

Safe migration and the politics of brokered safety in Southeast Asia

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Chapter 4

Departures: Technologies of anticipation

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Part II

Modalities of intervention

4 Departures

Technologies of anticipation

We need awareness if we want to migrate.
*(Workshop facilitator, pre-decision training,
Myanmar)*

It is early morning near a border checkpoint along the Lao-Thai border. A group of 15 Lao migrants sit on benches in the immigration police centre awaiting the information session to commence. One of the NGO representatives from TPSMC (see Chapter 2), who collaborates with the immigration police, had distributed safe migration information leaflets to the migrants ahead of the session. Some migrants look at the leaflet, whereas others seem indifferent, checking social media on their smartphones to pass time. In the background, police officers chit chat and attend to various logistical issues relating to deportation paperwork. Despite being a deportation centre, the atmosphere is amiable and relaxed.

Then, one of the police officers greets the migrants politely with a *wai* (a polite bow with palms joined together) and commence the information session. Before deporting the migrants back to Laos, the officer explains, he wants to share some information first. “When entering Thailand, you must do so under the MOU programme,” he says.

The pink card will expire on the 31 March this year. The Thai Government, Thai Immigration Police Officers, Governmental Officers are all worried that you all would be exploited or deceived if you don’t have the required documents to live and work in our country. There was a recent case where Burmese migrants working on a boat did not receive their wages for a year.

He then goes on to explain that the police, in collaboration with the NGO, will ask the migrants some questions before they are returned back to Laos. “Since you did not legally come into the country this time, please make the legal arrangements when your return home before coming back again,” the police officer proclaims. “We wish you good health and richness in the New Year.”

The police officer hands over to one of the TPSMC outreach workers, who goes through the content of the leaflets that was distributed earlier. The leaflet provides information on how to avoid exploitation when working in Thailand, the outreach worker explains. “What risks are there if you don’t have legal documents?” she asks the migrants. “Employers refuse to pay wages” one migrant utters. “Workers can be exploited” another migrant adds. “That’s right” the TPSMC officer replies. “And you would also be at risk of getting arrested by police.” She then points to various phone numbers on the leaflets that migrants could call if in trouble.

Later on, I had the opportunity to informally converse with both the TPSMC officers and police separately while the migrants were being interviewed for trafficking identification victims screening.¹ I ask TPSMC and police separately whether they had any idea whether migrants actually act upon the information they receive. Do Lao migrants obtain passports, work permits, and take steps to avoid labour exploitation as stipulated in the leaflet, I wonder? Both TPSMC field staff and the police are quite prepared to admit no clear method allows them to establish this connection. Later on, my research assistant and I are allowed to accompany the police to the Thai-Lao checkpoint. TPSMC has a similar arrangement on the Lao side of the border. After the handover between Lao and Thai police, a parallel



Figure 4.1 Thai police and TPSMC provide safe migration advice during a deportation procedure.

process takes place on the Lao side. In collaboration with Lao police and officials from the Lao Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare (MoLSW), the deported migrants are asked similar screening questions and provided with information on safe migration. I repeat the questions I earlier asked their Thai counterparts. How do you know the safe migration awareness-raising material work, we wonder? “There is no way for us to know this” one Lao official readily admits. The disconnect between programme objectives and outcomes does not appear to prevent TPSMC and their Lao and Thai government collaborators from rolling out their safe migration interventions.

Safe migration, pre-departure, and spatio-temporal reversals

The information session I here describe is one of the numerous examples where government bodies and NGOs attempt to safeguard migration through awareness-raising sessions premised on predictive ideal-type migration: advising migrants prior to departure on administrative processes (such as obtaining passports and work permits) and assistance mechanisms (e.g. hotlines), to ensure safety in migration. During our three-day stay at the Lao-Thai border, we were allowed to observe several instances where migrants were going through such information sessions. Typically, such sessions take place under the auspices of “pre-departure” training in source countries of migrants which has become commonplace in the Mekong region and elsewhere. Yet, in this case, we see a spatio-temporal reversal of the process, where safe migration pre-departure training takes place as part of the repatriation process. Rather than informing migrants on safe migration prior to departure, the session is held during their return process (through deportations) back to Laos. At first glance, this may seem contradictory but makes sense within a context where oscillatory migration is commonplace. The likelihood of returning migrants re-migrating explains why safe migration awareness raising can be provided upon migrant’s return, and points to the ubiquity of Lao-Thai cross-border migration. The fact that the police officer is in effect encouraging migrants to return (albeit with legal documents) is telling of the increasing acceptance of cross-border migrations along the Lao-Thai border.

The spatio-temporal reversal also points to how formal policy prescriptions are adapted through policy praxis. One of the reasons TPSMC ends up with inverted safe migration aid delivery has in part due to the administrative convenience involved. Whereas it is difficult for them to access aspiring migrants who are crossing the border from Laos into Thailand, deportations allow an entry point where they can engage migrants directly as they in practical terms have – quite literally – a captured audience.² Furthermore, the way TPSMC adapts to local contexts points to a broader implication regarding the relationship between policy prescriptions and outcomes. When NGO staff and police openly admit that they have no way of knowing if their safe migration awareness raising actually works,

they are, in Foucauldian terms, fully aware of the “immanent disjunction and dissonance between the ‘programmer’s view’ and the logic of practices, their real effects...” (Dean 2007, 83). Although they implement programme activities that are meant to contribute to migrants’ safety, they have no clear means of knowing if this desired policy objective comes to fruition. It is precisely the intersection between such disjunctions – between policy intent and outcomes – and the spatio-temporal reversals described above, which comprises the central theme for this chapter. How is it that pre-departure awareness raising can be scaled up despite no monitoring? As the following pages will explicate, through policy prescriptions based on pre-departure and pre-decision training, programmes are forced to engage in processes where both spatial and temporal principles within their programmes are reversed. Yet precisely because the interventions are based on an anticipatory logic, connecting prescriptions with outcomes becomes opaque. In turn, such opaqueness intersects with how pre-departure and pre-decision training blur legal and administrative entitlements with ideal-type migrant subjectivities. As the chapter will explicate, this contributes to a highly individuated behaviouralist discourse within safe migration activities which straddles well beyond pre-decision and pre-departure training.

