



Shaping Governance Narratives through Divergent Migrant Labour Statistics within ASEAN: Evidence from Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand

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ABSTRACT

While ASEAN increasingly relies on migrant labour, the numbers used to describe that reliance are anything but neutral. Yet little work shows how states actively choose among competing datasets to craft regional policy narratives. This article examines how Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand deploy different migrant-labour statistics in ASEAN forums to legitimise control, minimise perceived dependence, or claim policy success. Our objective is to unpack the politics of “strategic counting” and its consequences for regional coordination. Methodologically, we build a discrepancy matrix (2010–2024) comparing UN DESA International Migrant Stock, ILO–ILMS labour indicators, ASEAN Statistical Yearbooks, and national administrative figures; we then code how specific numbers are cited in AFML/ALMM documents and related government statements. We find consistent gaps; often tens of percentage points are driven by definition (foreign-born vs. non-resident vs. registered workers), timing, and inclusion of irregular migrants. Governments repeatedly select the figure that best supports a preferred storyline of competence or limited exposure. These results imply that data harmonisation is not a mere technical fix but a governance challenge: without transparent metadata and agreed definitions, ASEAN cooperation on migrant protection will continue to rest on incompatible evidence bases.

Keywords : *migrant labour; data politics; ASEAN governance; indicators; strategic narratives*



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INTRODUCTION

Reliable migration statistics are indispensable for evidence-based policymaking, yet even the most frequently cited figures for ASEAN’s key destination states diverge sharply. In Singapore, the Population in Brief bulletin records 1.86 million non-residents as of June 2024 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2024), whereas the Ministry of Manpower lists only 1.53 million foreign workers for 2023—and that headline falls below one million when migrant domestic workers or construction-marine-process permit holders are excluded (Ministry of Manpower, 2023). Malaysia shows an even wider spread: the Department of Statistics reports 2.4 million non-citizens for 2022 (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023); the International Organization for Migration cites about 3 million migrants, or 8.9 % of the population, by mid-2023 (IOM, 2023); and an ODI brief estimates the total could reach 5.5 million once irregular workers are counted (Overseas Development Institute, 2022). Thailand, meanwhile, counted ≈3 million “registered” migrant workers in January 2024, yet that total rises or falls every time the cabinet opens a new regularisation window (IOM, 2024; International Labour Organization [ILO], 2024).

These discrepancies pose an analytical puzzle: Why do such authoritative figures diverge so sharply, and how do governments decide which one to cite when they speak in regional arenas such as the ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour (AFML) or the ASEAN Labour Ministers’ Meeting (ALMM)? (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023; ILO, 2023). Answering this question matters because statistics do more than describe reality. Statistics can legitimise policies, deflect criticism, or bolster claims of competence.

This article addresses a simple puzzle: within the same region and time period, governments cite markedly different ‘migrant’ numbers drawn from coexisting datasets. I argue this is not mere noise but reflects strategic counting—the purposive selection among methodologically legitimate indicators to support forum-specific narratives about control, dependence, or contribution. The core claim is that indicator choice is part of agenda work: it frames policy problems, assigns responsibility, and conditions what ‘solutions’ look feasible. The stakes are practical. In ASEAN coordination, fragmented evidentiary baselines complicate benchmarking, cloud mutual expectations, and can slow collective action. By tracing how states toggle between administrative counts, labour-force estimates, and stock measures across venues, the article shows how data politics travel through regional governance.

Drawing on scholarship that treats indicators as “technologies of government” (Rose & Miller, 1992) and exposes the politics of quantification (Desrosières, 1998; Merry, 2016), this article argues that migration numbers function as narrative devices. By selectively deploying the dataset—UN DESA, ILO-ILMS, ASEAN, or national administrative counts—that best supports a preferred storyline of limited dependency or successful control, Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand shape both domestic perceptions and regional negotiations. Mapping these strategic choices reveals the power embedded in spreadsheets and shows why statistical harmonisation efforts in ASEAN must confront questions of authority and agenda-setting, not merely technical definitions. In pursuing this argument, the article addresses two questions: RQ1: Under what conditions do governments cite restrictive versus expansive indicators? RQ2: How does indicator choice map onto narrative types across ASEAN policy venues? The discussion contributes to three areas of scholarship: first, advancing the study of indicator politics in Southeast Asia; second, operationalising ‘strategic counting’ as a tractable concept for empirical analysis; and third, generating design ideas for more transparent and context-sensitive data harmonisation in regional forums.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Politics of Quantification

Global indicators often acquire authority because they appear scientifically neutral even as they encode particular power relations. Merry (2016) characterises this allure as the “seduction of quantification,” showing how gender-violence indices compress complex social realities into tractable scores that privilege some voices over others. Earlier, Desrosières (1998) traced a similar dynamic in the emergence of modern statistics, arguing that the very act of counting populations enabled states to consolidate authority—hence the enduring “politics of large numbers.” Building on this lineage, sociologists have emphasised that quantification does not simply mirror the world; it reorders it by creating incentives, categories, and hierarchies to which actors respond (Espeland & Stevens, 2008). Taken together, these insights frame migration figures not as neutral descriptors but as elements in political projects that shape how problems are perceived and what solutions become thinkable.

