



Legal Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers under Sustainable Development Goal 8: The Applus+ Karratha Case in Western Australia

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Informasi Artikel

Article history:

Received Sept 12th, 2026

Revised Oct 9th, 2026

Accepted Oct 25th, 2026

Keywords:

Indonesian migrant workers; Legal protection; Decent work; Sustainable Development Goal; Enterprise agreements; Western Australia.

ABSTRACT

This study examined the legal protection of Indonesian migrant workers employed at Applus+ Karratha, Western Australia, in relation to Sustainable Development Goal 8 on decent work. It applied a normative juridical approach, drawing on Indonesian and Australian legislation, international labour standards, and a limited semi structured interview with the company's human resources/legal representative. The analysis found that the employer reported direct recruitment and visa sponsorship, working conditions governed by an enterprise agreement, equal employment entitlements, uniform safety requirements, internal complaint channels, and access to trade union or legal assistance. These reported arrangements broadly corresponded with the rights based dimensions of Targets 8.5 and 8.8. However, mechanisms relevant to Target 8.7 could not by themselves establish the absence of exploitation. Since the empirical material was limited to an employer representative and no payroll, agreement or worker level records were independently reviewed, the findings established reported policy alignment rather than verified implementation. The study concluded that workplace level legal protection should be assessed through both formal legal compliance and accessible, independently verifiable remedies.



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INTRODUCTION

International labour migration has become an important component of contemporary economic globalization. Workers increasingly cross national borders in search of employment opportunities, better remuneration, professional development, and improved living standards. Labour migration therefore has an economic dimension, but it also raises significant legal and human rights questions concerning the protection of workers who perform employment outside their country of nationality. The economic opportunities of migration should therefore be evaluated alongside labour-market vulnerability and the accessibility of enforceable rights, rather than solely in terms of employment or remittance gains (Wright & Clibborn, 2020). Global migration patterns are documented by the International Organization for Migration (2024).

Indonesia is one of the countries in which international labour migration constitutes an important socio economic phenomenon. Indonesian migrant workers contribute to household welfare and national development through employment income and remittances. Their overseas employment may also facilitate the acquisition of professional skills and international work experience. Nevertheless, the economic contribution of migrant workers must be accompanied by adequate legal protection. The benefits of labour migration cannot justify the acceptance of discriminatory, unsafe, exploitative, or otherwise inadequate working conditions. Studies of temporary migrants in Australia illustrate how labour-market participation may coexist with underpayment and limited practical access to redress (Berg & Farbenblum, 2017).

The legal position of migrant workers is particularly complex because employment takes place across jurisdictions. Indonesian migrant workers remain Indonesian citizens and are consequently connected to the legal and institutional responsibilities of the Indonesian state. At the same time, once they work in another country, their employment relationship is governed substantially by the law of the host state. International labour standards further provide a normative framework concerning fundamental labour rights and the treatment of migrant workers. Comparative scholarship also shows that the design of employer-linked migration schemes can influence workers' bargaining power even where formal employment protections remain applicable (Clibborn & Wright, 2023).

Australia provides an important context for examining this interaction. Australian employment law establishes a comprehensive regulatory framework concerning minimum employment standards, workplace rights, employment agreements, dispute resolution, and occupational health and safety. Under the Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth), the National Employment Standards constitute minimum standards applying to national system employees, while enterprise agreements operate within that statutory framework (Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth), ss. 44, 55, 61). The current Federal Register compilation confirms that the Act remains in force as amended through July 2026.

Australian law also recognizes the workplace rights of migrant workers. The Fair Work Ombudsman states that migrant workers and visa holders have the same workplace rights and protections as other employees in Australia, including rights concerning pay, leave, discrimination, termination, and other employment entitlements (Fair Work Ombudsman, n.d.). The Western Australian context is particularly relevant to this study because the case examined is located in Karratha. Occupational health and safety is governed by the Work Health and Safety Act 2020 (WA) and associated regulations. These provisions establish the statutory framework for workplace health and safety in Western Australia.

The case of Applus+ Karratha provides a concrete setting in which these legal frameworks can be examined. Indonesian workers employed by Applus+ operate within the Australian employment system while maintaining their status as Indonesian migrant workers. This makes the company an appropriate case for examining whether legal protection available under Australian law is reflected in the employment practices experienced by Indonesian workers. The issue is particularly relevant when considered through the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Sustainable Development Goal 8 seeks to promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment, and decent work for all (United Nations, 2015). Prior Australian research demonstrates why formal rights must be distinguished from remedies that migrants can actually use: impediments to wage recovery and workplace complaints may persist notwithstanding statutory entitlements (Farbenblum & Berg, 2017).

