

Safe migration and the politics of brokered safety in Southeast Asia

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Chapter 8

Brokers, migrants, and safety

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8 Brokers, migrants, and safety

Brokers can make things happen for you.

(Senior UN official)

Some months had passed since the first meeting with Maung Thawdar. I was preoccupied with following the implementation of the one-stop service centres (see Chapter 5) and had little time to follow up on hospital translators such as Maung Thawdar. In an effort to consolidate legal pathways for labour migrants, the CI process was now interlinked with the Thai government's issuing of work permits. With the registration deadline looming for migrants who wanted to convert their pink cards into CI documents and formal work permits, the one-stop centres were overfilled with queuing migrants. The process also included health screening and the issuing of health insurance cards for migrants. Hence, Ministry of Health officials were at the frontline of migration management procedures alongside immigration and labour officials. As it turned out, Maung Thawdar had recently been seconded to one of the one-stop service centres from his hospital. He invited my research assistant and me to come along to see how the process worked. We agreed to meet on the following Sunday. In another example of bureaucratic convolution, although the CI service counters (managed by the Myanmar authorities) would be open, the service counters managed by the Thai labour and health officials would be closed as it was a public holiday. Consequently, Maung Thawdar explained, there "will be few people around then ... we will have time to talk."

The following Sunday, my research assistant and I travelled to the one-stop service centre which is located within a shopping mall on the outskirts of Bangkok. We meet Maung Thawdar at a nearby food court. When walking into the near-empty food hall, we spot Maung Thawdar together with a group of other migrant workers congregating around a table. We introduce ourselves and chit-chat about the migrants' work and experiences in Thailand. One of the male migrants, *Maung Ko Ko*, tells us that he currently had a temporary passport and was in the process of obtaining a new passport. One of the other migrants, *Ma Mie Mie*, holds a pink card and was in the process of going through the one-step centre processing system in order

to obtain a proper work permit. Whilst we were speaking, I could not help but notice the passports and work permit documents that were spread out over the table where we were sitting. Puzzled why the migrants were present with their documents given that the service centre was half-closed, we listened to Maung Thawdar explaining the operations of the centre. The one-stop centre involves a two-pronged process, he said. The first step provides migrants with a visa up to 31 March (2018); then a second step allows an extended visa up to two years (i.e. until 31 March 2020). This process only applies to migrants who hold a pink card or a temporary passport. Maung Thawdar elaborates. First, the migrant needs to obtain the CI document. This is all done at the mobile van outside, he explains. It is operated by a contractor on behalf of the Myanmar Embassy. Once that is done, the second step is to obtain the new work permit which is referred to as a “smart card.” We all laugh at the fact that the Thai authorities have confusingly chosen pink-coloured cards, which makes it easily mistaken for the “pink card” which the Thai government is phasing out.

Maung Thawdar continues. The Thai government operates the centre and involves several line ministries. Department of employment is one of the main agencies involved, but so is health. This is where my role comes in, Maung Thawdar explained. All migrants are subject to a health check which involves a blood test (to check for TB) but also screening for “elephant leg disease” (Lymphatic Filariasis) and other parasitic diseases. All migrants going through this process must take deworming tablets. The TB scan is also used to screen for narcotics.

While we sit and listen to Maung Thawdar explaining the process, it becomes clear how complex the “one-step” process is. In glaring contrast to the centre’s glib title promising speed and simplicity, the process, which we explored in Chapter 5, involves multiple steps with perplexing rules relating to different forms of employment. While Maung Thawdar explains the over-engineered bureaucratic process, it slowly dawns on me why the other migrants are present. Despite the government’s upbeat rhetoric of a streamlined one-stop process, the reality for most migrants is that they depend on others to guide them through the process. With his intimate familiarity with the system, Maung Thawdar had taken on the role of doing just that, something he confirmed to us later on. At the end of our conversation, money changed hands between him and the migrants. Maung Thawdar, it turned out, was not simply providing health-related migrant assistance under the auspices of safe migration programming, he was also operating as a work-permit broker.