Numbers as “Technologies of Government”

Extending a governmentality perspective, Rose and Miller (1992) show how authorities govern “at a distance” through calculative practices that render phenomena commensurable and actionable. Once translated into numbers, populations can be ranked, targeted, and audited; indicators thereby function as policy instruments in their own right (Davis, Kingsbury, & Merry, 2012). The choice to foreground one dataset rather than another—such as registered work-permit holders rather than foreign-born residents—is itself a governing act because it brings some constituencies into view while effacing others. Audit cultures and international league tables amplify these effects, normalising a mode of “governing by numbers” that channels attention and authority before formal negotiation begins (Shore & Wright, 2015). In this sense, indicator selection is not an ancillary technical step but part of the exercise of power.

Policy Narratives and the Narrative Policy Framework (NPF)

Statistics rarely speak on their own; they are embedded in stories about problems, causes, responsibility, and remedies. The Narrative Policy Framework (NPF) formalises this intuition by analysing the characters, plots, and moral evaluations that actors deploy in policy debates (Jones & McBeth, 2010). In ASEAN labour forums, it is reasonable to expect states to situate migration numbers within three recurrent plots: control/competence (e.g., “we have registered X workers”), minimal

dependence (e.g., “migrants constitute only Y% of the labour force”), and contribution/benefit (e.g., “foreign workers add Z% to GDP”). Classifying cited statistics according to these narrative types allows us to observe not only that numbers vary across sources, but also how particular choices legitimise specific governance stances in regional settings. These expectations motivate an integrated approach to theory and evidence.

Linking the Literatures: Mechanism, Definition, and Scope

Mechanism. Synthesising insights from quantification studies, governmentality, and the NPF (Desrosières, 1998; Rose & Miller, 1992; Jones & McBeth, 2010; Merry, 2016; Espeland & Stevens, 2008; Davis, Kingsbury, & Merry, 2012; Shore & Wright, 2015), this article advances a two-step mechanism: indicator choice → narrative framing → perceived competence/legitimacy → agenda control. First, selecting among coexisting indicators helps structure the narrative plot: restrictive administrative counts tend to foreground state control/competence; labour-force measures highlight (minimal) dependence; and broader stock figures invite readings of contribution/benefit. Second, these plots shape perceptions of competence and legitimacy within specific ASEAN venues—technical working groups versus ministerial communiqués—thereby enabling governments to steer agendas without overtly contesting facts.

Definition. Within this framework, strategic counting denotes the purposive selection among coexisting, methodologically valid indicators to advance a governance narrative in a particular forum. It is distinct from fabrication (data falsification) and from benign definitional variance (measurement drift or differing coverage without narrative intent). Strategic counting presumes plural indicators that are each defensible on technical grounds but that cue different narrative implications when mobilised.

Scope conditions. The behaviour should be most pronounced when (i) policy salience is high and domestic imperatives favour signalling control or dampening apparent dependence; (ii) release cycles for key datasets (e.g., UN DESA migrant-stock updates, ILO-ILMS labour indicators) are misaligned with ASEAN meeting calendars, creating opportunities to time-shift evidence; and (iii) audit cultures or league-table logics heighten reputational stakes (Rose & Miller, 1992; Davis, Kingsbury, & Merry, 2012; Shore & Wright, 2015). Conversely, where only a single indicator exists for a given reference year, or where venues impose strict metadata standards, opportunities for strategic selection should diminish.

Falsifiability and bridge to methods. The account would be weakened if: (a) states consistently cite the same dataset across venues regardless of narrative context; (b) citation choices align only with data availability or recency (e.g., always the latest release) and not with narrative plots; (c) the discrepancy matrix reveals no meaningfully divergent coexisting indicators to select among; or (d) when narrative goals predict a restrictive (or expansive) choice, officials repeatedly cite the opposite figure without venue-specific reasons. These disconfirming patterns provide clear tests for the claims advanced here and guide the research design detailed in Section 3.