Three targets are particularly relevant to migrant worker protection. Target 8.5 calls for full and productive employment and decent work for all, together with equal pay for work of equal value. Target 8.7 concerns the eradication of forced labour, modern slavery and human trafficking. Target 8.8 specifically requires the protection of labour rights and the promotion of safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers (United Nations, 2015). The concept of decent work was developed by the International Labour Organization (ILO) as an overarching framework for work performed under conditions of freedom, equity, security, and human dignity. The ILO's Decent Work Agenda is structured around four strategic objectives: employment creation, rights at work, social protection, and social dialogue (International Labour Organization [ILO], 1999; ILO, 2017). The decent-work concept also raises a measurement problem: legal and policy commitments do not, without workplace evidence, establish job quality or workers' lived experience (Burchell et al., 2014). The interdependence of sustainability targets is also discussed by Le Blanc (2015).

The analysis addresses two interrelated questions: first, how Indonesian workers at Applus+ Karratha are protected under the applicable national and international frameworks; and second, how the employer reported arrangements relate to SDG 8, especially Targets 8.5, 8.7 and 8.8. The study is significant because it moves beyond a general examination of migrant worker protection and examines the interaction between legal norms and workplace implementation in a specific employment setting. It also contributes to the discussion of decent work by examining migrant worker protection within a cross border employment relationship.

Indonesian Law No. 18 of 2017 on the Protection of Indonesian Migrant Workers provides a relevant country of origin framework; it should be read alongside, rather than substituted for, the labour

law applicable at the Australian workplace. In Australia, the distinction between immigration regulation and enforceable labour rights is decisive: the Fair Work Ombudsman explains that migration status does not displace minimum workplace entitlements (Republic of Indonesia, 2017; Fair Work Ombudsman, n.d.).

The contribution of this case study is analytical rather than representative: it tests whether declared workplace arrangements can be mapped to measurable dimensions of decent work while explicitly distinguishing legal entitlement, employer assertion and verified worker experience. This distinction is important because the existence of a grievance channel does not demonstrate its effective or retaliation free use (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2017; United Nations, 2015). This distinction responds to research identifying gaps between statutory rights, worker bargaining power and effective access to remedies in Australia (Berg & Farbenblum, 2017; Clibborn & Wright, 2023).

RESEARCH METHOD

This study employs a normative juridical approach supported by limited empirical data. The normative component examines legal rules governing Indonesian migrant workers under Indonesian law, Australian employment law, and relevant international legal instruments. The study uses three approaches. First, the statutory approach is used to examine relevant legislation, particularly Indonesian regulations concerning migrant workers, the Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth), and the Work Health and Safety Act 2020 (WA). Second, the conceptual approach is used to examine the concepts of legal protection, migrant worker rights, decent work, and sustainable development. Third, a case study approach is used to examine the implementation of legal protection in the specific context of Applus+ Karratha, Western Australia. Primary legal materials consist of relevant Indonesian legislation, Australian legislation, Western Australian workplace safety legislation, and international legal instruments. Secondary materials include academic literature, ILO publications, United Nations documents, and other relevant scholarly sources.

The empirical component consists of a semi structured interview with the HR/Legal representative of Applus+ Karratha. The interview addressed employment arrangements, applicable law, employment agreements, equality of rights and benefits, workplace safety, complaint mechanisms, protection against discrimination and retaliation, access to legal assistance, visa status, and the company's understanding of decent work under SDG 8.

The legal materials and interview data were analyzed qualitatively. The analysis compares the applicable legal framework with the employment practices reported by the company and subsequently evaluates their correspondence with the principles of decent work under SDG 8, particularly Targets 8.5, 8.7, and 8.8.

The single employer side interview was treated as an account of reported procedures, not as independent confirmation of actual wages, visa conditions, workplace incidents or complaint outcomes. No inference regarding prevalence, causation or full organizational compliance was made. Legal materials and official guidance were used to identify normative standards against which those reports were compared.