The chapter proceeds as follows. First, it explicates how a behavioural change discourses have become central within anti-trafficking and safe migration programme activities. Second, it traces how this discourse manifests itself through spatial reversals within pre-decision training and pre-departure training. Third, it considers other programmatic attempts that link behavioural change to spatial (beneficiary tracing) and structural dimensions (i.e. targeting employers) of labour migration.

From territorial governance to epistemological behaviourism

For years, awareness raising has remained a central component for UN agencies and NGOs who work with migrants. Yet, important changes have ensued since the advent of anti-trafficking programmes in the 1990s. Awareness raising within early anti-trafficking efforts in the Mekong region was situated within a broader community development agenda (Molland 2012b; Thatun and Marshall 2005). By providing opportunities “at home,” it was argued, human trafficking was “prevented”: if aspiring migrants decided against migration, then no trafficking would occur. Awareness-raising messages echoed this logic by emphasising the dangers of migration. Over the year, this approach was heavily critiqued by both academics and practitioners as ineffectual but also politically problematic as such interventions risked becoming unintended, extended arms of border control; something which was at odds with aid organisations’ claim of human rights approaches to migration.³ Yet, over the years, things changed. NGOs, UN agencies, and even governments acknowledged that the real emphasis ought not to be placed on whether people abstain from migration, but

how trafficking, exploitation, and other forms of problems can be mitigated *through* the migration process. The awareness-raising message changed from “don’t go” to “if you go, go safely” (Molland 2012b). During the 2000s, agencies recalibrated their programmes accordingly.

This change has both practical and theoretical significance as it alters the relationship between governance and space. It moves awareness raising away from territorial control. Rather than anchoring populations to territory (“don’t go”), it attempts to safeguard migration *through* mobility (“go safely”). Furthermore, although trafficking awareness raising has always been a technology of anticipation (as “prevention” is by necessity prior to the event), safe migration programmes have made awareness raising central in a double sense: in addition to constituting a central pillar of programme intervention (pre-decision training, pre-departure), safe migration information applies to all potential migrants (as opposed to particular “kinds” of migrants, i.e. migrants at risk of trafficking). Hence, safe migration awareness messages open a wider space for how migration governance is enacted as it transcends a governmental logic premised on spatial and territorial control. This is not to suggest that safe migration awareness raising is necessarily separate to activities under the auspices anti-trafficking. Indeed, as explicated in Chapter 2, anti-trafficking programmes were central in popularising safe migration awareness raising throughout the 2000s. Agencies hired research, monitoring and evaluation consultants in order to carefully recalibrate how awareness raising could move beyond simplistic “don’t migrate” messages towards a focus on safety in migration. As a result, agencies produced a range of training manuals in order to assist their awareness-raising efforts.

Perhaps, one of the most influential reports amongst agencies in the Mekong region at the time was a discussion paper supported by the Asian Development Bank (ADB) which was a culmination of a series of workshops involving several UN agencies and migration partners. *Re-Thinking Trafficking Prevention: A Guide to Applying Behaviour Theory* starts off with a truism: “we cannot assume that increasing a person’s knowledge and understanding about a particular risk will lead them to take action to avoid that risk.” (Marshall 2011, 7). It then goes on to highlight several examples of how current awareness-raising approaches often fail to achieve desired outcomes by, for example, failing to acknowledge that:

It may also be the case that potential migrants understand the risks but are not able to access ways of reducing those risks. For example, there may be safer legal migration channels but these may be restrictive in terms of costs, time, or criteria in terms of age or qualifications.

(Marshall 2011, 8)

As such, the report hints at an acknowledgment of structural reasons for migrants’ vulnerability. Yet, the focus on “behaviour” remains central

throughout the document. For example, it suggests the following goal and activities under the auspices of potential safe migration activities:

Safe migration goal: Prospective migrants in District X take the following steps below to protect themselves from exploitation:

- 1 Take a copy of the personal documentation of their recruiter and leave with a family member, village chief, or other trusted source;
- 2 Leave details with family member, village chief or other trusted source as to where they are going and who with;
- 3 Memorise a phone number they can call for assistance in the destination country; and
- 4 Talk to three other returned migrants for advice about protecting themselves during migration and at destination.

Eventually, specific targets and indicators can be set for this goal, such as increasing the proportion of prospective migrants who undertake at least three of the steps above.

(Marshall 2011, 14)

The specific activities suggested exemplifies how safe migration moves from territory (“stay where you are”/“don’t migrate”) to conduct: a set of identifiable actions that individuals ought to take through migration. As such, the report is – quite literally – a textbook example of what Xiang Biao has labelled *epistemological behaviourism* which:

treats migration as a behaviour distinct in itself, that is, a particular class of intentional human actions responsive to particular stimuli and constraints. Disparate human flows are thus imagined into a singular subject that can be analytically isolated.

(Xiang 2016, 669)

Such behaviouralist discourses are widespread in policy circles, and migration aid policy is no exception (see Killias 2010). UN agencies (ILO 2015a), NGOs (World Vision 2014), and even government bodies (Ministry of Labour and Social Welfare Laos n.d.) have produced a range of training manuals with similar behaviouralist assumptions and advice similar to the *Re-Thinking Trafficking Prevention* report. Although many of these initiatives, as evident in TPSMC’s leaflet described at the beginning of this chapter, provide emphasis on documents (passports and work permits), others provide more emphasis on social dimensions of migration. World Visions’ *Smart Navigator* training manual, which I referred to in the introduction of this book, is exemplary of how it maps migrant behaviour through a checklist with yes/no answer options, and is worth quoting in its entirety (World Vision 2014, 10–14):

Checklist: Safe migration

Answer these questions when you first start having discussions about moving to take a job outside your community. Discuss these questions with your family.