Migrant assistance as brokering

The previous chapter explicated how biolegitimacy enables an operational space for migration assistance within the Thai health sector where language translators play a central role. Maung Thawdar is one amongst

numerous hospital translators which exemplifies how health interventions enable a broader humanitarian space for migration assistance. Yet, as alluded to above, his role goes well-beyond linguistic translation pertaining to healthcare. This chapter investigates how – in contrast with a Weberian legal-rational rule-bound practice – migrant assistance comprises various forms of interpersonal reciprocity which depend on intermediaries within a grey-zone of migrant assistance. To put it simply, migration assistance and brokering are two sides of the same coin. Yet, the role of brokers in safe migration is highly paradoxical. As we have seen in previous chapters, safe migration discourse often professes that traffickers and brokers constitute a potential threat to orderly, safe migration. Consequently, formal safe migration activities do either implicitly or explicitly, seek to eradicate extra-legal forms of assistance, yet – as this chapter will explicate – they are in practice depended on informal intermediaries and practices.

The role of brokers and brokering practices has surfaced throughout the book, ranging from how legal migration pathways, such as the MOU system and the CI process, breed labour brokerage (Chapter 5); how safe migration outreach workers at times recommend how to pick a “good broker” (Chapter 6); U Ba Sein’s revelation that his migrant school unintentionally produce brokers (Chapter 1); and – as we saw in the last chapter – the pivotal roles of Burmese language translators as intermediaries of migrant assistance. Yet, the focus in this chapter takes on particular significance. Although a large body of literature explores the role of brokers in migration, the focus tends to centre on what we discussed in Chapter 5: social actors that act as intermediaries in facilitating transport and documents (passports and work permits) for labour migration (Chee et al. 2012; Lin et al. 2017; Lindquist et al. 2012; Shrestha and Yeoh 2018). Yet, little scholarly attention has been afforded to migration assistance itself as a form of brokering practice within aid delivery. This neglect is curious as it is precisely within the anthropology of development where most academic mileage has been made on the study of brokers (Lewis and Mosse 2006).

This chapter explicates the role of brokers and brokering practices within safe migration programme implementation and consider the analytical challenges this poses for how we both understand aid delivery in relation to brokers, but also how moral opposites – assistance and exploitation – are brought together. This, in turn, relates to how an operational space of assistance is enabled. Hence, beyond pointing to how assistance and brokering fuse, the chapter divulges how a counter-intentional effects of programme interventions are produced through different modes of visibility and hiddenness which allows dichotomous practices to become one. In what follows, we examine brokers both as an analytical category as well as an emic category of ascription. We will consider why labour migration brokers become migrant assistance outreach workers and vice versa, and how brokerage is ubiquitous within safe migration praxis. But first, a few points need to be made regarding the concept of brokerage itself.

Revisiting the anthropology of brokerage

Brokers can be productively compared with patron–client relations. Patrons and brokers are both analytically actor-centric with emphasis on how transactional relations (that are often face-to-face) are central to social practice (Lindquist 2015a). Yet, the two are distinct in terms of control over resources:

Most generally, the broker is a human actor who gains something from the mediation of valued resources that he or she does not directly control, which shall be distinguished from a patron who controls valued resources, and a go-between or a messenger, who does not affect the transaction.

(Lindquist 2015a, 870)

Hence, in contrast to patron-client relations (which are premised on dyadic, vertical, yet reciprocal relations), brokers are middlepersons who “trade on gaps in social structure” (Stovel et al. 2019, 141). And it is this attribute which make brokers both valuable yet morally dubious. On the one hand, brokering underscores mediation of social, economic, and political relations. Yet, at the same time, brokering is associated with profiteering, rent seeking, monopolisation of information and various gatekeeping roles, as well as (at times) highly abusive practices (Gorman and Beban 2016; Stovel et al. 2019). This renders brokering highly ambiguous in terms of trust:

Given that a broker—due her greater access to information, control over resources, or structural power—has a clear opportunity to gain at the expense of either or both of the groups for whom she is brokering, how does she maintain the trust necessary to continue brokering between them? Thus, broker’s dilemma stems from the tension between the personal ties that make brokering possible, and the gains—of profit, of status, or of power—that result from the brokering role. If brokers fail to effectively manage these gains, they risk undermining the very relationships that keep them at the centre of potential transactions and interactions.

