Bioeconomy Corporation – a state agency responsible for developing a bio-based industry in Malaysia – it was stated, that in context of the BTP the state focusses among others on promoting Malaysian entrepreneurship and skill creation as part of the overall economic development strategy (180410\_0001, BiotechCorp).<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> The BTP is for example linked to the 11<sup>th</sup> Malaysia Plan, which is part of the overall Malaysian development strategy (cf. Dir 2018: 7).

In the process of transforming the national economy into a Bioeconomy the palm oil sector fulfils a threefold role: First, the palm oil industry is considered to have an important impact on the development of rural areas, as it is considered to be an essential income source and a driving force for infrastructure development. Second, with the industrial upgrading of the sector the state expects the creation of new job opportunities in up- and downstream activities as well as further skill-development and training possibilities. And third, with the modernization of agriculture the palm oil sector is supposed to become an important economic impact factor boosting Malaysia's "green" competitiveness on a regional and global scale (cf. BiotechCorp/MOSTI 2017; BiotechCorp/MOSTI n.y.).

The palm oil industry in Malaysia consists of at least three main production sites: oil palm plantations, palm oil mills and palm oil refinery plants. In the labor-intensive oil palm plantation sector, working conditions are characterized as predominantly dirty, dangerous and degrading, while salaries remain significantly below the national average (cf. Ford 2014; ILO 2016; Pye et al. 2012). This applies for the most part to low-skilled mill workers as well, who usually also have a migrant background. As Malaysian workers are generally unwilling to work under such conditions, companies and smallholders seek to employ large numbers of migrant workers (cf. Pye et al. 2016).

"[I]t is rare to find Malaysian workers planting seedlings, spreading fertilisers, spraying pesticides and harvesting the oil palm fruit bunches. This work is done almost entirely by workers from Indonesia, whereas Malaysians account for some of the skilled factory workers in the mills, the employees in the office ('staff') and all of the management."  
(Pye et al. 2012: 334)

Nevertheless, the use of migrant labor in labor-intensive, low-wage segments of the national economy is not limited to the palm oil plantation sector. Rather it is *one* specific expression of what scholars generally refer to as the "Malaysian migrant labor regime" (Garcés-Mascreñas 2012). In order to understand to what extent the Malaysian Bioeconomy program in terms of the improvement of working and living conditions dis-/regard migrant workers, it appears necessary to embed the socio-economic prospects of the program within the framework of this regime.

The largest shares of migrant workers in Malaysia currently consist of un- or low-skilled workers from Indonesia, the Philippines, Nepal, Myanmar, India and Bangladesh (ILO 2016). For the most part they are regularly or irregularly employed in the plantation, construction and service sector (including domestic care) (Sugiyarto 2015: 281 f.). The economic performance of these segments strongly depends on the low wage level, which led in the 1990s to a structural generalization of labor migration (Garcés-Mascreñas 2012: 56).

„While social programmes aimed at situating the Malay in a better position on the labour market, economic growth continued to depend on cheap labour. In this context, there was (and still is) general consensus that employment of migrant workers was necessary for both social stability and economic growth.“ (ibid. 196)

Today, the Malaysian labor migration regime is generally characterized by the following intertwined features: Since colonial times the economic development model of Malaysia was marked by a specific division of labor regarding the respective citizenship of workers (cf. Khoo 2001: 181). To this day, workers migrating from different countries to Malaysia dominate certain low-wage segments of the Malaysian economy (cf. Garcés-Mascreñas 2012: 49). In the state of Sabah (East-Malaysia) for example, only Indonesians and Filipinos are granted a working permit (cf. Ford 2014: 308 f.) to predominantly work in agriculture and the construction sector. Further, labor migration became increasingly flexible in the course of various state driven de-/regulation waves (cf. Kaur 2004). Today the relative share of migrant workers in the domestic labor market depends on the one hand on the market demand of cheap low-skilled labor and on the other hand on the political power of nationalist, Malaysian employee-friendly actors to limit labor migration in favor of the domestic labor force (cf. Garcés-Mascreñas 2012). Consequently, the historical-specific form of the Malaysian labor migration regime was always shaped by the competition between Malaysian and non-Malaysian wage workers on the labor market (cf. *ibid.*: 68; Kaur 2006: 44; Khoo 2000: 222). Thus, the socio-economic interests of the domestic labor force stand to some degree in diametrical opposition to the profit-and growth-driven interests of businesses and the state. This tension re-/produces the structural social exclusion of migrant workers from the Malaysian society.

For the purpose of developing an analytical starting point for investigating how mechanisms of social exclusion find expression in the everyday working and living conditions of migrant workers in the palm oil sector, the next section aims to conflate the structural dimensions of the social exclusion of migrant workers in the context of the Bioeconomy transformation program of Malaysia.

#### **4 Structural Social Exclusion of Migrant Workers: Towards an Analytical Framework**

Social exclusion expresses itself in distinctive, group-specific disadvantages. In a critical sense social exclusion, defined as the marginalization of a social group within a given societal context, is mediated by directly or indirectly denying this group the access to basic public goods like welfare services (cf. Mohr 2005), spatially marginalizing them, preventing them from political participation or the like (cf. Bude/Willich 2006; Kronauer 2010). Processes of social exclusion become structural when for example state policies or social practices reinforce social segmentation over a certain period of time without destabilizing society as a whole (cf. Bude/Willich 2006: 22).