Information About Your Destination

Do you know where are you going?

If yes, write the name of the town here:

Do you know anyone who lives in the town to which you are going?

Do you have that person's phone number?

Can you call that person to make a plan to meet when you arrive?

Information About the Journey

Do you know how you will return to your home country when the job finishes?

How much does the return trip cost? Write the amount here:

How much does it cost to live in the place you are going if you don't get a job when you first arrive? Write the amount here:

Do you have enough money to live for a while when you first arrive and for the return trip?

(Remember, it is dangerous if you have to borrow money from the recruiter or employer to make the trip, or if you have to go into debt to pay a deposit to the recruiter. It is dangerous to arrive at a new job in debt to the recruiter or employer.)

Are you travelling with friends?

Information About the Job

Do you know anyone who has been hired through this person or a recruiter before?

Does the person who got a job sometimes come home to visit?

Does the person who got a job call his or her family?

Does this job sound like other jobs you have heard about?

Does it pay the same amount of money as other migration jobs you have heard about? (If it sounds too good to be true, it might be a lie.)

Can the person who is organising the job for you tell you the name of the company you will work for? Write it here:

Can the person tell you the address and phone number of the company? Write it here:

Can you look up the name and address of the company on the Internet?

Do you have a contract?

If you do not have a contract, have you discussed the conditions of your work?

Can you read and understand the whole contract?

Do you agree with everything the contract says?

Documents

If you are going to another country, do you have a passport and a work visa for that country?

People to Contact

Will you bring a mobile phone with you so that you can contact your family when you are away?

Do you know an organisation or person to contact in the other town/country – if something goes wrong and you need help and safety?

The more times you answer yes, the safer your plan is.

Both the Smart Navigator manual and Re-Thinking Trafficking Prevention report make it clear how safe migration goes beyond a focus on legal travel documents to emphasising the right kind of knowledge and relationships in migration. Hence, the social eclipses the legal. As will become evident, different agencies approach this differently, and it is not unusual for pre-departure training to emphasise state-centric dimension of migration (such as the importance of passports and utilising licensed recruitment agencies). Yet, advocating the use of, say, passports takes place within a discourse that aims to calibrate migrants' dispositions. And it is here, the relevance of epistemic behaviourism is the key. On the one hand, training manuals seek to mould specific dispositions and behaviours through training accompanied by pre- and post-test of migrants' "awareness" (more on this below, also see Chang 2018). Hence, recalibrating migrants' behaviour is premised on a logic of verification in response to training sessions with clear panoptical characteristics (as we will see, pre-departure training commonly takes place in seminar rooms or village compounds).

Yet, at the same time, such manuals apply a tick-in-the-box approach to assessing safety in migration where either "...specific targets and indicators can be set for this goal, such as increasing the proportion of prospective migrants who undertake at least three of the steps above" (Marshall 2011, 14), or "[t]he more times you answer yes, the safer your plan is" (World Vision 2014, 14). The operational logic is not one of verification but one of profiling based on categorisation and ranking. This pushes safe migration awareness raising interventions towards what I have alluded to several times earlier in the book: governance premised on anticipation. Success can be assessed before migration commences. At the same time, migrants' conduct replaces a governmental concern with territorial control. Hence, epistemological behaviouralism merges two theoretical themes that I canvassed in the introduction of this book: disciplinary power and governmentality on the one hand and security, modulation, and simulation on the other hand. Furthermore, it is precisely safe migration behaviouralist discourse, expressed in manuals like Rethinking Trafficking Prevention and Smart Navigator, which brings together the various assemblages of safe migration interventions: the importance of legal documents (passports and work permits), migration

infrastructure (migrant networks, brokers, and recruitment agencies as facilitators for migration), and a range of support mechanisms (such as hotlines).

Yet, as social scientists are well aware, a recipe is not the same as food. One cannot deduce social practice from training manuals. Anthropological and sociological critiques of policy-orientated behaviouralist discourses are plentiful, well-known, and point to several profound problems with their assumptions, including the tendency to confuse migrants' behaviour with their social condition (Fassin 2017) and mistaking the prescriptive for the descriptive (Merry 2016; Neumann 2017). Despite the Re-Thinking Trafficking Prevention report placing considerable importance on how a "behavioural approach" will strengthen aid programmes monitoring, evaluation, and impact, it is easy to see how the report neither evidences nor explains how safety is meant to follow from the recommendations the document provides. For example, whether migrants "[l]eave details with family member, village chief or other trusted source...[m]emorise a phone number they can call for assistance," or "[t]alk to three other returned migrants for advice about protecting themselves during migration and at destination" (Marshall 2011, 14) do not show much in and of themselves (indeed, later chapters will explicate the precarity of such actions). Yet, before we even get to the question of efficacy of policy outcomes, the ethnographic question becomes this: how do aid agencies produce the kind of safety that their training manuals stipulate in specific settings?

Before pre-departure: Pre-Decision training

The Labour Migration Consortium (LMC) is a small local NGO that collaborates with Linda's (see Chapter 2) safe migration programme. LMC is a key agency that operates in one of the Myanmar border areas. As their activities take place in village communities with high levels of out-migration to Thailand (and to a lesser extent Malaysia, Singapore, and even Japan), they are in practice curtailed by the kinds of interventions they can provide. Being based in a source community of migrants, LMC's programmatic target – safe migration – is situated elsewhere, both spatially and temporally. Hence, in practice, their interventions are reduced to two things: targeting migrants with information prior to departure, coupled with attempts to connect returning migrants with local development objectives (typically related to migrant remittances). In this sense, LMC's activities resemble TPSMC's activities but in reverse: whereas TPSMC target migrants on their return back to Laos LMC ground their interventions in local villages with high levels of circular migration.