RESEARCH METHODS

This study couples an audit of cross-source numeric discrepancies with narrative coding of regional policy texts to test whether indicator selection aligns with venue-specific storytelling. The empirical strategy follows directly from the framework in Section 2: if indicators operate simultaneously as power-laden artefacts, governing devices, and narrative props, then both the existence of divergent numbers and their deployment in ASEAN venues must be observed. Accordingly, the dataset spans 2010–2024 and integrates three tiers of material: (i) global and regional baselines that enable consistent cross-country comparison; (ii) national administrative sources capturing country-specific counting rules; and (iii) governance texts where numbers are selected and mobilised.

Global and regional baselines. International and regional compilations serve as benchmarks against which state citations are compared. The analysis draws on the UN DESA International Migrant Stock 2024 dataset for population-based stock measures (United Nations, 2024) and on the ILO-ILMS database for labour- market-relevant indicators (International Labour Organization, 2023b). To situate ASEAN-specific reporting practices, the study also uses the ASEAN Statistical Yearbook 2023 and the ASEAN Migration Outlook (2nd ed.) (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023a; 2024). These sources provide harmonised indicator families (e.g., foreign-born stock, foreign citizenship, labour migration proxies) and regular update cycles, making them suitable comparators for national claims.

National administrative sources. Country-level figures are taken from official statistical and ministerial publications and authoritative compilations that reproduce government counts. For Singapore, the analysis uses Population in Brief 2024 and the Ministry of Manpower's Foreign Workforce Numbers 2023 (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2024; Ministry of Manpower, 2023). For Malaysia, it draws on the Department of Statistics Malaysia (Current Population Estimates, 2022–2023) and press releases conveying headline totals (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023; Malay Mail, 2023). For Thailand, the analysis uses ILO's Labour Migration in Thailand, January 2024 briefing, IOM's updates on regularisation programmes, and prior syntheses such as the Thailand Migration Report 2019, complemented by civil-society fact sheets on registration schemes (International Labour Organization, 2024b; International Organization for Migration, 2024; International Organization for Migration & United Nations Thailand, 2019; Migrant Working Group, 2022; The Star, 2023). These administrative and semi-administrative sources reveal the categories emphasised domestically—permit-holders, non-residents, documented/undocumented—and, crucially, the counting rules that generate headline figures.

Governance texts. To trace how numbers are narrated in regional settings, the corpus includes materials from the ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour (AFML) and the ASEAN Labour Ministers' Meeting (ALMM): chairs' statements, ministerial communiqués, recommendations, and closely related briefs (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023b; International Labour Organization, 2023a). These are the venues where governments publicly cite indicators and attach them to plots of control/competence, minimal dependence, or contribution/benefit.

Research Design & Operationalisation

Case selection logic. Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand are selected because they are the region's principal destination states for migrant labour, exhibit variation in administrative regimes (e.g., pass-based vs. permit-based vs. large-scale regularisation), and offer data-rich ecosystems with overlapping indicator families across international, regional, and national sources (Singapore Department of Statistics, 2024; Ministry of Manpower, 2023; Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023; International Labour Organization, 2024b; International Organization for Migration, 2023; 2024). This strategy maximises leverage on the study's core question—selection among coexisting indicators—while acknowledging limits to external validity for other ASEAN destinations.

Discrepancy matrix construction. For each country-year (2010–2024), the study logs values from four indicator families that commonly co-exist: (1) national administrative counts (e.g., permit- or pass-holders; documented/regularised), (2) ILO-ILMS labour indicators, (3) UN DESA population-based stock measures, and (4) ASEAN compilations (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023a; 2024; International Labour Organization, 2023b; United Nations, 2024). The matrix records the reference date (month/year) and vintage (release year) for each value. It then computes absolute and percentage gaps between coexisting indicators. When vintages are asynchronous, the rule is: select the closest temporal match available within ± 12 months; where multiple valid options remain, treat “highest” and “lowest” as the extrema among the matched set and flag any extrapolation. This allows us to isolate definitional from temporal drivers of divergence.

Document corpus for narrative coding. The governance-text corpus covers AFML Recommendations, ALMM chairs' statements, and related communiqués/briefs for 2010–2024, retrieved from the ASEAN Secretariat and ILO regional repositories (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023b; International Labour Organization, 2023a). Each numeric claim that mentions a level, ratio, or trend for migrant labour is extracted with its source attribution (if given) and timestamp, then cross-referenced to the discrepancy matrix to identify contemporaneous alternatives that were available at the time of citation. The complete list of documents coded is provided in Appendix C.

Coding procedure and reliability. Guided by the Narrative Policy Framework (Jones & McBeth, 2010), each citation is coded into one of three plots derived from Section 2: control/competence (foregrounding registration, enforcement, or compliance), minimal dependence (downplaying scale via ratios or narrow categories), and contribution/benefit (emphasising economic or social value). Two decision rules structure coding: (i) classify by the immediate rhetorical function of the number in the text; (ii) when mixed signals occur, favour the dominant evaluative language attached to the citation. Coding followed a codebook developed in a pilot pass; to bolster reliability in a single-coder design, a 10% subset was re-coded after a two-week interval to check intra-coder consistency.