(Stovel et al. 2019, 154)

As will become evident, this tension makes migration assistance not only highly ambiguous but helps explain how brokering easily transposes between migration assistance delivery and extractive labour recruitment.

Brokers emerged as a central anthropological focus in the context of decolonisation. At the time, modernisation theory served as the central heuristic device for examining how societies mediated this change (Bierschenk et al. 2002; Lindquist 2015b). Social actors that served as mediators between different social domains (such as between urban and rural areas, and local populations and elites) became empirically visible to anthropologists given

their ethnographic fieldwork methods. In this sense, brokers have variously been understood as filling a gap due to either dysfunctional institutional practices (e.g. “weak states”) or other forms of discrepancies in social intercourse (Lewis and Mosse 2006). Later, theoretical influences in economic anthropology, and particularly transactionalism, consolidated anthropology’s focus on brokers (Barth 1967; Lindquist 2015a).

In recent years, ethnographic attention to brokers has witnessed somewhat of a renaissance within a wider interest in neoliberalism. Development aid and labour migration have emerged as central areas of focus (Bierschenk et al. 2002; Mosse et al. 2002; Rudnycky 2004; Stirrat 2008). Arguably, David Mosse’s work on development aid workers as a form of brokerage is amongst the most influential scholarly contributions (Lewis and Mosse 2006; Mosse 2005a). Extending transactional analyses, Mosse draws on a Latourian actor-network theory emphasising the role of translation. “The differentiation of practical interests around ‘unifying’ development policies or project designs,” Mosse says, “requires the constant work of translation...which is the task of skilled brokers (managers, consultants, fieldworkers, community leaders) who read the meaning of a project into the different institutional languages of its stakeholder supporters.” (Mosse and Mosse 2004, 647) The focus on meaning-making practices is understandable given the aid sector’s heavy reliance on textual resources. However, this forces the analysis to be overly concerned with discursive dimensions of brokerage (translation, meaning-making, and interpretations of success). This has limited analytical purchase for what follows as the way brokering intertwines with altruistic migration assistance is just as much about obfuscation of meaning and relations. A collective bad faith of willed unintelligibility is just as important as meaning making within safe migration assistance.

The other key strand of brokerage research, unsurprisingly, pertains to labour migration (Shrestha and Yeoh 2018). In order to open the “black box” of migration (Lindquist et al. 2012), the study of brokers has become an entry point for examining migration infrastructure, that is, the complex web of persons, objects, and practices that move migrants (Lindquist et al. 2012). This analytical move is germane as it pushes analysis away from a common critique of broker-scholarship: methodological individualism (Lindquist et al. 2012). Yet, this body of research tends to limit analysis to social actors who mediate between migrants and employers. Although altruistic discourses are recognised, the role of aid agencies and migration assistance is usually absent. Indeed, the two domains are considered socially separate. One of the few explicit juxtapositions of aid delivery and migration brokers is made in Johan Lindquist’s evocative ethnography of labour migration in Indonesia where NGO outreach workers and labour migration brokers curiously share the same linguistic label in Indonesian language. “*Petugas lapangan*,” Lindquist writes, “namely the informal labour recruiter and the NGO outreach worker... are both important actors in the contemporary

regime of transnational migration from Indonesia, but... have nothing to do with one another in practice, and, indeed, are often found in different kinds of locations” (Lindquist 2015b, 163). It may well be that Lindquist’s informants indeed operate in separate social universes. Yet, it is puzzling how the connections between them are not explored further, given the fact that it is precisely the NGO-world where so much ethnographic mileage on brokers has been made. What follows explores precisely how safe migration assistance and brokerage embody the same social universe and quite frequently, as in the example of Maung Thawdar, embody the very same person. As will become evident, the blurring of labour brokers and migrant assistance are conduits for the kind of analysis Lindquist seeks, which “consider the broker as an ethnographic entry point that illuminates broader contexts and processes from a particular position of mediation.” (Lindquist 2015a, 874)

Helpers as brokers

In Chapter 5, we were introduced to Siriwan, a licensed broker who throughout my fieldwork battled the new regulative requirements for licensed recruitment agencies, introduced by Thailand’s Ministry of Labour. During one of my visits to her office I ask her how she identifies herself. She makes no qualms about the fact that she is a broker (*nai na*) but also claims to be a humanitarian. She describes to me her involvement in assisting several of the refugee populations along the Thai-Myanmar border with food donations. Siriwan, therefore, managed to balance multiple roles and identities.