Today, it is the first part of LMC's work – awareness raising for aspiring migrants – which takes prominence. LMC had prepared the event in consultation with a cluster of villages in a local district. In order to ease access for participants from several villagers, the event is held at a local temple. Around 30 participants between 19 and 32 years of age are in attendance that day. MLC staff seem well-prepared. They have structured the workshop into several modules, which are all designed to aid aspiring migrants

in terms of their migration decision-making. The modules comprise a variation of advice on laws and regulations (pros and cons of migrating legally or illegally; how to migrate through licensed recruitment agencies; human rights and labour law), the importance of social relations in migration in order to mitigate risk (i.e. whether you have friends or relatives who are migrants and how to stay in touch with friends and family during migration), as well as various sessions on practicalities relating to migration (cultural etiquette in a foreign country) and saving strategies in order to remit money. In other words, the awareness raising resembles the kind of training manuals previously described in this chapter. As the training proceeds, the organisers allow considerable scope for attendees input, no doubt inspired by participatory methodologies that remain popular amongst aid agencies.

Participation comes most to light in the use of role-play where the organisers are able to engage participants in possible migration scenarios in order to strengthen aspiring migrants' decision making. One role-play exercise includes a daughter and her family's deliberation regarding whether she should migrate to Thailand for work to support the family. The role play commences with a humorous spin. "Don't go" the aspiring migrants' older "sister" exclaims, as "you will end up marrying another man" (laughter). "I will send money home" the aspiring migrant replies. "I can trust you - we know each other" the "mother" adds. "When I come back, I want to open a clothing shop." After some further deliberations regarding the possible positive and negative aspects of migration, the mother says: "Ok you go. We need to investigate further about *how* to migrate." Subsequent to the role play, participants are asked to cross-check the role-play story against a checklist for migration decision making, which includes:

- Who will migrate?
- Impact on the ones left behind.
- Domestic or international migration.
- How much you know about the place you want to migrate (including whether you have any family members or friends present at destination point that can potentially help you)?
- What kind of job?
- Match your skills.
- What skill gain? [sic]
- How much money to send (remittances)?
- How to communicate with family members?
- What to do with money you send home?
- How much cost to migrate?
- What you hope to gain from migration?

The organisers then go through how the participants matched the role-play story against the check list. The more complete answer under each question, the more informed the migration is likely to become, LMC staff explain.

The participants appear genuinely enthusiastic about the training. Yet, as the day progresses, several dissonances become evident. The training is, as is common in aid, formulaic. Participants are advised that when working in foreign countries, the working day should not exceed eight hours without overtime. If this is breached, the employer can be taken to court, one of the organisers alleges. Although the training session considers the possibility that some migrants may prefer unlicensed, extra-legal migration (in part due to the low cost), this is quickly side-parked, instead providing ample space for elevating formal, legal migration – through state-sanctioned recruitment agencies – as the preferred migration pathway. “What is good about going the legal way,” one of the organisers asks before answering her own question: “you will get full labour rights and full salary.” Such advice is provided despite the fact that both implementers and participants reveal to me through informal conversations over tea breaks and lunch that they are well aware of ongoing reports (either through social media or returning migrants) on violation of migrants’ rights, including serious abuse and malpractice within formal, legal, state-sanctioned recruitment chains. As I learned later in the afternoon, nearly all the participants followed Migrants Assist Migrants (MAM) on Facebook, which is one of the most prominent migrant self-help groups in Thailand, which includes daily updates on various abuse of migrants which often takes place regardless of migrants’ legal status (see Chapters 5 and 9).

After the lunch break, space is provided for an informal discussion with the participants about migration. I was curious how the aspiring migrants would find jobs abroad, given the advice that had been given through the training thus far. One man in his twenties tells the group that he has already undertaken the pre-departure training offered by a recruitment agency in Yangon and is awaiting his placement. Several other migrants are already well ahead with initiating their migration. Three young women have already paid huge amounts, around 2000 USD, to a broker whom we later learned is a Monk. The pious broker had promised secure passage to work in Malaysia as domestic workers. Visibly shocked by hearing this troubling news, Ma Thida, one of the MLC’s managers, queried whether the broker provided any receipt. The three young women confirmed that no receipt had been given. This led to a general discussion on brokers.

Similar stories emerged the next day in training session in an adjacent village. A group of participants claimed that their key conduits for migration was through “friends,” though later on it became clear that brokers were also central to participants’ migration plans. They had paid brokers upfront fees but had then not heard anything. They had waited for three months. They were effectively stranded in the village. The problem with unscrupulous brokers was an immediate problem for both the aspiring migrants as well as Ma Thida and MLC. Ma Thida told me that although they had good experience with the authorities dealing with malpractice amongst licensed recruitment representatives (which she alleged was now less of a problem), no immediate strategy was available to them in tackling unlicensed brokers who fleeced

migrants for money. As no receipt was provided, it was nearly impossible for MLC to act on the case, Ma Thida told me. Hence, the distinction between licensed recruitment agencies and unlicensed brokers was essential in this context. Yet, as Ma Thida explained to me, this point was hard to get across to MLC's target communities. Although the distinction between a recruitment agency and a broker (*boisa*) is easily understood in Burmese, this distinction is not recognised in the local vernacular (Shan and Pa'O).⁴

The training progressed. At the end of the day, the participants are asked to again fill out the pre- and post-test survey in order to measure participants' awareness of migration in light of the training. Echoing the training itself, the survey questions are strongly skewed towards legal migration channels through the formal bilateral MOU system as the preferred migration pathway.⁵ Then, flipcharts are used for participants' feedback. No doubt the semi-public nature of the evaluation contributed to a certain courtesy bias. All participants rated the training as "good."

Pre-decision: Four paradoxes

The pre-decision awareness raising I describe here constitutes one out of numerous safe-migration-related interventions that are implemented by NGOs, UN agencies, and governments in the Mekong region under the auspices of either pre-decision, pre-departure, or post-arrival training. Throughout my fieldwork, I was able to observe similar sessions in a range of locations, including Mon State, Shan State, Mandalay, Nong Khai, and Mukdahan.⁶ I will return to the several of the dynamics relating to these initiatives in later chapters. For now, I elucidate four paradoxes that such training presents.