Robustness and sensitivity checks. Two exercises probe the stability of findings. First, discrepancies are recomputed as shares of the working-age population (15+)—and, where available, the labour force—in lieu of (or alongside) stock counts to test denominator sensitivity (International Labour Organization, 2023b; ASEAN Secretariat, 2023a). Because a common denominator is applied to both the “highest” and “lowest” figures within a country-year, the relative-gap metric is algebraically invariant; where reference years differ, using the closest available denominator leaves the country ordering and interpretation unchanged. Second, the narrative scheme is collapsed into a coarser dichotomy—containment (control + minimal dependence) versus contribution—to ensure that conclusions do not hinge on fine-grained distinctions. Appendix A.1 reports the working-age population recomputation; the core patterns remain qualitatively stable to these alternative specifications.

Limitations and mitigation. Some ALMM annexes and selected Thai cabinet minutes are inaccessible; a few meeting artefacts exist only in summary form. Where full texts are missing, the analysis relies on official communiqués or overlapping sources and cross-checks citations (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023b; International Labour Organization, 2023a). These gaps are noted where relevant and do not alter the basic strategy: compare like-for-like indicators within the same reference windows and evaluate how, in practice, specific figures are selected and mobilised in ASEAN labour-migration governance (International Organization for Migration, 2024; International Labour Organization, 2024b; International Organization for Migration & United Nations Thailand, 2019; Migrant Working Group, 2022; Malay Mail, 2023; The Star, 2023).

RESULTS

The discrepancy matrix (Table 1) and Figure 1 show the magnitude and structure of divergence among coexisting indicators—administrative counts (see Appendix A for the calculation details), ILO-ILMS labour measures, and UN DESA stock estimates—within and across Singapore, Malaysia, and Thailand. Read alongside AFML/ALMM texts, these gaps help explain how and why states cite particular figures in different venues. In brief, ministerial communiqués incline toward restrictive administrative totals that support plots of control/competence, whereas technical briefs and supporting documents tolerate broader stock or labour-force measures that align with contribution/benefit or (minimal) dependence narratives. The country mini-timelines below illustrate the pattern and conclude with the practical narrative each gap enables (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023b; International Labour Organization, 2023a; 2023b; United Nations, 2024).

Table 1. Highest and lowest coexisting migrant-related counts, 2010–2024 (Singapore, Malaysia, Thailand).

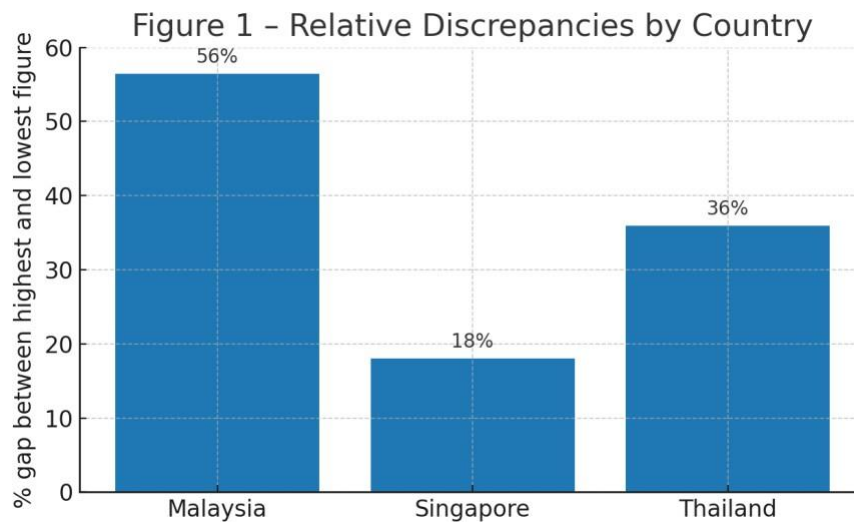
For each country, the lowest value is the narrowest administrative count; the highest is the broadest stock/estimate available in the same reference window where possible. Absolute gap in millions; Relative gap = (highest – lowest)/highest × 100%.