Siriwan (her adopted Thai name) came to Thailand as a migrant in 1994 ending up working in the seafood processing sector. In addition to long hours of arduous work filleting fish, she made time for studying Thai language in hope that this would help her obtain better employment in the future. On occasion, immigration officials would visit her workplace. They would commonly ask if any of the workers spoke Thai and could facilitate translation during their visit. One day, Siwiran offered to serve as translator, a role she would undertake on several subsequent occasions. This introduced her to several aspects of immigration and labour regulation but also assistance mechanisms relating to health and work conditions. It also introduced her to a range of officials working with migrants from both government and the Thai NGO sector.

Eventually, these connections led to ad hoc employment with an NGO as a court-case translator relating to compensation claims. This reinforced her familiarity with migration policy frameworks and labour migration laws. Furthermore, this exponentially increased her social capital as her work brought her close to both migrants and officials. She soon became involved in helping migrants with getting their passports, and subsequently started charging money for her service – 20 Baht per passport. She stayed on with the NGO for a few years.

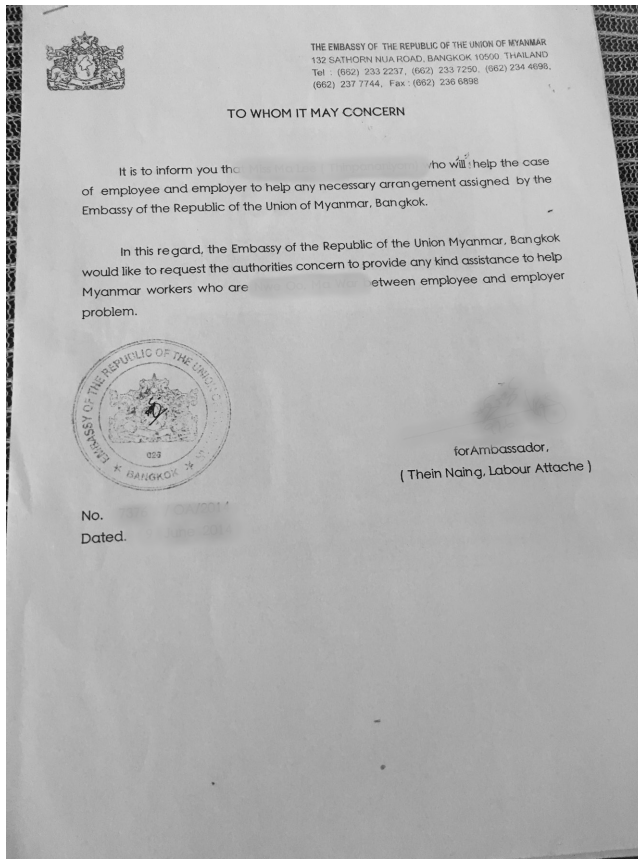


Figure 8.1 Siriwan’s endorsement letter, allowing her to act on behalf of the embassy in migrant assistance cases.

In her role at the NGO, Siriwan also became acquainted with officials at the Myanmar Embassy. As she did a lot of case work, (compensation claims, workplace accidents, and visa troubleshooting), she was ultimately afforded a formal status acting on behalf of the Myanmar Embassy in a range of migration assistance cases (see Figure 8.1). This was particularly useful in dealing with repatriation cases as it allowed her legal authority to escort migrants across the Thai–Myanmar border. She claimed to have done this work for free.