First, formal programme logic suggests a chronological sequence: pre-decision training is meant to precede pre-departure training. Whereas the former is intended to provide migrants with an informed ability to decide whether they should migrate, the latter is meant to target migrants who already have made their decision regarding migration. Yet, during MLC's training, it becomes evident that several participants have already undertaken pre-departure training. This reversed sequence can be explained in light of the fact that MLC's bureaucratic logic (which is partly imposed by the international organisation that funds them) works against any chronologic sequencing of their pre-decision training. Although the training is meant to offer a neutral platform for local villagers to consider the pros and cons of migration, the programme has (due to donor pressure) targets for training attendance. Hence, the training resembles preaching to converts as it is easier to mobilise participants who already are geared towards migrating. Hence, several of the participants attend the training while passing time awaiting news from either their broker or recruitment agency. As such, several participants are deep into the migration planning process where many of them have already signed up with recruitment

agencies. In contrast to a formal programmatic objective of a chronological process (pre-decision, pre-departure, departure, etc.), migration practices precede decisions.

Second, such temporal reversals relate to a spatial challenge. Although this intervention places specific focus on migration to Thailand, some of the aspiring migrants are destined for elsewhere: Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea, and Japan. Despite a formal discourse of connectedness, which is evident in the Global Compact on Migration (United Nations 2019, 10), where pre-decision and pre-departure training are meant to be linked to post-arrival training and other support services in migrants destinations, such connectedness remained a programmatic fantasy which only exists in training manuals and aid reports, and had little relevance to the specific circumstances of MLC's pre-decision training.

Third, although the formal training focuses on regulation and law (the importance of passports, work permits, health insurance, etc.), once participants and MLC engage in informal conversations regarding migration, the discussion gravitates towards the question of brokers and social connections in migration. The importance of connections through friends and how to trust – and deal with “good” and “bad” brokers – dominate discussions. Hence, although the training content gives priority to how legal status is achieved (e.g. how to obtain documents), conversations move from the legal to the social and relational.

Fourth, MLC's pre-decision training raises broader questions regarding programme efficacy and the reproduction of programme activities. What exactly did the training achieve? Some 30 people received information on pre-decision migration yet without any clear way of knowing whether this information would indeed result in safety for the aspiring migrants. Echoing the training manuals discussed above, safe migration decisions are assessed through categorisations expressed through checklists and pre- and post-test questionnaires (as opposed to any means of verification of actual migration outcomes). Prescriptive advice (e.g. utilising licensed agencies) is privileged, whereas context-specific problems are unaddressed (e.g. how to address unscrupulous, local brokers; the widespread social media reporting on malpractice within legal migration pathways). Furthermore, the fact that several migrants already have either made decisions or engaged in migration processes even before the training, the whole exercise is by its own logic partly redundant. Furthermore, some participants have already lost significant amounts of money due to unscrupulous brokers. Migration had become “unsafe” even before commencing. Yet, MLC has no obvious way to deal with the situation. Despite the tragicomic nature of such situations, this does not bring the programme to a halt. Indeed, the participants ranked the training as a success (which in turn will be reported back to MLC's main donor and collaborator: Linda's safe migration project). As such, the training is a world onto itself. Both the implementation and evaluation of the training session unfold regardless of the context where it takes place.

Pre-decision training sessions like the one I here describe underscores how aid implementation does not depend on the translation of policies into outcomes (Mosse 2005a). At the same time, several temporal inversions take place. As an act of programmatic bad faith, attention to specific context of migrants' life worlds becomes opaque. Yet, this is not to suggest that aid agencies do not attempt to overcome the kind of spatial and temporal challenges involved in tracking migrants' well-being through migration. One strategy which attempts to address this is beneficiary tracing.

Beneficiary tracing

Several aid programmes have taken up beneficiary training in order to determine migration outcomes in light of pre-departure training and counselling. An ILO report explains its rationale thus:

One of the main support services provided to potential migrant workers in countries of origin is safe migration counselling. A central objective of this counselling is to provide potential migrants ...with the ability to make informed decisions about working abroad, and to emphasise the benefits and increase knowledge about the procedures for migrating through legal channels for those who choose to go...To assess that impact, several MRCs have begun tracing counselling beneficiaries through follow-up phone calls [which] seeks to determine the extent to which the services provided contributed to those behaviours – rather than other external forces, events or actors... The approach is designed to capture both the intended results (informed decision-making about migrating for work, increased knowledge about how to migrate safely, and better protection of rights in destination countries) and unintended results (counselling that convinces beneficiaries that labour migration is profitable without informing them of the potential risks involved or migrants facing abuse in spite of using a licensed recruitment agency to migrate regularly). The information obtained should also be used to provide follow-up services to migrants and adjust the approach to service provision where indicated.

(ILO 2014a, 12)

Hence, through follow-up calls subsequent to pre-departure training or counselling, NGOs and MRCs are able to assess migration outcomes through beneficiary tracing. As the activity is based on a phone call, interventions can potentially be scaled up considerably as they sidestep logistical constraints relating to physical co-presence. Beneficiary tracing echoes certain characteristics that we identified above regarding training manuals. On the one hand, beneficiary tracing objectifies migration outcomes through verification (through follow-up phone calls). Hence, for individual migrant cases, beneficiary tracing is *reactive*. At the same time, scaling up beneficiary

tracing allows aid agencies to prospectively assess migration outcomes based on an ex post facto aggregate (i.e. X% of migrants report positive experience utilising a licensed recruitment agency). As such, it resembles how insurance companies project risk and premiums, and embodies the analytical distinction between discipline and security as discussed in Chapter 1. As such, beneficiary tracing comprises de-territorial interventions (the whereabouts of migrants are irrelevant to the intervention) where efficacy of safe migration awareness raising and counselling combines chronological verification, with prognostic assessment based on aggregates.