In order to develop a theoretical framework which allows to analyze the structural social exclusion of migrant workers from the socio-economic prospects of the Malaysian Bioeconomy program, I plead for a perspective which combines an intersectional approach with political economy (cf. Roediger 2017; Whitehead 2016) predominantly

stressing the intersection of class and migration, without neglecting other discrimination axes such as gender or age. In that, I frame labor migration as a specific “conditioned response to the process of productive and social transformation brought up by the capitalist development of the forces of production” (Wise/Veltmeyer 2016: 20). In a wider context, I seek to analyze labor migration taking “the dynamics of global capitalist development” (ibid.: 33) into account. Therefore, I assume that “the social reproduction of the global working class crucially entails processes of migration and racialization that are inseparable from its class and gender dimension” (Ferguson/McNally 2015: 3). Integrating a political-economic perspective makes it possible to link the socio-economic status of migrant workers to the development processes of the Malaysian economy. In respect to Malaysia’s ambition to establish a bio-based, knowledge-driven economy, I understand the BTP and respective policies as an encompassing strategy to productively and socially transform the country’s mode of capitalist development.

In the case of Malaysia’s Bioeconomy strategy it is important to analyze processes of social exclusion in the context of the above outlined nexus comprising the programs’ socio-economic development targets, the economic and socio-economic importance of the palm oil sector for the implementation of a Bioeconomy, and the country’s prevailing labor migration regime. Within that nexus structural social exclusion is characterized by the following main features: Generally, the BTP is embedded in a socio-/economic development and growth model, in which the social exclusion of migrant workers is historically deeply rooted. Thus, by addressing the overall target of social upgrading, the BTP, like other policies concerned with socio-economic development before, principally neglects low-skilled migrant workers. All measures of enhancing working and living conditions – especially in rural areas – addressed in the overall Bioeconomy strategy are tailored for the domestic Malaysian workforce (cf. Khoo 2001: 184; 2000: 216). Higher qualification and skill development are reserved for occupations low-skilled migrant workers have no access to. Working permits for this working group are only granted for specific low-wage segments of the economy depending on “the requirements of a set of preconceived factors such as the level of economic activity ... the rate of unemployment, sectorial labour market imbalances” (cf. Garcés-Masareñas 2012: 64). In concentration on the palm oil sector, the structural dependence and economic importance of cheap labor in labor-intensive segments of the sector solidifies Malaysia’s migrant labor regime further (ibid.: 196). This mutually intensifying dynamic is reinforced through the BTP by making the palm oil industry a core strategic field for green transformation, innovation and socio-economic development without addressing the sector’s reliance on low-skilled migrant workers performing undesirable work tasks and as a source of cheap labor. Therefore, I argue, that migrant workers in the Malaysian palm oil sector are structurally excluded from the prospect of the enhancement of working and living conditions through the establishment of a Bioeconomy due to their restricted access to the labor market, the economic importance of cheap labor in the palm oil sector and the flexible regulation of migrant labor. But

how does this structural social exclusion affect the working and living conditions of low-skilled migrant workers?

In order to build an analytical bridge between the socio-economic development targets of the Malaysian Bioeconomy program and the structural importance of labor migration in low-wage segments of the economy, the next section will address in what way the state's program finds expression in the case of working and living conditions of low-skilled migrant plantation and mill workers in the palm oil sector. For this purpose, I will first elaborate on the underlying methodical approach of my field research. Following this, I will present preliminary results deduced from my fieldwork in Malaysia. The outlook will inform about preliminary findings derived from interviews with refinery workers.

## 5 Approaching the Field Site

The following findings are based upon field research, which was carried out from February until April 2018. The research concentrated on workers in the palm oil sector in the East-Malaysian state of Sabah, with a special focus on migrant workers in the industry. Members of the Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Heritage of the Universiti Malaysia Sabah (UMS) helped me in accessing the field, finding respondents and translating interviews. During my stay I conducted 20 interviews with three different occupational groups in the palm oil sector as well as two interviews with palm oil smallholders.

Number of respondents		Occupation	Area of work
male	female		
6	4	plantation worker	Sandakan
2	-	smallholder	Sandakan
2	-	refinery worker	Sandakan
1	2	plantation worker	Tawau
3	2	mill worker	Kunak
<b>Total: 22</b>			

*Table 1: List of respondents*

Within this paper, I focus mostly on low-skilled migrant plantation and mill workers as the research on working and living conditions of refinery workers is yet to be further advanced. Oil palm plantations and processing mills are almost entirely made up of workers with a migrant background. Except for the specific production site they work in, they share core characteristics in working and living conditions. The occupational group of migrant plantation workers encompasses all jobs directly linked to maintaining the estate (harvesting, fertilizing, collecting loose fruit, maintenance, tree nursery



and basic services such as cleaning). This excludes for example the staff and managers responsible for managing the production flow. The same logic was applied to mill workers. Here I concentrated on workers directly involved in processing procedures (including for example operating the oil press or weighing fresh fruit bunches).