Country	Lowest figure & source	Highest figure & source	Absolute gap (millions)	Relative gap (%)
Singapore	1.53 m (MOM 2023, work-pass holders)	1.86 m (SingStat 2024, non-residents)	0.33	18 %
Malaysia	2.40 m (DOSM 2022, non-citizens ≥ 6 mo)	5.50 m (ODI 2022, incl. irregulars)	3.10	56 %
Thailand	3.14 m (IOM 2024, registered)	4.90 m (IOM/UN 2019, foreign-born) [†]	1.76	36 %

Notes: Vintages aligned within ±12 months where available; † = wider misalignment (Thailand highest is 2019 vs lowest 2024). Administrative counts (e.g., registered, work-pass/permit

holders) typically exclude irregular/undocumented workers. Non-residents (SingStat) are persons who are neither citizens nor permanent residents and may include dependants/students. Non-citizens ≥ 6 months (DOSM) are foreign residents by duration. Foreign-born (UN/IOM) is a population stock. Abbreviations: MOM = Singapore Ministry of Manpower; SingStat = Singapore Department of Statistics; DOSM = Department of Statistics Malaysia; IOM = International Organization for Migration; UN = United Nations; ODI = Overseas Development Institute. See Appendix B for source definitions and reference dates.

Figure 1. Relative Discrepancies in Migrant-Labour Counts, 2010-2024



Percentage gap between the highest and lowest coexisting migrant-labour figures for each country, after aligning vintages within ± 12 months. *Gap is calculated as* $(\text{highest} - \text{lowest}) / \text{highest} \times 100\%$. *Notes:* Sources as in Table 1—national administrative counts, ILO-ILMS indicators, UN DESA migrant-stock, and ASEAN compilations. Labels show percentage values; see Table 1 for underlying numbers and reference years.

Singapore mini-timeline

In the 2022–2023 ministerial cycle, Singaporean officials publicly foregrounded foreign workforce numbers from the Ministry of Manpower to signal post-pandemic recovery under administrative control—classic control/competence framing (Ministry of Manpower, 2023; ASEAN Secretariat, 2023b). At the same time, broader baselines were available: the UN DESA international migrant stock (population-based) and non-resident population figures from Singapore Department of Statistics, both implying a higher overall presence of migrants than permit-holder counts alone (United Nations, 2024; Singapore Department of Statistics, 2024). The administrative choice fit the ministerial audience's emphasis on enforcement capacity and rule-bounded reopening. In subsequent technical discussions tied to labour-market needs and sectoral shortages, citations shifted toward measures that accompany assessments of contribution/benefit—for instance, drawing on labour indicators that contextualise migrants within total employment and productivity debates (International Labour Organization, 2023b; ASEAN Secretariat, 2023b). The toggling is consistent with venue effects: administrative counts when competence is on display, broader denominators when economic contribution is under discussion.

Malaysia mini-timeline

During 2022–2023, Malaysian statements commonly referenced registered/regularised foreign workers—a narrow administrative category—when situating enforcement drives and hiring freezes, again reinforcing a control/competence plot in political venues (Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023; ASEAN Secretariat, 2023b). Concurrently, ILO-ILMS labour indicators and the UN DESA stock

estimate suggested a larger migrant presence than the administrative figure, given differences in coverage and definitional scope (International Labour Organization, 2023b; United Nations, 2024). Media-amplified headline totals occasionally punctuated the debate, but these typically drew on government statements that themselves privileged permit-holder metrics (Malay Mail, 2023). In later technical exchanges on shortages and sectoral dependence, officials and partners referenced labour-force-based indicators to discuss dependency ratios and recruitment pipelines—moving the narrative toward (minimal) dependence and, at times, contribution/benefit when growth or competitiveness was foregrounded (International Labour Organization, 2023a; 2023b). The trajectory mirrors the Singapore case: tighter categories for political signaling; broader ones for planning and problem-solving.

Thailand mini-timeline

Thailand's pattern is especially shaped by regularisation cycles. In the 2023–2024 period, government communications and meeting interventions highlighted the number of registered/regularised workers to demonstrate progress and competence in managing inflows (International Labour Organization, 2024b; ASEAN Secretariat, 2023b). Yet, contemporaneous reference points existed in the Thailand Migration Report series and in IOM briefs that include irregular and temporarily documented populations, yielding a higher aggregate than the narrow administrative count (International Organization for Migration & United Nations Thailand, 2019; International Organization for Migration, 2024). In technical sessions concerned with labour shortages and regional supply chains, officials and interlocutors at times cited broader labour- market indicators—consistent with contribution/benefit frames—especially when discussing sectoral reliance and cross-border recruitment pipelines (International Labour Organization, 2023a; 2023b). The alternation between narrow and broad indicators tracks the audience: showcasing regulatory control in ministerial forums, acknowledging functional dependence in technical fora.