Yet, in practice, the uptake of beneficiary tracing appears piecemeal and limited for a range of reasons. One constraint is practical. As migrants need to change SIM cards when crossing international borders, it limits programmes' ability to reach beneficiaries as migrants' phone numbers in destination country may not be known prior to migration. It is curious why programmes have not given more thought to the possibility of requesting social media contacts (such as WhatsApp and Line) as they are ubiquitously used by migrants and do not depend on country-specific SIM cards (see Chapters 7 and 9). Another limitation is political. Following up with outbound migrants is not only time consuming but also requires migrants' consent. As state officials are often involved in pre-departure training, migrants may be less inclined agreeing to have state officials scrutinise their whereabouts. Given the authoritarian political legacies of migrant source countries, such as Laos and Myanmar, one should not underestimate the serious implications this has for how migrants (dis)engage such processes. For example, Lao authorities have for years both fined and confined returning migrants who officials believe have breached migration regulations. This point is even recognised by aid agencies. For example, one of the ILO's evaluation reports makes the following observation regarding beneficiary tracing amongst Vietnamese migrants:

While the findings are very encouraging, the potential response bias should also be considered. Government officials contacting migrants to ask questions regarding recruitment agencies – to whom they often have well-established linkages – as well as requesting information about behaviours that violate Vietnamese law, mean that the high response rates related to the use of regular channels must be qualified somewhat. Further data collection by an objective and non-duty bearing research institution during the end-line survey will provide a clearer picture of the impact of the safe migration counselling provided.

(ILO 2014c, 100)

Possible reactive responses where one cannot distinguish migrants' deference to authorities from actual migration outcomes are a recognised problem within beneficiary tracing. This self-critique also brings attention to how migration governance, and the various modes of objectification it entails, are mediated through social actors (such as state officials), which

has important bearings on how encounters between safe migration interventions and migrants produce certain kinds of knowledges and practices. This point is brought to light by considering a third approach that has become popular in relation to pre-departure training and behavioural change discourses: safe migration awareness-raising videos.

“Know before you go”

The consolidation of pre-departure and pre-decision training has emerged alongside an increasing “tech utopia” within the aid sector. Digital technologies, social media, and online media content have become part of aid programme activities (see Bernstein 2016). As such, the safe migration sector exemplifies how *data doxa* (Smith 2018) intersect with humanitarian and emancipatory projects. The considerable increase in social media and smartphone use (even amongst poor migrant workers) makes such interventions an attractive proposition. UN agencies and several NGOs have been on the forefront in developing various social media apps, ranging from assisting with the identification of trafficking victims to crowd-sourced rankings of labour migrants’ employers resembling TripAdvisor.

Perhaps, more dominant is the production of video content. IOM has been at the forefront of this trend, with its own dedicated programme – IOMx – which produces safe migration awareness-raising material on a broad scale.⁷ As with beneficiary tracing, such interventions are appealing due to their de-territorial quality, although – as will become evident in Chapter 9 – UN agencies and NGOs social media presence is easily dwarfed by migrant self-help groups’ social media use. Videos are also transposable as they can easily be employed within programme activities. During fieldwork, I observed both ILO and IOM videos being employed by other aid agencies and even government departments within the context of pre-decision, pre-departure, and post-arrival training sessions. Awareness-raising videos also share temporal qualities with beneficiary tracing in how they connect the past and future. On the one hand, they are meant to shape migrants’ conduct (thereby being future orientated) while at the same time being grounded in migrants’ real-life worlds (which connects to past action).⁸ As such, they are *models for and of reality* and can therefore be thought of in terms of simulation.

Throughout fieldwork, I had several opportunities to speak to migrants regarding such videos. One afternoon, my research assistant and I visited a group of Lao migrants at the outskirts of Bangkok. We were initially introduced to the migrants through an outreach worker related to a domestic worker project. Sai, Lanh, Phou, and Chan all come from southern parts of Laos. Although the initially claim to have been in Thailand for only two–three years, as conversations progressed, it turns out that some of them had been in Thailand for much longer than that. Sai, now aged 32, arrived in Thailand as a domestic worker when she was 13. The others had been in Thailand for around five–six years.

Initially arriving in Thailand as undocumented migrants with the assistance of friends and acquaintances, they have in later years been able to obtain legal documents. The transition from an undocumented to documented status is in part due to the fact that the Thai government is becoming increasingly insistent on migrants holding legal documents, they tell me. In addition, obtaining passports in Laos has become much easier and cheaper than in the past. They all relied on brokers in order to obtain a passport.

Despite this similarity in legal status, only Phou holds a work permit. The rest of them are technically in Thailand as tourists without any work permit. This means that they cannot be too choosy with work, Lanh explains, as many employers are now reluctant employing workers without work permits. Yet, despite holding a work permit, Phou is not necessarily better off than the other women. During our conversation, it becomes clear that the cost of the work permit is simply passed onto Phou, which challenges common claims relating to the potential advantages of holding legal status.

After a while, I ask if they would be ok with me showing them a video on my phone made by an organisation that helps migrants.⁹ I tell them that I am interested in hearing their views and thoughts about the video. Once the 6-minute video animation is complete, we discuss its contents. The video resembles awareness-raising content described earlier in the chapter: alongside the importance of legal documents, the importance of going through licensed recruitment agencies, consulting friends and knowing how to seek help is emphasised. Initially, Sai, Lanh, Phou, and Chan express affirming responses. “The video tells us how to migrate the right way,” Lanh says. “It tells us what we should do when we go to another country” Phou adds. Chan suggests it is helpful that the video provides phone numbers that migrants can call.

After further discussion, I point out to them that although they all allege the video provides useful information for migrants, they had not done anything of what the video recommends. None of them had gone through the formal bilateral labour channels between Laos and Thailand, nor had they utilised formal recruitment agencies.¹⁰ To the contrary, they had engaged in practices (such as relying on brokers) which the video warns against. Although they had over time obtained passports, all but one of them did not possess a work permit. Furthermore, although they all expressed usefulness regarding hotlines numbers, none of them knew of anyone who had requested assistance in this way.