I chose Sabah as my main field site for three primary reasons: First, the region is characterized in a significant way by the economic activity of the palm oil industry. In that, the sector has become an important income source for the population in Sabah and currently records the highest growth rates within Malaysia. In that way, it becomes possible to analyze socio-economic transformation processes against the backdrop of the expansive development dynamic of the palm oil sector. Second, the standard of living in the predominantly rural areas of East-Malaysia is considerably lower than in the more urban and modern regions of West-Malaysia. For that reason, one strand of the Malaysian Bioeconomy strategy explicitly focusses on the industrial upgrading to establish bio-based production branches in Sabah. The respective concrete measures undertaken target beneath others explicitly the advancement of living and working conditions of the rural population of Sabah. Third, the palm oil sector in the region is characterized by an especially high share of migrant workers, coming mostly from Indonesia and the Philippines. This makes Sabah a prime example for possible impacts of the Bioeconomy-transformation on the working and living conditions of migrant workers in the sector (cf. Rahmat 2015: 6, 32 f., 36).

The field research aimed to explore the current socio-economic status of workers in the palm oil industry, with emphasis on migrant workers, in order to translate the question of structural social exclusion into an empirical investigation (cf. Horvath 2006). In reflecting on the socio-economic status of a specific group socially conveyed mechanisms re-/producing different forms of social inclusion and exclusion are at work. I define the socio-economic position of workers as determined by their economic status within a given, historically grown and socially embedded economic system (cf. Mikl-Horke 2011: 13; Weber 1985). It provides insight into the objective living conditions of individuals within a given society, induced for example by working conditions, access to education and property (cf. Mikl-Horke 2011: 13).

To gain a complex understanding of how the socio-economic status of migrant workers translates into everyday living and working conditions while searching for an appropriate research method in which respondents have the chance to express their own perceptions, concerns and aspirations, I chose a qualitative methodical approach for my empirical study (cf. Richards 2005) using a semi-structured questionnaire as research tool. The questionnaire was designed following the method of Cornelia Helfferich (cf. 2011: 182-189). Helfferich's approach allows to construct a questionnaire which incorporates already acquired knowledge structuring the fundamental research interest, while at the same time maintaining the necessary degree of openness, which is fundamental to qualitative research (cf. *ibid.*: 182). The questionnaire covered the following topics: (1) general working conditions, (2) income situation and distribution, (3) organization of the family household (internal division of labor), (4) community life, (5)

dealing with work and income related problems and (6) future aspirations. Additionally, personal data of the respondents were gathered such as: age, ethnicity, place of birth and level of education. The one-on-one interviews with workers in the palm oil sector were complemented by expert interviews with non-governmental organizations, state institutions and other relevant actors in the field as well as participatory observations. The interviews were analyzed and coded using MAXQDA (cf. Richards: 2005: 67-81). During the field research and the analysis of the interviews I worked with memos in order to document the research process as well as capture evolving ideas and questions (cf. *ibid.*: 73). In respect to the qualitative nature of the research, the discussed data is not quantitatively representative.

### 5.1 Overview: Variations in working and living conditions

Since plantations and mills “are far away and spatially separated from everyday Malaysian life”, workers are forced to live on or close to plantations or processing sites. Both “cannot be reached by public transport and workers usually have no cars”, causing their “isolation” (Pye et al. 2012: 334) from urban areas and public infrastructure. However, the immediate living conditions of migrant plantation and mill workers in Malaysia vary gradually according to the type of employer they work for. Therefore, in order to outline similarities and variations in the working and living conditions of migrant workers in the palm oil sector, first of all a rough distinction must be drawn between different types of employers concerning the organization of production and business size (cf. Cramb/McCarthy 2016a: 49; Sanderson 2016: 399).<sup>10</sup>

During field research, I interviewed workers employed by *smallholders*, *medium-sized companies* as well as by a large *international company*.<sup>11</sup> Larger companies are village-like organized. Workers are accommodated within the plantation or next to the mill in houses owned by the company. They are also provided with facilities such as a small health clinic or a religious institution as well as with basic services like electricity, water or a school bus for their children. Generally, working and living on estates with a basic infrastructure goes along with a certain self-contained communal life. Workers have the possibility to shop in small grocery stores, get medical check-ups and in many cases, they live next door to family members. But more importantly, larger estates may be perceived as protected areas, where migrant workers (i.e. without the possibility to hold their own passports) are safe from detention or deportation and companies are able to exercise control over them (Pye et al. 2012: 334). Some respondents working

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<sup>10</sup> For a partly similar distinction, see Pye et al. 2012: 337.