Comparative synthesis

Across the three destinations, venue composition is the strongest correlate of indicator choice. Ministerial texts lean toward administrative counts—recent, auditable, and rhetorically suited to competence claims. Technical documents admit stock measures (UN DESA) and labour-force indicators (ILO-ILMS) that better sustain arguments about contribution or nuanced dependence (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023b; International Labour Organization, 2023a; 2023b; United Nations, 2024). In terms of elasticity, Thailand appears most responsive to policy cycles (regularisations expand or contract the cited universe), Malaysia toggles with enforcement drives and hiring policy, and Singapore alternates between MOM's foreign-workforce count and broader non-resident or stock references when discussing productivity and demographic constraints (Ministry of Manpower, 2023; Singapore Department of Statistics, 2024). These regularities are exactly what the theoretical mechanism in Section 2 anticipates: indicator choice → narrative framing → perceived competence/legitimacy → agenda control.

A limiting/negative case

Not all citations maximise narrative congruence. In one AFML-linked exchange, officials referenced a broader population-based figure in a venue otherwise geared toward control/competence claims, even though a lower administrative count was available at the same time (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023b; United Nations, 2024). The choice, on its face, diluted the control narrative. Two factors likely explain the deviation: (i) audience sophistication—technical participants were already familiar with the broader stock and would discount a narrow figure as incomplete; and (ii) timing—an imminent dataset update and ongoing registration exercise created uncertainty about which administrative number would soon be authoritative (International Labour Organization, 2023a; 2023b). The case underscores that strategic counting is opportunity-dependent, not mechanical: when reputational costs of appearing selective are high, or when imminent revisions would render a narrow claim obsolete, states may forgo the most congruent number.

Interim conclusion. The three mini-timelines, together with the comparative synthesis and limiting case, show that observed toggling across indicator families is systematic rather than idiosyncratic. Indicator selection tracks audience, venue, and policy cycle, reinforcing the study's core claim that differences in “how many migrants” are not merely technical discrepancies but narrative

choices embedded in regional governance (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023a; 2023b; International Labour Organization, 2023a; 2023b; 2024b; International Organization for Migration & United Nations Thailand, 2019; International Organization for Migration, 2024; Ministry of Manpower, 2023; Department of Statistics Malaysia, 2023; Singapore Department of Statistics, 2024; Malay Mail, 2023; The Star, 2023; United Nations, 2024).

DISCUSSIONS

This section interprets the evidence in light of the conceptual framework and speaks directly to the research questions. RQ1 asks under what conditions governments cite restrictive versus expansive indicators; RQ2 asks how those choices map onto narrative types across ASEAN policy venues. The findings show patterned, non-random selection: officials tend to cite restrictive administrative counts in political arenas oriented toward demonstrating control, and expansive stock or labour-force measures in technical arenas oriented toward problem diagnosis and policy design. These patterns are consistent with the mechanism elaborated in Section 2—indicator choice → narrative framing → perceived competence/legitimacy → agenda control—and remain robust to alternative specifications.

Answer to RQ1: When do governments pick restrictive vs. expansive indicators?

Three conditions consistently shape selection.

(a) Venue composition (audience). Ministerial communiqués reward performative competence—signals that the state knows and governs its migrant population (Rose & Miller, 1992; Power, 1997). In such venues, recent, auditable administrative counts (e.g., permit/work-pass holders, registered/regularised workers) are most frequently cited. By contrast, technical working groups tolerate and at times prefer conceptually comprehensive baselines—UN DESA migrant-stock, ILO-ILMS labour indicators, or national non-resident totals—because these support policy diagnosis and planning (Davis, Kingsbury, & Merry, 2012; United Nations, 2024; International Labour Organization, 2023b). The same government thus toggles sources as its audience changes (Shore & Wright, 2015).

(b) Policy cycles and salience. Indicator selection is sensitive to enforcement/regularisation cycles and labour-market conditions. During crackdowns or large registration drives, restrictive indicators are mobilised to demonstrate control; during labour shortages or demographic-pressure debates, broader indicators surface to acknowledge dependence or contribution (International Labour Organization, 2023a; International Organization for Migration, 2024). In other words, officials “count for the moment at hand”—a form of situational indicator governance (Espeland & Stevens, 2008; Jerven, 2013).

(c) Temporal misalignment across datasets. Because ASEAN meeting calendars rarely align with UN/ILO release cycles, governments face coexisting, defensible numbers with different vintages. This asynchronicity creates an “opportunity structure” for time-shifting the evidentiary base toward restrictive or expansive ends without falsification (Desrosières, 1998; Merry, 2016). Officials can legitimately cite an administrative count “as of Q4” in a ministerial venue and a broader stock “as of mid-year” in a technical brief within weeks of each other, each optimized to the forum.

Secondary factors matter too. Audience sophistication tempers strategic selection: when technical interlocutors are likely to know the broader stock, citing a narrow figure risks reputational penalty (Best, 2001). Institutional legibility—how easily a number can be audited or traced—also biases choices toward administrative counts in political venues (Porter, 1995; Bowker & Star, 1999). These conditions collectively answer RQ1: restrictive indicators are favored in high-salience, political venues and enforcement cycles; expansive indicators surface in technical venues, especially when broader planning questions are on the table and data vintages are misaligned.