The conversation shifts towards reflecting on the differences between the video and how they had themselves migrated. Recruitment agencies are expensive, they said. Furthermore, going through formal channels makes it difficult to change employers, a fact that they had learned through friends. Lanh alleges that in such cases you could change jobs, but this would incur a huge informal fee that is typically paid back through monthly deduction from your salary. They also have heard of migrants who have ended up with no salary even when they went through requirement agencies. Obtaining

a work permit is prohibitively expensive. It would cost 20,000 Baht (646 USD) to change their status from a tourist visa to a work permit. Phou, who had obtained a work permit, was still being charged deductions from the employer who simply passed the work permit cost onto her.

The conversation with Sai, Lanh, Phou, and Chan encapsulates a central problem that Robert identified for us in Chapter 2: the difficulty for migrants to act on awareness-raising messages, a point that has also been noted in recent commissioned research on safe migration (Kiss and Zimmerman 2019). Awareness-raising material, in the forms of videos and pre-departure interventions, assumes safe migration can be invested in migrants' individual behaviour. However, several social and structural forces work against this. In other words, the behaviouralist discourses that underpin these interventions contribute to masking the situated contexts of migrants. How would Sai, Lanh, Phou, and Chan respond to a beneficiary tracing phone call from an MRC in Laos? The initial response they gave me reveals interlocutors can readily allege support for one kind of behaviour when asked (e.g. going through a recruitment agency) whilst not doing so in practice. The fact that verbal utterances do not reflect actual behaviour is a truism for social scientists (Jerolmack and Khan 2014). Yet, what is of importance in this context is to appreciate how such encounters produce two effects: it allows safe migration interventions, in the form of awareness-raising videos and beneficiary tracing, to produce data that confirms their models of intervention (which in turn contributes to producing "success") whilst at the same time obfuscating any serious attention to how migrants have to navigate assistance relating to labour abuse (a theme we will explore in greater detail in later chapters). These dynamics are also apparent in cases where safe migration programmes attempt to move beyond an individuated focus on migrants in how they attempt to target behaviours that result in exploitation of migrants.

Behavioural change: Beyond migrants

The behavioural change models within pre-departure training discussed so far target migrants, thereby ignoring wider societal constellation of forces that contribute to migrants' precarity. Such criticisms are partially acknowledged within the safe migration sector, witnessed by programmatic efforts to address this shortcoming. One such example is professionally produced short films that are meant to target employers of domestic workers, thereby contributing to broader social changes in attitudes and treatment of migrant workers.

Open Doors is a three-part short film series depicting encounters between middle- and upper-class families and their live-in domestic workers from Malaysia, Singapore, and Thailand. The Thai segment (IOMx 2016b) depicts a widowed well-healed businessman, Krit, and his relations with his Burmese domestic worker, Fon, who also has nanny duties for Krit's child.

The film portrays Fon's daily struggles as she is not allowed a day off which makes it a real struggle for her to attend to a sick relative. One day, these pressures cause Fon to be late picking up Krit's child from school, which results in conflict between Krit and Fon. However, Krit is himself under enormous pressure at work, which ultimately leads him to reflect on his own role as Fon's employer. In the end, he allows Fon one day off work.

The film is professionally produced, with convincing acting. The choice of focusing on a widowed man, I learned in an interview with one of the films' sponsors, was in part to depict a modern, urban Thai family context where traditional gender patterns are starting to change. The video has been a central part of the IOMx' awareness-raising campaign. As with the film script, audience impact of the video has also been, similarly to the examples discussed above, pre- and post-tested with the use of *Knowledge, Attitude, and intended Practice (KAP)* impact assessment tools distributed through online platforms to employers of domestic workers (IOMx 2016a). The tool produces a KAP index which is meant to map behavioural change based on a pre- and post-survey. The findings of the KAP index survey are explained thus: "The objective of the video was to raise awareness of live-in domestic worker exploitation and encourage employers of domestic workers to adopt practices to reduce exploitation (such as providing one day off per week)." (IOMx 2016a, 1) The findings from the survey were positive: "87% of viewers processed the messages of Open Doors. This means that it was interesting and they learned something new of which 46% said they would speak to others about the issue." (IOMx 2016a, 2) Hence, the KAP survey contributes to legitimating the video production as a successful awareness-raising intervention targeting employers of domestic workers.

But, how and why would employers change their perceptions of domestic workers, resulting in allowing one day off per week, based on the Opening Doors video? Researching employers of domestic workers poses a range of methodological challenges (in part due to inaccessibility), yet during my fieldwork, I interviewed five urban Thai families, whom all employ domestic workers, regarding the video. Furthermore, I also had the opportunity to discuss the video with a range of migrant domestic workers during fieldwork.

Urai, a well-healed Thai lady, with a cosmopolitan disposition (due to her considerable international travel experience) appreciated the professional production of the video. Although the acting, in her view, was convincing, she expressed doubts regarding the video's communicative impact amongst ordinary urban Thais. "It's too western" she said, pointing to the atypical nature of a male being in charge of managing a domestic worker. *Urai* qualms regarding this choice of script was echoed by *Supa*, who has employed both Burmese and Lao domestic workers for years. When I asked *Supa* what she thought was the films' main message, she replied "do never let a husband be in charge of managing a maid!" In effect, *Supa* misinterpreted the video through the same traditional gendered lens that the video was (in part) attempting to challenge. For *Supa*, the broader point of the

film (i.e. allowing the maid a day off) was turned on its head: it exemplified a failure in managing domestic workers, which did not conform with traditional Thai gender roles. Drawing attention to Supa's response is not to poke fun at how awareness-raising messages become mistranslated. The broader point is that KAP surveys like these cannot grasp either the context of respondents' answers, let alone reasons behind attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours (for extensive critiques of KAP surveys, see Good 2010; Pelto and Pelto 1997; Size 2009). The way the video is attempting to communicate the importance of allowing one day off also comes with tacit assumptions regarding the temporal nature of housework, something that surfaced in conversations with domestic workers.