<sup>11</sup> For the purpose of this paper, I provisionally define a large company in the palm oil sector as an internationally operating enterprise, usually active on more than one link in the value chain. Whereas, I define a medium-sized company as a business rather concentrated on one level within the value chain, primarily focused on national and regional markets. The distinction of business size by these criteria appears for the purpose of this research more useful than to differentiate them for example by the size of the plantation area or other abstract metric characteristics.



for such companies hinted that they mostly stay within the estate they currently work and live in. One worker even stated, that she never been to another estate:

“[I was raised in this estate.] I have never been anywhere else. Until now I have grandchildren here.” (180313\_0012, female plantation worker)

This especially applies to migrant plantation workers without a (valid) working permit and to those workers, who migrated at an early age to Malaysia or were even born as second-generation workers on the estate. In contrast, smaller companies could be less well equipped and maintained when it comes to the living space of workers and their basic needs, making workers more dependent on facilities and services outside the plantation or production site. However, workers are less monitored in their hours off work and consequently enjoy a greater freedom of movement.

Migrant workers working for smallholders or small private companies may lack access to fresh water, experience electricity cuts or they are provided with insufficient housing. One respondent working for a smallholder in Sandakan mentioned for example that his household lacks constant power supply and in that context he stated “it gets hot in the evening” (180308\_004, male plantation worker), while another worker employed by a different smallholder explained, that his family uses rain water and water from the pipeline connected to the farm for cooking and drinking, unsure about its quality (180309\_006, male plantation worker).

While bigger and medium-sized companies provide for basic training and safety briefings, employees of smallholders might receive no training at all, as they rely on their previous work experience or by self-taught skills. Migrant plantation workers working for smallholders regularly perform tasks autonomously without direct guidance from their employers. Indonesian migrants usually stem from rural areas where they worked as farm laborers and/or practiced subsistence. Some of them even gained practical experiences working with oil palms before. This way, they acquired important skills concerning harvesting, determining ripe fruits as well as on maintaining the farm. Consequently, smallholders are foremost concerned with selling the fresh fruit bunches (FFB) than actively intervening into the production process. As a result, respondents working for smallholders expressed that they may get the impression they work on their own farm, which employers encourage indirectly by granting them far-reaching autonomy managing the farm, as this response of a smallholder exemplifies:

„We just let them do it in their own way. [...] They are the ones who decide on when they should carry out [tasks]. Mostly, we only do the transport and the selling of the FFB [fresh fruit bunch].” (180322\_17, male smallholder)

Working for smallholders also requires workers to perform various tasks, of which some might be unpaid and working hours are handled more flexible, whereas on plantations of larger companies there is a more distinct division of labor with rather fixed working hours and formalized rules concerning overtime.

Generally, migrant plantation workers often seem to lack knowledge of their own work productivity and their legal rights. Lacking knowledge of one’s own work productivity

exposes workers to wage dumping when they are paid by the rate they harvested. To illustrate: when asked a loose fruit picker, if she knows each time how much fruit she collected, she responded, that only the staff attends the weighing of the FFB. The staff will later inform her about her harvesting rate and pay her accordingly (180308\_001, female plantation worker).

## 5.2 The importance of the two-level family household

To gain a better understanding of the nexus between living and working conditions of migrant plantation and mill workers employed in the Malaysian palm oil sector, it is also necessary to take the social network, which they are a part of, into account (cf. Li 2009; Pries 2018; Pye et al. 2016).

“[T]ransnational households and community networks represent ... cross-border survival strategies designed to meet the socio-material and affective needs of the workers and their families. [...] Sustained by wages paid to migrant workers which are divided between their self-reproduction and that of families back home or elsewhere, transnational households are deeply imbricated in the workings of global capitalism, all the more so as the flow of remittances from the more to less capitalistically advanced societies has become deeply embedded in the social and economic fabric of the sending country.” (Ferguson/McNally 2015: 13 f.)

In all interviews it became evident, that the household is the most important socio-economic reference point for migrant workers. Analytically I divide the household in *two interconnected spheres*. The typical immediate *nuclear family household* encompasses a married couple with usually two or more children. The *transnational extended family household*<sup>12</sup> might include parents, siblings, in-laws and cousins in the country of origin as well as Malaysia. Family members of both household levels undertake different economic roles. They either contribute or they are dependent on income from family members working in the Malaysian palm oil sector, reproduction or subsistence work in Malaysia or the country of origin. Thereby, the division of labor within the nuclear family household in Malaysia is replicated in the extended family household. Reproduction work is largely performed by female family members. Within the nuclear family household, it was found that the more precarious the income situation of the household, the more likely women will carry a double or even triple burden, performing wage, informal and reproduction work. This might lead to exhaustion or frustration of female family members. For example, when asked a female mill worker “who manages the household”, she replied:

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<sup>12</sup> Similar to this notion Ferguson/McNally use the term “transnational households” to emphasize the global and inter-state entanglements by which migrant workers are part of a working class, that is shaped through gendered and racialized relations (2015: 12).

"I will do it myself. If I feel tired I will get angry too." (180316\_0016, female mill worker)

Migrant workers may also depend on the reproduction work of family members in their country of origin. Often, Indonesian migrant workers send their children to school in Indonesia where they stay with family members or on their own, as migrants are until now not allowed to attend public schools in Malaysia. In this way reproduction (costs) are externalized by the Malaysian state to the sending country of migrants (cf. Pye 2015: 193).