Siriwan alleged that she helped a lot of migrants due to her consolidated experience and her wide range of contacts, both within the Myanmar and Thai state bureaucracies. She shows me large document files of cases she has solved. One includes a case of two young Myanmar domestic workers who had been underpaid. “I negotiated a compensation sum with the employer of 30,000 and 48,000 Baht, respectively, despite them both being

undocumented,” she boasted. While the girls were eventually compelled to return to Myanmar, they did receive their compensation claims, Siriwan explained. Underscoring her success with such difficult cases, she says, “in order to work in this business you must know big people” (*phu nyai*). Her office’s décor reinforced her claim. Her office walls are liberally ornamented with photos of her meeting and greeting with a range of officials from the Thai political elite. “One of my current advisors is a senior person within the Thai military” she says, adding “If you don’t know big people you can’t move forward.”

After years of carefully greasing the patrimonial wheels of the Thai bureaucracy, Siriwan now runs a licensed recruitment agency which imports large number of labour migrants into Thailand from Myanmar. Her company is legal, but as we learned in Chapter 5, she is currently struggling to keep afloat due to the new regulations from Ministry of Labour. During our conversations, it becomes clear that she has become highly critical of the NGO sector which previously employed her. In our conversations, she frequently juxtaposes labour recruitment brokers and NGO officials. NGOs “need cases” in order to gain an income (i.e. donor contributions) and are therefore just as unscrupulous as brokers, she proclaims. She insinuates dubious NGO conduct by the way of hinting at poor pay. “My NGO salary was only 4500 Baht with frequent overtime,” she complains. “When I became a broker, I could also help migrants. NGO’s image is all about helping. I am now a broker, but I can still help.”

Extending her claims, Siriwan further argues that “NGOs are also a form of broker,” given their dependency on foreign funding. “But NGOs don’t help anyone.” The way Siriwan explicates her role as a broker and former NGO official is premised on an inversion of the good and the bad, the helpful and the unscrupulous. Contrary to common understandings, she claims, brokers are good and NGOs bad. Such reversals are also reflected in her employment trajectory, which she alleges is uncommon. “I am the only person I know who has moved from an NGO to become a broker,” she said. “But you have a lot the other way around.”

Brokers as helpers

According to Siriwan, plenty of NGO outreach workers are former labour migration brokers. One such person is *U San Tint*. His role as a former broker only became apparent to me over time, due to my repeated visits to the NGO where he works, *Migration Aid* (an NGO we have explored in earlier chapters). During one of our many visits, U San Tint reveals that he used to work as a *carry* (a broker specialising in transporting migrants). The disclosure was curious, given that we had previously attended Migration Aid staff meetings where U San Tint served as a language translator for Thai staff, where brokers were frequently discussed as a key reason for migrants’ numerous problems. I was interested in knowing more about U San Tint’s

past and asked if we could discuss this further. U San Tint agreed on the condition we met outside Migration Aid's office.

A few weeks later, in the blistering hot Bangkok sun, we met in a neighbourhood within an industrial zone where many labour migrants work. The area houses some 10,000 Myanmar migrants, mixed with Mon, Burmese as well as several other ethnic groups. The streets and adjacent housing complexes are full of migrants from Myanmar. When walking down the narrow alleyways, a mixture of Burmese food and chatter fills the air. One could easily mistake it for a suburban part of Yangon. We decide to go to a nearby shop as we can speak in private over lunch. When we walk inside, U San Tint boasts that he is wearing a cap as a disguise "because I work on human rights." We order lunch. While we wait for our food, U San Tint begins his account of how he became a *carry* (a transport broker) and before later becoming an outreach worker for an NGO.

U San Tint is the eldest of six children. His father was a taxi driver and his mother worked at a market. He left Myanmar for southern Thailand about twenty years ago. After one year, he moved to the outskirts of Bangkok. There he met a friend, which led him to relocate to another province nearby. He tried a job in construction which paid him 20 Baht per day. Subsequently, another migrant helped him find another job. Back then, he said, all migrants were undocumented. His new job was industrial prawn farming. The work was dangerous and involved diving despite electricity wires being close to the water. He ended up having a major dispute with his employer and left after one year. He returned to Myanmar. While he brought gold with him on his return journey, this was confiscated from him by the police on his return.