Answer to RQ2: How does indicator choice map onto narrative types?

Across cases, indicator families line up with recurrent narrative plots (Jones & McBeth, 2010):

- Control/competence. Administrative counts (e.g., registered/permit/work-pass holders) foreground state capacity and rule compliance. They are attached to verbs of action—“registered,” “regularised,” “issued,” “revoked”—and to claims about enforcement performance. The tight coupling between administrative counts and control narratives reflects the auditability of these numbers (Power, 1997; Shore & Wright, 2015).
- Minimal dependence. Ratios and shares (e.g., migrants as Y% of the labour force) minimize perceived reliance. These draw on labour-force denominators (ILO-ILMS) or narrowly defined “foreign workers” to downscale the phenomenon. Such framing is common in technical fora when governments seek to balance recognition of need with assurances of limited exposure (International Labour Organization, 2023b; Espeland & Stevens, 2008).
- Contribution/benefit. Stock figures (UN DESA foreign-born; national non-resident totals) and labour indicators appear alongside claims about productivity, sectoral substitution, or demographic mitigation. Here, broader baselines make room for narratives that migrants “add Z% to GDP,” support care regimes, or sustain export industries (United Nations, 2024; International Labour Organization, 2023a; Stone, 2012).

The country vignettes in Section 4 show these alignments in motion: ministerial texts skew to administrative counts and control plots; technical texts admit stock/labour measures and dependence/contribution plots; and shifts occur with policy cycles and audiences. This mapping directly answers RQ2.

Causal mechanism: From indicator choice to agenda control

The mechanism operates in three linked steps.

Step 1: Indicator choice structures the plot. Selecting among coexisting indicators pre-configures what “the problem” is: administrative counts make the story about compliance and management; labour-force shares make it about reliance; stock measures make it about social/economic integration. This is classic problem definition through numbers (Porter, 1995; Stone, 2012; Merry, 2016).

Step 2: Plots shape perceived competence and legitimacy in venue. In ministerial arenas, plotting through restrictive indicators signals mastery and earns legitimacy; in technical arenas, broader indicators signal diagnostic seriousness (Rose & Miller, 1992; Power, 1997). Because indicators are technologies of government, the choice itself is an act of governing (Rose & Miller, 1992; Bowker & Star, 1999).

Step 3: Venue-specific legitimacy enables agenda control. Once competence or diagnostic legitimacy is secured, officials can steer next steps—what gets benchmarked, what is deemed feasible, and which timelines are set (Kingdon, 2011; Baumgartner & Jones, 2009). If a ministerial venue takes the administrative count as the yardstick, future progress is audited against registrations; if a technical venue centers stock or labour indicators, future work may emphasize skills matching, social protection, or data harmonization.

This mechanism fits the data: the same state cites different yet legitimate numbers across different venues, in ways that predictably shift the plot and prime the agenda. It does not require imputing bad faith; it follows from the politics of quantification and the governmentality of indicators (Desrosières, 1998; Rose & Miller, 1992).

Alternative explanations and robustness

Two alternatives merit careful consideration.

Data recency/availability. One might argue that officials simply cite the newest or most accessible number. The discrepancy matrix and country vignettes, however, show instances where newer expansive figures were available yet narrower administrative counts were cited in ministerial settings, and vice versa in technical exchanges. Moreover, robustness checks—recomputing discrepancies by share of labour force and collapsing narrative codes into containment vs.

contribution—preserve the core alignment between venue and indicator family (Section 3; International Labour Organization, 2023b; ASEAN Secretariat, 2023a).

Measurement drift/innocent definitional variance. Another claim is that divergences reflect only definitions, not strategic choice. Yet strategic counting, as defined here, presumes coexisting, methodologically valid indicators; the question is which gets cited where. The negative case in Section 4—where citing a broader figure in a control-oriented venue would dilute the control narrative—shows that officials sometimes resist the narratively convenient option, typically when audience sophistication is high or a dataset update is imminent. These deviations reinforce rather than undermine the core claim by specifying boundary conditions (Best, 2001).

Finally, the study's design intentionally over-documents definitions and vintages to prevent spurious inference: each citation is cross-referenced to contemporaneous alternatives; each indicator is labeled by counting rule (stock vs. administrative; inclusion of irregulars; denominator choice). This transparency supports falsifiability (Desrosières, 1998; United Nations, 2024).