Remittances are an essential feature of the socio-economic organization of the extended family household. In the case of workers migrating from Indonesia, they are also of economic importance to the sending country, leading to an active state-support of labor migration, in order to manage "labor surpluses and to earn foreign currency" (Missbach/Palmer 2018). Both functions of remittances are on a structural level mutually consolidating.

Generally, the two-level family household can be characterized as a socio-economic redistribution network. It functions as a cross-border support network concerning issues such as financial squeezes, care work or job promotions. Especially the latter is important for migrant workers to gain foothold in Malaysia, as relatives who work or who are in touch with workers and employers in the palm oil sector help promoting family members which seek to work for a specific employer.

As shown in the next section from the perspective of the nuclear family household, the transnational extended family household serves as a social security system substituting public welfare, which on the one hand only exists rudimentary in the country of origin and to which migrants in Malaysia on the other hand have no or limited access to.

### **5.3 The diversification of the nuclear family household income**

There are great variations in the payment system employers install, with ranging from a permanent contract based payment, to in-/formal payments determined by harvesting quotas (cf. Pye et al. 2016) and salary sharing between legal workers and undocumented migrants with expired working permits. Usually, salaries in the palm oil plantation sector and mills do not exceed minimum wage (180410\_0001, The Forrest Trust). Often they are even below that after wage deductions. Higher salaries can only be achieved through overtime (cf. Pye et al. 2012) or by taking up additional jobs. Most respondents explained that they spend the largest share of their salary on basic needs, as one male mill worker pointedly stated:

"I have no savings. All of it becomes food." (180315\_0015, male mill worker)

Income sources of migrant plantation workers are generally highly diversified, while for migrant mill workers it is less common but not excluded. From the point of view of

migrant plantation workers, the necessity for and the degree of the income diversification depends primarily on the nuclear family household size. During the research it became obvious, the more immediate family members depend on income earned from working on a plantation or in a mill without contributing to the overall household income, the greater the pressure to find additional income sources – most of them being informal. Almost all respondents had a diversified nuclear family household income, shifting between formal wage work and informal small businesses. This includes for example female family members selling candy, pastries or fruits to other plantation workers, the staff or on the weekly market as well as sewing works for co-workers in return for small compensations or personal favors. Plantation workers working for smaller companies or smallholders, usually paid by harvesting quotas, seem more flexible in taking different harvesting or farm maintenance jobs, as this statement exemplifies:

„If my salary is very low then I can find an additional job.“ (180309\_0003, female plantation worker)

The income of workers working for smallholders is usually more diversified, because their basic income may vary significantly depending on the employer’s willingness and ability to pay, the amount workers are capable to harvest, the daily weather condition or seasonal factors (cf. Pye et al. 2012: 333f.), as this statement of a smallholders worker with a highly diversified household income exemplifies:

„Our family income depends mostly on how many fruits can be produced from the palm oil tree. [...] My future depends on how many fruit bunches I can harvest. [...] To me the amount paid [as wage] is not suitable. [...] But I also think about my employer. He also could not afford to give me minimum wage [...]. I told my employer a few times to increase my salary, but it still maintains the same.“ (180309\_0006, male plantation worker)

The income diversification goes along with a certain flexibility in a twofold sense. On the one hand, workers are granted more freedom to gain additional income as long as they achieve targeted quotas. On the other hand, migrant workers may be forced to seek additional income sources, as their income level is uncertain, or the wages paid by smallholders are too low to sustain their household (cf. Pye et al. 2012: 333). In the latter sense, the flexibility to diversify the household income becomes an expression of a socio-economic precarity, as the following statement of a male plantation workers who earns less than minimum wage hints:

„[My salary is just] enough to make a living out of it. [...] I have to find other sources of income.“ (180309\_0002, male plantation worker)

Another extreme example can be illustrated by the case of a male mill worker with six children. When he was asked if he is satisfied with his wage, he stated, that his family regularly suffers from food shortages. His monthly income is just enough to buy basic foods such as rice, sugar and salt. Only if he is able to work overtime or find other

sources of income he can buy fresh fish and vegetables for him and his family (180315\_0015, male mill worker).

In Malaysia migrant workers will perform subsistence work only if they have access to small pieces of land provided by their employers or by squatting land. In contrast, in their country of origin, family members will use the remittances their relatives send from Malaysia to buy up and cultivate land for their subsistence. When migrant workers return to their country of origin the purchased land becomes their main income source and/or will be used to building a house. However, owning and cultivating land has a big influence in both contexts, but is much harder to achieve for migrant workers in Malaysia (cf. Cramb/McCarthy 2016a: 54).