After some time in Myanmar, he once again returned to Thailand. He ended up working in food processing inside a large frozen storage facility. He worked there for three years. When he returned to Myanmar for a visit, the employer asked him if he could bring more workers. He ended up bringing two of his siblings, two cousins, and a brother in-law. By the following year, he had gained experience in bringing in people to Thailand. He began requesting money for this service. He charged 5000 Baht per head. The problem was that people did not pay and simply ran away once they arrived in Thailand. This was a serious problem for U San Tint as he often had to advance other cost as the migrants had no money.

Due to his Thai language skills, his boss also asked him to manage the Burmese workers. He then started bringing in more migrants, around 25 each time. He established connections with the Thai police. He charged 300 Baht per person, plus 500 Baht for the van driver. "Then all would be ok," he explains. The driver would deal with the police during transport. This was the situation 15–20 years ago. He decided that for a 5000 Baht investment, he wanted 10,000 Baht return.

"How do you secure your payment," I wondered? Making migrants pay was an ongoing problem. In order to enforce payment, he took photos of

the migrants he brought in, recording their names, home village, and details about their families. This way, he would be able to threaten them if they didn't pay (something he ended up doing). While he explained that he did not actually have the resources to trace family members of migrants, he was hopeful that it would work as a threat. "Did it work?," I asked. U San Tin shook his head. "No!" (laughter). "I would then try other methods." Happy to elaborate, he explained that this included beating people up, or sometimes he would clear debt by having sex with female migrants. He built connections with "hooligans" and the police, allowing him to threaten workers who did not pay him. His reliance on the police worked as the arrangement was reciprocal. In return, he would assist police with translation when the police wanted money from migrant workers.

"You have to be friendly with police, immigration and bus drivers," he says. He bribed officials at checkpoints. "Was prior contact with officials at the checkpoints necessary?" I ask. "Over time, I became friends with lots of police officers," U San Tin explains, "but no pre-established relationship existed with checkpoints." To the contrary, he tells us, "when approaching the checkpoint, I never presented myself as a broker, but as an ordinary fellow migrant within the group."¹ Then, he demonstrates to us (also through bodily gestures) how he would bribe. He would put his hands in a "wai" and say something along the lines of "we migrate, we have a hard time." He would then ask the officer to please let them through and offer "their only savings" as a bribe. According to U San Tin, this works as a treat. "Everybody loves money," he says. "In my ten-year career as a broker, I never experienced a police officer declining a bribe" he laughs. "That is my skill ... the skill to be friends with others."

Even arrests became opportunities for expanding his operations as a broker. He explains how the arrest took place due to him miscalculating the patrimonial linkages amongst police officers. "There was a chain of people connected amongst the police that I did not know of," he says. Nevertheless, the unfortunate arrest turned out to become "an opportunity to make friend with the police!" U San Tin giggled. His skills as a broker contributed to an ever-increasing thickness of social relations which, in turn, reinforced his broker dexterities. Over time, U San Tin says, he developed some skill in knowing how to bribe the police.

Say, if there are three officers, I would first identify the one with authority. I would then give money to that person. But if he was uncooperative, I would approach the subordinate and try to convince that person (with the anticipation of bribes) to speak to the boss on his behalf.

Despite U San Tin's apparent success as a broker, he was looking for ways out of his profession. The work could be dangerous. At one point, he was arrested for human trafficking, which was a much more serious charge. He was later on threatened at gunpoint in connection to a botched smuggling

operation involving police officers. “Anything you get from water you lose in water,” U San Tint exclaimed. If the police think you stab them in the back, he said, then you are in real trouble. There are financial downsides too, according to U Sant Tint: “unclean money doesn’t stick long.”