RESULT AND DISCUSSION

1. Legal Framework and Cross Border Employment Protection

The Australian employment system provides a statutory framework for minimum employment rights. The Fair Work Act 2009 establishes the National Employment Standards (NES) as minimum standards applicable to national system employees. These standards cover fundamental matters including maximum weekly hours, leave entitlements, public holidays, termination and redundancy, and other employment conditions (Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth), ss. 44, 55, 61).

An important characteristic of the Australian system is the relationship between statutory minimum standards and collective employment arrangements. Enterprise agreements may establish employment conditions for employees covered by the agreement, but they cannot exclude the National Employment Standards (Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth), s. 55). This framework is directly relevant to the Applus+ case because the company reported that the employment conditions and rights of Indonesian workers are contained in an Enterprise Agreement. Consequently, the Enterprise Agreement should be understood within the broader statutory framework of the Fair Work Act 2009 rather than as an independent source capable of overriding statutory minimum rights. The relevance of enterprise agreements must therefore

be assessed together with their actual coverage and the practical power of migrant employees to negotiate or enforce entitlements. Australian scholarship cautions that employer-sponsored visa arrangements may constrain bargaining power even when labour standards exist (Wright & Clibborn, 2020).

The legal framework also provides an important basis for equal treatment of migrant workers. The Fair Work Ombudsman confirms that migrant workers and visa holders have the same workplace entitlements and protections as other employees in Australia (Fair Work Ombudsman, n.d.). Accordingly, the legal position of Indonesian migrant workers cannot be reduced merely to their immigration status. Their status as migrant workers do not remove their employment rights under Australian workplace law.

The empirical findings indicate that all Indonesian workers at Applus+ Karratha are directly employed by Applus+ and sponsored for their visas (Applus+ Karratha HR/Legal representative, personal communication, 2026). The company further stated that employment conditions and workers' rights are set out in an Enterprise Agreement (Applus+ Karratha HR/Legal representative, personal communication, 2026). The existence of a formal employment instrument provides an important mechanism for communicating employment conditions and establishing the rights and obligations of the parties.

From a legal protection perspective, this arrangement corresponds with the Australian regulatory structure in which enterprise agreements operate within the statutory framework of the Fair Work Act 2009. The agreement therefore functions as a mechanism for regulating employment conditions while remaining subject to statutory minimum standards (Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth), s. 55). The finding is relevant to SDG Target 8.5 because decent work requires more than the existence of employment. It requires employment under conditions that respect workers' rights and provide fair employment conditions (United Nations, 2015).

For precision, an enterprise agreement does not displace the National Employment Standards: section 55 of the Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth) expressly prohibits their exclusion. Whether a particular enterprise agreement covers the workers in this case, and the scope of its classifications and entitlements, requires checking the agreement and its approval details; the present interview does not supply these documents (Fair Work Act 2009 (Cth), s. 55). Accordingly, the study does not treat the employer's description of the agreement as documentary proof that the instrument has been approved or applies to each individual employee. This evidential distinction is consistent with research on limitations of formal labour protection for temporary migrants (Clibborn & Wright, 2023).

2. Equality, Occupational Safety and Access to Remedies

The company stated that Indonesian workers receive the same rights and benefits as other employees, with employment conditions determined according to qualifications rather than nationality or age (Applus+ Karratha HR/Legal representative, personal communication, 2026). This finding corresponds with the broader Australian principle that migrant workers and visa holders are entitled to the same workplace protections as other employees. The Fair Work Ombudsman expressly confirms that migrant workers have the same workplace entitlements and protections as other employees in Australia (Fair Work Ombudsman, n.d.).

From the perspective of SDG 8, equality of treatment is particularly relevant to Target 8.5, which includes decent work for all and equal pay for work of equal value (United Nations, 2015). The empirical finding therefore suggests a degree of normative and practical correspondence between the Australian legal framework, Applus+'s reported employment practice, and the principle of equal treatment underlying decent work.

Nevertheless, the finding must be interpreted carefully. The present study relies on an employer side interview. The statement that workers receive equal rights and benefits establishes the company's reported policy and practice, but does not independently verify individual payroll records, employment agreements, or workers' experiences. Worker side evidence would therefore strengthen the assessment of actual equality in practice. Australian empirical research on wage recovery likewise shows that access to legal entitlements and successful recovery of withheld pay are different questions, supporting the need for employee interviews and documentary comparison (Berg & Farbenblum, 2017).