#### **5.4 Citizenship and residence status**

The political and legal differentiation between Malaysian and non-Malaysian workers effects the position of the respective workers on the national labor market and thus their socio-economic position in a crucial way. Since Malaysia's independence from the British colonial rule in 1957,

“[t]he need to protect the national labour market led to the gradual closure and delimitation of Malaysian borders. However, while the limits of the nation-state became clearer, as did the distinction between citizens and non-citizens, the demand for foreign labour continued to grow in Malaysia. The borders of the nation-state thus became more and more delimited while, at the same time, more and more migrant workers were required. The solution was an institutionalised, government-regulated temporary labour migration system. [...] this system sought to let in migrant workers, but only in places where they were needed and for as long as they were needed.” (Garcés-Mascreñas 2012: 74)

As mentioned before, working permits for low-skilled foreign workers are issued to specific national groups to work in selected branches of the economy, which results in a state regulated ethnic division of labor (cf. Khoo 2001: 181). Working and living in Malaysia, instead of for example Indonesia, promises workers more job opportunities and higher wages (cf. Pye et al. 2016) and in some cases better working conditions. These prospects are linked to the hope of an overall social advancement of the household. Once arrived in Malaysia, migrant workers are perceived and legally treated as temporary residents to do one thing only – work (cf. Garcés-Mascreñas 2012). Migrant workers usually receive a three-year work permit, which can be extended by one year twice. They are bound to a specific employer unable to choose or change employers on their own “which places them in a dependent position.” (Pye et al. 2016) Additionally, workers are regularly required to attend medical check-ups. In case a worker is severely ill or pregnant they will legally be deported (ibid.). Workers who “enter Malaysia without a work permit or who are later illegalised (by overstaying their contract or by switching jobs) are in an even more precarious situation.” (ibid.) Migrant

workers are in most cases legally prevented to establish a life beyond working and living on the estate or the small piece of land provided by smallholders, unless they successfully apply for a Malaysian Identity Card, which is extremely rare (180314\_0001, SPIEU).

When working permits are withdrawn or expired or migrant workers choose to re-/enter Malaysia without proper documents their position on the labor market changes (cf. Ford 2014; Garcés-Mascareñas 2012) in two intertwined but contradicting ways: On the one hand, undocumented workers “can ... move from one job to another, they do not pay taxes and it is much more difficult to make them leave the country at a moment’s notice.” (Garcés-Mascareñas 2012: 84) In this sense, migrant workers gain autonomy in working for the employer who pays them the best, as the following generalizing statement demonstrates:

“To me, an Indonesian citizen, if the employer pays one Ringgit<sup>13</sup> but another employer pays two Ringgit, of course we will go there. I want to earn more.” (180314\_0014, male plantation worker)

On the other hand, illegalized migrant workers are in constant fear of being caught by the police or vigilante groups putting them into detention and eventually be deported. From this perspective, undocumented migrant workers may lose autonomy as they become dependent on a social network protecting, supporting or even hiding them. Undocumented migrant workers may sometimes even dependent on the employment of legal migrant workers. This can be illustrated by one case, in which a female plantation worker helped out her friend who works for a subcontractor, sharing the salary:

“I was supposed to leave Malaysia in March but I do not want to go back with [my husband to Indonesia]. [...] I will not be long here [anymore]. My friends are doing good deeds to me although it is not legal. I know that I am in Malaysia.” (180314\_0013, female plantation worker)

It is a widespread practice of employers to seize the passports of their employees for different reasons – for example to prevent workers from “running away” or for “security measures”.<sup>14</sup> Therefore, it is crucial for migrant workers in Malaysia to hold on to their own passport. Holding one’s own passport influences the freedom of movement significantly as the following remark of a male smallholders worker indicates:

„I hold my own passport. He cannot hold my passport. It is mine ... Without it I cannot go anywhere. ... [Taking my passport is] the same as chaining my arms and legs, I cannot make any movements.” (180309\_0006, male plantation worker)

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<sup>13</sup> Ringgit is the official currency of Malaysia.

<sup>14</sup> In an expert interview with a representative of the non-governmental organization *The Forest Trust* (tft), it was mentioned that companies considered it a security risk when foreign employees working and living on their estates would hold their own passport, as they feared workers would try to get hold of each others documents or outsiders would enter the estate in order to steal passports (180410\_0001, The Forest Trust)



## 5.5 Uncertainty and flexible adaption to income insecurity

Uncertainty derived from income insecurity is caused by various factors: In many cases migrant workers in the plantation sector only get paid when they actively carry out their work tasks. If workers are unable to do so because of heavy rainfalls, seasonal factors, sickness or a family issue which requires them to go back to their country of origin outside their annual leave they will not get paid. Uncertainty may also arise when workers are not in possession of a formal working contract or when they are unaware of the content of the documents they are signing. In an interview with a union representative of the *Sabah Plantation Industry Employees Union* (SPIEU) it was mentioned that it is not uncommon that migrant workers do not (fully) understand the content and conditions of their working contracts or appointment letters (180314\_0001, SPIEU), as the following statements confirm:

“I just sign everything without reading it.” (180315\_0015, male mill worker)

“We just have to sign it only. We wouldn’t read it because the document is thick.” (180316\_0016, female mill worker)

Some respondents were even unsure if they signed a working contract at all. Relating thereto, the majority of the interviewed migrant workers were unaware of their legal rights for example joining a union or demanding safety instructions and equipment. Migrant workers will generally try to bridge uncertainty through personal networks (cf. Pye et al. 2016) – a friend or relative promoting a worker to a better-paid job, a family member giving financial support or by establishing a network to share crucial information about working conditions of different employers, legal rights, organizing strategies or the like. This way migrant workers flexibly adapt to legal obstacles and socio-economic hurdles. If migrant workers household run short of money, it is a common coping strategy to either borrow money from relatives or buy groceries in a take-now-pay-later system. The latter may even be institutionalized by the employing company, as one respondent explained, that in case workers purchase basic foodstuff on credit from a small store within the estate, the company will deduct the outstanding payment from the workers next paycheck (180314\_0014, male plantation worker).