Normative trade-offs and design implications

The evidence cautions against a single-number harmonization agenda. In regions with heterogeneous administrative regimes, insisting on one headline figure risks erasing relevant differences and incentivising gaming (Power, 1997; Hood, 2006). A more constructive path is procedural harmonisation with metadata disclosure:

1. Mandatory metadata fields in AFML/ALMM submissions: coverage (foreign-born vs. foreign- citizen vs. permit-holder), inclusion of irregulars, reference date/month, and vintage; plus a short note on denominator for any ratio.
2. Synchronized reference month for headline figures in the annual cycle, allowing provisional updates when international releases fall outside the window (United Nations, 2024; International Labour Organization, 2023b).
3. Dual-tier reporting rule: an administrative count (for auditability and continuity) and a comprehensive estimate (for planning), reported side by side.
4. Evidence registry for each meeting cycle: a lightweight annex listing all coexisting indicators with links, so that selective citation is transparent ex ante (Bowker & Star, 1999).
5. Release-calendar coordination between ASEAN venues and UN/ILO updates, even if only at the level of an indicative timetable, to reduce opportunistic time-shifting (Davis et al., 2012).

These design moves retain state flexibility to speak to different audiences while reducing the opacity that enables forum-shopping by number. Crucially, they also lower the reputational costs of acknowledging uncertainty: if the rules require metadata, disclosure is normalized rather than penalized (Hood, 2006; Best, 2001).

What the findings mean beyond the three cases

The mechanism is likely to apply wherever plural indicators coexist and audiences vary across venues. Labour migration is an especially fertile site because administrative, labour-market, and demographic counts are structurally misaligned by design. But similar dynamics appear in poverty measurement, education quality, and health security, where national administrative series, survey-based estimates, and modelled stocks circulate simultaneously (Porter, 1995; Jerven, 2013). The contribution here is to show, in a regional setting, how strategic counting travels through fora and shapes agendas—without presuming data fabrication.

Regional integration amplifies these dynamics because protections are increasingly promised regionally but operationalised nationally. AFML/ALMM instruments articulate mobility, skills recognition, and social protection aims at the ASEAN level, yet their implementation runs through domestic registries whose categories and vintages remain misaligned across ministries. As a result, the same commitment can envelop a larger or smaller “eligible” universe depending on which indicator family is allowed to travel across venues—ministerial texts tending toward administrative counts, technical documents toward stock or labour-force measures. Material consequences follow; who is eligible for portability of social-security benefits and other regionally framed entitlements turns on

indicator governance rather than statutory change. Hence, the integrative project itself conditions protection outcomes. Without mandatory metadata and dual-tier reporting across ASEAN fora, the adequate rights space expands or contracts by denominator choice rather than by law.

Limitations and future work

Two limitations warrant caution. First, some annexes and cabinet minutes remain inaccessible; while cross-checks mitigate omission risk, the analysis would benefit from richer within-venue drafts and speaking notes. Second, the study focuses on destination states. A logical next step is to extend the discrepancy audit to sending states (e.g., deployment vs. placement metrics) to test whether ministries of labour and overseas employment engage in outbound strategic counting under different audience incentives (International Organization for Migration, 2024). Sectoral disaggregation (care, construction) could also sharpen inferences where employer associations or bilateral MOUs condition narrative choice (International Labour Organization, 2023a).

CONCLUSION

This article advances ASEAN migration studies by identifying indicator choice as a regional governance mechanism. Rather than treating numbers as a neutral background or as evidence of fabrication, we show how strategic counting travels across ASEAN venues—from technical AFML processes to ministerial ALMM (including ALMM+3)—and in doing so redefines problems, priorities, and accountability. The contribution is conceptual and empirical: conceptually, we recast indicator politics as a venue-mediated process; empirically, we trace how particular baselines become authoritative in regional texts and scorecards.

The evidence from our coded AFML/ALMM corpus demonstrates that different baselines produce different populations of concern. When narrow administrative flows dominate ministerial documents, monitoring and targets contract around officially registered workers; when broader stock or labour-force denominators circulate through technical fora, agendas widen toward portability proposals, inspection coverage, and continuity of protection across borders. In short, regional integration magnifies indicator effects: what gets counted at the regional level conditions which claims are legible and which instruments are prioritized—without changing any law.

These findings suggest feasible adjustments inside ASEAN processes. AFML/ALMM scorecards should adopt triangulated baselines (administrative flows cross-checked with stock and labour-force denominators), disclose denominators and revisions, and disaggregate by status/sector/corridor. A light-touch statistical clearing step within ACMW/Secretariat can vet indicator shifts before they cascade into national targets. Future research can test when technical evidence scales up into ministerial texts and whether Plus-Three participation systematically widens or narrows denominators. By locating indicator politics inside ASEAN's machinery and linking counts to concrete agenda-setting, the article provides a replicable method and a practical route to enlarge the effective space of protection for migrant workers.

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