Workplace safety constitutes a central element of migrant worker protection, particularly in industrial employment. In Western Australia, the Work Health and Safety Act 2020 (WA) established

the principal statutory framework for workplace health and safety. The relevance of occupational health and safety is reinforced by SDG Target 8.8, which specifically calls for the protection of labour rights and safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers (United Nations, 2015). A systematic review and meta-analysis of international migrant workers identified occupational health risks that warrant examination of actual workplace exposures and outcomes, rather than reliance on general safety assurances (Hargreaves et al., 2019).

According to the Applus+ HR/Legal representative, workplace safety measures are applied equally to all employees regardless of nationality (Applus+ Karratha HR/Legal representative, personal communication, 2026). The finding is significant because the concept of decent work encompasses security in the workplace and social protection (ILO, 2017). Thus, the reported application of uniform workplace safety standards supports the conclusion that Applus+'s stated practice is consistent with the safety dimension of decent work and SDG Target 8.8.

Legal protection cannot be assessed solely by identifying substantive rights. Workers must also have access to mechanisms through which those rights can be asserted when problems arise. The Applus+ interview indicates that workers may bring workplace matters to HR. If a matter remains unresolved, workers may seek legal advice or assistance from a labour union. Workers may also obtain assistance from lawyers in employment disputes (Applus+ Karratha HR/Legal representative, personal communication, 2026).

This mechanism is significant from the perspective of rights at work and social dialogue, two of the strategic objectives underpinning the ILO's Decent Work Agenda (International Labour Organization [ILO], 1999; ILO, 2017). The Australian Fair Work system also provides institutional mechanisms through which workplace rights can be enforced. The Fair Work Ombudsman provides information and assistance concerning workplace rights and entitlements for migrant workers and visa holders (Fair Work Ombudsman, n.d.). The existence of both internal and external avenues therefore strengthens the formal architecture of protection. However, the effectiveness of these mechanisms depends on workers' awareness, accessibility, willingness to use them, and the absence of retaliation or other barriers. Studies of the Fair Work Ombudsman's role in migrant-worker exploitation underline the importance of complaint accessibility and institutional enforcement; the formal presence of an avenue of redress does not itself demonstrate its effectiveness (Farbenblum & Berg, 2017).

The Applus+ representative stated that discrimination is prohibited under company policy and that discriminatory conduct may result in immediate dismissal (Applus+ Karratha HR/Legal representative, personal communication, 2026). This finding is relevant to the equality dimension of decent work. The ILO identifies equality of opportunity and treatment as an important component of decent work (ILO, 2017). It is also relevant to SDG Target 8.5, which requires decent work for all, and Target 8.8, which protects labour rights (United Nations, 2015).

The existence of a strong internal sanction against discrimination suggests that the company treats discriminatory conduct as a serious workplace violation. Nevertheless, the empirical material available in this study does not establish how frequently complaints have occurred, how they were investigated, or how sanctions have been applied in individual cases. Accordingly, the present finding should be understood as evidence of the company's stated institutional policy rather than definitive evidence of the absence of discrimination in practice.

The distinction between the availability and effectiveness of remedies is central. The Fair Work Ombudsman confirms that migrant workers retain entitlements regardless of migration status and may obtain workplace assistance; an employer itself cannot cancel a worker's visa (Fair Work Ombudsman, n.d.). In this case, no complaint files, retaliation outcomes or independent employee testimony were supplied, so the evidence does not support a claim that remedies are used without fear or that discrimination has been eliminated. This analytical caution is reinforced by Australian case-study research showing that the design of a wage-repayment mechanism affects whether temporary migrant workers can effectively secure remedies (Berg & Farbenblum, 2017).

3. Visa Sponsorship and Alignment with SDG 8

One of the most significant findings concerns the relationship between migrant status and workplace rights. The Applus+ representative stated that visa status does not affect workers' ability to exercise their employment rights (Applus+ Karratha HR/Legal representative, personal communication, 2026). This statement is consistent with the Australian regulatory position. The Fair Work Ombudsman

states that migrant workers and visa holders have the same workplace entitlements and protections as other employees, regardless of migration status (Fair Work Ombudsman, n.d.).

The principle is important because migrant status may create a structural vulnerability in employment relationships. A worker who depends on a particular visa or sponsorship arrangement may perceive greater risks in raising complaints or challenging an employer. Australian law and policy have developed protections for eligible visa holders experiencing workplace exploitation. The Fair Work Ombudsman provides specific information and pathways for migrant workers seeking assistance with workplace problems, including circumstances involving visa conditions (Fair Work Ombudsman, n.d.). More recent scholarship specifically questions employer sponsorship as a migration-policy design because dependence on a sponsoring employer can discourage mobility and increase the practical costs of challenging conditions (Clibborn & Wright, 2023).