## 5.6 Future aspirations: addressing social mobility

For low-skilled workers within the region, the decision to migrate to Malaysia to seek employment in the palm oil sector is embedded in a complex of individual rationalities and surrounding factors. An already established social network, the historic-specific transnational migratory dynamic and socio-economic marginalization in the country of origin may, beneath other factors, influence this decision significantly (cf. Pries 2018: 454 f.). Most workers migrating to Malaysia willing to work in the palm oil sector are “attracted by the higher wages”, better working conditions and the “hope to save

enough money in Malaysia to improve their livelihood possibilities at home" (Pye et al. 2016). Thus, the hope for upward mobility is one of the main reasons why non-Malaysian workers are willing to work in the Malaysian palm oil sector.

It is common for family members of migrant palm oil plantation workers within Malaysia to work in the same sector with little variations in working and living standards. In fact, the extended family network often encompasses the whole palm oil plantation sector providing relatives with job opportunities and employers with new workers. This can apply to more than one generation as job positions may even be 'inherited' as the following example particularly shows:

„My father promoted me for the job. He quit and went back to Indonesia then I replaced [him].“  
(180309\_002, male plantation worker)

Despite the fact, that almost all respondents stated that their income from working in the Malaysian palm oil sector was enough to finance basic living expense in the country and that working conditions were considered decent or at least moderate, many of them desire to do something else in their future back in their country of origin. While future plans were articulated for the most part in an abstract manner, such as:

“For my goal, I want to achieve something higher” (180314\_0014, male plantation worker),

two occasionally mentioned concrete targets migrant palm oil plantation and mill workers shared stood out: first, some workers aimed to open up a small business of any kind (cf. Pye et al. 2016):

“I want to have my own business. If I rely on my wage that I earn, I run out of money easily. [...] I have no capital to start. I wait until I have enough [...] Anything would do, as long as I'm self-employed.” (180315\_0015, female mill worker)

Second, in the case of Indonesian migrant workers unable to settle permanently in Malaysia, plans for the future aligned with the general goal to possess land (cf. Pye et al. 2016). As mentioned before, if they have the possibility migrant workers will regularly send remittances to family members in their country of origin. Besides securing the livelihood of the extended family household, land ownership is considered an essential socio-economic resource and subsistence safeguard for migrant workers themselves when they are required to leave Malaysia.

“Now I don't have land back home. When it is time for me to leave Malaysia, I must buy a piece of land there, do many things there. Build a house.” (180314\_0014, male plantation worker)

Both targets, being self-employed and acquiring land, are indirectly associated with the hope for a better live and consequently with upward mobility.

By contrast, migrant workers directly raised the issue of social mobility in context of future aspirations for their children. All respondents employed on a palm oil plantation or mill hoped for an improvement of the living standard of their children. In order to



achieve this goal, education (especially higher education) was identified as the most important factor.

"If they do not want to go to school, they will end up like their mother. Look at your aunt, she is a teacher, every month she will get paid." (180309\_0006, male plantation worker)

Although, education is generally considered a great financial burden on the nuclear family household budget, it is considered a crucial strategy to escape harsh working and precarious living conditions.

## 6 Discussion

The presentation and contextualization of preliminary results within this paper represent one section of the broader scope of my research on transnational working conditions of migrant workers in the context of an emerging Bioeconomy in Malaysia. Hence, it is important to note, that further research is crucial in order to gain a more complex understanding of the processes of social inclusion and exclusion with respect to the socio-economic prospects of the Malaysian Bioeconomy program.

At the outset of this paper, I argued that low-skilled migrant palm oil plantation and mill workers were structurally excluded from the socio-economic prospects of Malaysia's transformation strategy of enhancing the working and living conditions of the (rural) population of the country through the establishment of a Bioeconomy. I assumed that this exclusion intersects with the specific socio-economic status migrant workers hold within Malaysia. By investigating the current everyday working and living conditions of low-skilled migrant palm oil plantation and mill workers, I sought to shed light on the societal context the Malaysian BTP is embedded in, focusing on existing mechanisms of group-specific social exclusion.

The paper showed, that there is a direct interplay between working and living conditions of migrant workers employed in the Malaysian palm oil industry. At this, it was demonstrated in what way the everyday living conditions of migrant workers are determined by working and living on oil palm plantations or close to the mill site. The isolation from urban areas and rural communities results in a spatial and social marginalization separating migrant plantation and mill workers from the Malaysian population, re-/enforcing their social exclusion from other parts of Malaysian society. The specific work sphere influences variations in working and living conditions of migrant palm oil plantation and mill workers. Workers employed by smallholders may experience greater autonomy and freedom of movement, at the expense of access to basic goods and the blurring between paid and non-paid work tasks. Working and living on estates of larger companies often goes along with decent housing, regular medical check-ups and fixed working tasks, but also with greater social control of the workers (cf. Pye et al. 2012: 334).