In contrast to employers (who all claimed that the language used by the employer in the video was much harsher compared to reality), domestic workers I spoke with at U Ba Sein's language school (see Chapter 1) considered the interactions between the employer and the maid to be much less grim compared to their own circumstances. *Ma Mya Moe*, a domestic worker from Myanmar, immediately understood the point about advocating for one day off. "But this is not how it works in practice," she alleged. *Ma Mya Moe* herself was in the situation of being allowed a day off (hence, her ability to attend U Ba Sein's language school). Yet, this did not translate into a reduction in workload. Instead, she was simply expected to catch up on the missed work before and after leaving for school. For her, Sundays – despite being formally a day off – was a gruelling back-breaking day of labour requiring her to get up extra early and go to bed extremely late in order to make time to attend school. *Ma Mya Moe* highlights an important point about domestic work in a Thai context that seems to have been completely lost on the producers of *Open Doors*: housework is not defined by calendrical time (as assumed in the film) but a notion of a moral economy around time-use. For domestic workers like *Ma Mya Moe*, "a day off work" is simply a reorganisation of arduous labour. Despite the film attempting to move beyond an individuated focus on migrants' (e.g. pre-departure training) to target wider, societal attitudes towards migrants (in order to improve *structural* discrimination against domestic workers), it ends up producing the same behaviouralist discourse explicated earlier in the chapter, but without recognising its own mistranslations. The film's producers consider it a success regardless of what *Ma Mya*, *Uraj*, and *Supa* may think or do.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored how epistemological behaviouralism has manifested itself across a range of safe migration interventions including pre-departure training, awareness raising, beneficiary tracing as well as broader awareness raising attempting to move beyond an individuated focus on migrants (by targeting employers). We have seen how these interventions engage an anticipatory logic (where efficacy of interventions is partly

assessed in advance of interventions) which tends to be positivist in orientation (i.e. epistemological behaviouralism). This contributes to a form of institutional bad faith where interventions can carry on, even being judged as successful, while migration praxis is made opaque despite a programmatic allegiance to generate “behavioural change.” As later chapters will show, such obfuscation has real implications – not only that it obscures the efficacy of policy interventions – but it also enables transposing culpability away from the state and employers, thereby making migrants blameable for their own despondency. In order to appreciate how this comes about, we need to consider state-centric dimensions of pre-departure and pre-decision training of migrants, that is, the insistence on documents and legal migration pathways. Chapter 5 will explore this dimension of migration management in great detail.

Notes

1. The victim identification process is curious. We were allowed to sit within ear-shot of some of the interviews and could hear the questions listed on the form being read out. The included the migrant’s name, home address, basic information about their migration to Thailand (which routes), kind of employment they had in Thailand, whether they got paid while employed, and what types of assistances they are looking for. We were told that this was part of a pre-screening process for identifying trafficking victims. I asked the NGO how they could possibly get any clues about trafficking from such generic questions. They said that sometimes they would also look for other signs, such as whether women were wearing revealing clothes as this could be a sign of working in prostitution. A similar blurring between sex work and assumed trafficking vulnerability has been thoughtfully critiqued in the Australian context (Ham et al. 2013).
2. Pre-departure training in Laos is complicated for several reasons. First, due to the authoritative political context, many NGOs have difficulties with permissions allowing sustained access to village communities with awareness raising. This point was confirmed to me several times throughout fieldwork from aid workers. Second, although TPSMC had attempted to provide safe migration awareness raising and distribution of leaflets to outbound migrants on the Lao side, this was for similar reasons curtailed and limited in practice. Third, cross-border migration to Thailand spans a range of formal and informal border crossings making it difficult to target migrants during departure.
3. It must also be noted that the reason several organisations implemented such activities was not necessarily that they believed they were right, but that they operated within a political conservative context which made more progressive awareness raising messages difficult.
4. It is worth noting that ethnicity also has bearing on how local people seek assistance. Ma Thida, who is herself member of one of the local ethnic groups, told me that many local people do not have the confidence to approach government officials, who are typically ethnic Burmese, with their problems (such as fraudulent brokers) due to a historical legacy of ethnic conflict. Teachers too are typically Burmese and school curriculum is in Burmese language. In this sense, MLC arguably serves as an important intermediary in how they

provided a conduit for migrants to facilitate their migration. For example, during my visit I personally observed villagers who had attended MLC's training visiting MLC's office in order to obtain assistance with passport applications.

5. For example, the survey asks the following leading questions regarding migration pathways:

Please explain the good benefits of legal migration.

- Safe and secure travel to the country of destination.
 - Can receive full employment benefits and rights as per the law of the destination country.
 - Can travel and move independently in the destination country.
 - The possibility for becoming a victim of trafficking and labour exploitation is low.
 - Can avoid being arrested or repatriated by the destination country.
 - When the employment term is expired, you can safely return back to the country of origin.
6. The training content within both government-led pre-departure and post-arrival training as well as NGO- and UN-led pre-decision and pre-departure training are surprisingly similar. They all focus on labour law, how passports and documents can be obtained and the various entitlements and obligations that comes with them. Although government-led training gives more emphasis to the regulatory dimensions of migration (alongside cultural etiquette), NGO and UN training tends to cover more ground in terms of social relations in migration (e.g., the pros and cons migrating with licenses and unlicensed recruiters and friends).
7. As with many other agencies, IOMx emanates from anti-trafficking interventions, under an earlier partnership with MTV Asia.
8. Awareness raising videos are typically either based on documented cases or engage pre-testing (through focus groups or other methods) in order to achieve a sense of social realism. Some examples: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ay39-h1kbDo>
9. The video can be accessed here: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kHPSU8a9Gyg>
10. With the exception of Sai, all have migrated to Thailand after the implementation of both the MOU and the establishment of licenses recruitment agencies (Huijsmans and Phouxay 2008).