In the Applus+ case, however, the company reports that visa status does not restrict the exercise of workplace rights. This finding supports the principle that migrant status should not constitute a basis for reduced employment protection.

As a legal matter, continued access to Fair Work protections does not mean that sponsorship based immigration arrangements have no consequences for workers. Distinguishing workplace entitlements from visa requirements avoids overstating the empirical assertion that immigration status “does not affect” workers’ practical ability to complain (Fair Work Ombudsman, n.d.; Australian Department of Home Affairs, n.d.). Findings on the historical decline in some migrant workers’ bargaining power and on employer-linked dependency reinforce the need to distinguish *de jure* labour equality from the capacity to exercise rights without jeopardising employment (Wright & Clibborn, 2020; Clibborn & Wright, 2023).

Table 1. Reported Practices and SDG 8 Assessment

SDG 8 dimension	Reported Applus+ practice	Evidence limited assessment
Target 8.5: decent work	Equal benefits; enterprise agreement	Reported alignment; payroll/agreement unverified
Target 8.7: exploitation	Complaint and legal/union channels	Potential safeguards; absence of exploitation not established
Target 8.8: rights and safety	Equal safety practices	Reported alignment; safety records unverified
Equality	No nationality based differentiation	Company account; worker verification needed
Access to remedy	HR; lawyers; unions	Channels reported; accessibility not assessed
Visa status	Rights reportedly remain exercisable	Consistent with formal protections; practical barriers untested

The company itself characterizes its employment practices as supporting SDG 8 through fair employment conditions, appropriate remuneration, safe working environments, equal opportunities, and compliance with applicable Australian employment and workplace health and safety legislation (Applus+ Karratha HR/Legal representative, personal communication, 2026). From a legal perspective, the company’s reported practices demonstrate substantial correspondence with the core elements of decent work. The correspondence is strongest in relation to equal treatment, employment conditions, workplace safety, and access to complaint mechanisms.

However, the findings should not be interpreted as establishing full compliance with every dimension of SDG 8. First, SDG 8 is broader than the employer employee relationship and includes structural issues concerning employment, economic growth, and labour rights. Second, the present empirical data derives from a single employer side informant. Third, the study has not yet independently reviewed the full Enterprise Agreement, employment records, payroll documentation, or individual worker experiences. Broader research on migrants’ experiences in Australia during the COVID-19 period further documents that statutory inclusion does not always protect migrants from economic insecurity and social exclusion (Berg & Farbenblum, 2023).

The appropriate conclusion at this stage is therefore that the legal framework and reported company practices demonstrate substantial normative alignment with decent work principles, while the effectiveness of such protection requires further verification at the implementation level.

The table accordingly describes degrees of reported correspondence, not audit findings. The limited evidence supports the proposition that declared practices resemble selected decent work principles, but it cannot establish wage equality, compliance rates, injury incidence, or effective freedom from coercion. Further research should triangulate worker interviews, the applicable enterprise agreement, payslips, safety records and grievance outcomes. The recommendation to triangulate multiple records follows the wider methodological critique that decent work should be measured through observable employment quality, working conditions and effective access to rights rather than employer declarations alone (Burchell et al., 2014).

CONCLUSION

This study examined the legal protection of Indonesian migrant workers at Applus+ Karratha, Western Australia, within the framework of Indonesian law, Australian employment law, international labour standards, and Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 8. The findings indicate that Indonesian migrant workers are directly employed and visa-sponsored by the company, with employment conditions regulated through an Enterprise Agreement under the Fair Work Act 2009. The company reports equal employment rights and benefits, workplace safety standards, protection against discrimination, and access to complaint mechanisms and legal assistance regardless of nationality or visa status.

These reported practices demonstrate substantial alignment with the principles of decent work under SDG 8, particularly Targets 8.5, 8.7, and 8.8, concerning fair employment, protection against exploitation, and workplace safety. However, the findings are primarily based on an employer-side interview and have not been independently verified through employment documents or workers' experiences. Therefore, although the company's reported practices are consistent with applicable legal standards, further empirical verification is necessary to assess the actual effectiveness of legal protection for Indonesian migrant workers.

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