In building an analytical bridge to the policy framework of the Malaysian Bioeconomy strategy, it becomes obvious that the already existing structural social exclusion of low-skilled migrant workers in the palm oil industry is underpinned by excluding this occupation group from the socio-economic development measures of the program, creating group-specific barriers for upward mobility. The countries' green development strategy neither envisaged skill-development nor advanced education for low-skilled migrant workers. The legal prevention of low-skilled migrants to fill higher paid occupations with better conditions remains unchanged. This structural exclusion intensifies the social division between migrant and Malaysian workers already enforced by the current migrant labor regime of Malaysia. In response to the experienced social exclusion, social as well as family networks help handling socio-economic hurdles. Additionally, being unaware or lacking access to necessary information of legal rights or the content of work contracts puts migrant workers in an even more vulnerable position.

To determine the socio-economic status of low-skilled migrant workers in the Malaysian palm oil industry, the internal organization of the two-level household must be taken into account. Reproduction costs of migrant workers are largely externalized by the state (cf. Pye 2008). Basic welfare services may – but not necessarily – be provided by the company. But most importantly, reproduction costs are cushioned by the social and family networks of migrant workers in their country of origin. Future planning uncertainty and the pressure on wage earners to support multiple family members in Malaysia and the country of origin characterize the specific precarity low-skilled migrant workers in the Malaysian palm oil sector are confronted with. While the need to support the transnational extended as well as the nuclear family household by working in Malaysia results from the precarity and socio-economic marginalization of workers in their home country (Li 2009), the internal organization and importance of the two-level family household must be understood as a core strategy to enforce social stability coping with this precarity.

The wages of low-skilled migrant workers in the Malaysian palm oil sector are (after deductions) usually below the national minimum wage level. Income derived from working at palm oil plantations or mills are mostly spend on basic goods, which leaves little to nothing for consumer goods, savings or remittances. In the hope of building a better live, this often results in a structural necessity for a diversified family household income. Subsequently, the enforced flexibility of migrant workers to diversify the family income appears as a conditioned expression of their socio-economic precarity.

The precarious social and socio-economic status of low-skilled migrant plantation and mill workers is also reflected in their envisaged life perspectives. As long-term planning seems hard to achieve, because “[p]ermanence of employment is categorically excluded” (Pye et al. 2012: 331), the monthly income situation may be uncertain due to natural conditions and yields as well as a lack of decent employment opportunities in the country of origin, future aspirations appear rather arbitrary in nature. Respondents asked about their plans for the future often stressed the motive of “going back”. This relocates future perspectives to the country of origin. “Building a better live” or “do

many things back home” become abstract vanishing points without a definite understanding of how to achieve or finance these goals. Social mobility seems to be projected upon children promoting their education understood as a strategy to step out of structural constraints in respect to the social mobility of the next generation. In that sense, education is perceived as a possibility to escape from precariousness and social exclusion. Future aspirations shift or may even become more concrete when migrant workers have the possibility to get hold of a Malaysian ID, retrieving their future plans to where they currently work and live. Respective future aspirations then revolve around building a life in Malaysia. Abstract or concrete imagination of the future are consequently directly linked to the question of citizenship, going along with for example permanent working contracts, legal rights to purchase land or buy a house and sending children to University in Malaysia. But within the BTP permanent residence permits for low-skilled migrants, which could significantly improve the social inclusion into the Malaysian society and thus the living conditions of the two-level family household, are indeed not intended.

To sum up, by focusing on working and living conditions of low-skilled migrant workers in the palm oil industry, Malaysia’s Bioeconomy program operates within the framework of existing social inequalities. It reinforces the precarity of migrant workers, by only focusing on training and skill-development of Malaysians. At the same time, it stresses the economic importance and growth of the palm oil industry, which heavily depends on the cheap labor performed by migrant workers. Consequently, the green transformation strategy of the state re-produces the social exclusion of low-skilled migrant workers, expressed in the lack of perspectives for upward mobility.

## **7 Outlook**

Future research should encompass a comparison between living and working conditions of low-skilled migrant workers and other, higher skilled occupational groups in the sector. This could contribute to the development of an encompassing framework able to analyze labor and living conditions of workers in the wake of a Malaysian Bioeconomy. Within the scope of the Malaysian Bioeconomy program, the occupational group of refinery workers can shed light on the socio-economic impact of the BTP as the expansion of refineries to produce agrofuels for the global market is a concrete objective of the program (cf. BiotechCorp/MOSTI 2013). Two test interviews with refinery workers have already hinted that this group appears higher educated, has access to further training and skill-development and also have concrete future plans to achieve upward mobility.

It appears useful to concentrate further on the intersection of class and citizenship or nationality of the workers. Therefore, theoretical connecting lines between class and the status of workers as migrants must be drawn in order to understand in what way

migrant labor becomes socially degraded. Also, as different dimensions of social exclusion may reinforce each other, further research should be endorsed examining possibilities for political interventions as well as the transnational consequences of the structural social exclusion in Malaysia.

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