Over the years, U San Tint became acquainted with a few outreach programmes involving local NGOs working on health amongst migrants. “I was quite well-known in the migrant community,” U San Tint says, and “this was useful for NGOs as I could access various people.” Over time, this has turned into a formal role for U San Tint. He has stopped working as a broker, he alleges, and now devotes his time working for a local NGO relating to health, compensation claims, and other forms of problems migrants face. U Sant Tint’s local status has also proven highly effective for the NGO in order to recruit migrants for various training sessions relating to safe migration. As the NGO paid some 100–200 Baht for attendance as well as top-up money for migrants who could recruit others to attend, this became a lucrative business for U Sant Tint which neatly merged NGO-led migrant assistance with commission-based brokerage.

“If you don’t enter the tiger’s cage you will not get the cub”

U San Tint and Siriwan’s double roles as brokers and migrant assistance workers are far from unique. Ko Htay, who we introduced in the previous chapter, does not only assist with health claims; he is also a highly experienced passport and work permit fixer. As such, he is similar to Maung Thawdar who used his experience in health work as a launchpad into document brokering. Ko Thein Phay, another passport broker introduced in Chapter 6, volunteers as a translator relating to healthcare cases (especially pregnancies) through one of the numerous Myanmar migrant self-help groups.

Although NGOs and Government bodies appear unaware of the double-roles of many of these individuals, this is not always the case. For example, the director of Migration Aid, U San Tint’s employer, is cognisant of U Sant Tint’s shady past. Why, then, do brokers become attractive for NGOs? It was Siriwan who was the first one to shed some light on this conundrum. “If you don’t enter the tiger’s cage, you won’t get the cub,” she tells me. Intrigued by her poetic response, I ask her to elaborate. “If we only work as NGO we would not know. But brokers know.” She elaborates further. If you want to understand what is taking place on the factory floors, in the migrant dormitories and on the streets where migrants live, you’ve got to engage brokers, Siriwan alleges. Within the murkiness of semi-legal migration status, precarious work conditions (with scrupulous employers), predatory officials (police), and intimidating labour recruiters, the ability to access and assist migrants requires particular skills and positionalities. Brokers fit that role perfectly.

Later in my fieldwork, U san Tint and I had the opportunity to discuss how his previous role as a broker had influenced how he carried out migrant

assistance work. “The key benefit [for the NGO] is that I can easily identify if someone is good or bad,” he tells me. “This is useful when you are assisting people.” He pulls up a notebook from his bag. He opens it and shows several pages to me. They are full of name lists that are colour-coded. I keep records of all phone conversations, he tells me. In meticulous detail, he records the date, the name of the person spoken to, and the general topic of conversation. He highlights bad people and good people in different colours. Green equals good; orange equals bad. “This is a habit I have developed since I was a broker,” he explains. The ability to build and maintain relations across a wide span of people straddling migrants, NGO personnel, police, health and labour officials as well as a range of other brokers is premised on U San Tint’s ability to “read” people. “I can go anywhere, and I can make connections with both brokers and police.” “It is this skill that I have,” U San Tint says, “to make friends.” And making friends interrelates with the multiple roles and functions that brokering takes. I asked U San Tint to free-list all the different kinds of broker roles he has served. “Ah, it takes so many forms,” he tells me. He pauses for a bit. After some deliberation, he itemises his broker roles as follows:

- Translator for police
- Informer to the police
- Escorting migrants to hospital
- Sending money (remittances)
- Assist in cases relating to expired passports
- Assist with compensation claims
- Provide participants for NGO training

His multiple identities even apply to his formal status. When he talks to an employer, such as in a work compensation claim, he will use the NGO office phone. He showed me his identification cards. He had one as a staff member for the NGO and another for the police (in his role as translator). He used the cards depending on what suits the situation. Ironically, it is the formal status working for an NGO which contributes to his ability to operate in such multiplex manner, which helps explain why some brokers end up working with migrant assistance programmes. “Working for an NGO has advantages” Siriwan told me, as it provides you with a legal status and therefore a level of safety and protection. This way, Siriwan, exclaims, “everyone wins.”

Although part of U San Tint’s work relates to obtaining various information to build work compensation claims through formal complaints mechanism, migrant assistance extends well into informal modes of working. “Some good brokers ask for advice,” he tells me. “For example, if a worker is arrested without a pink card, what to do? I will ask what the police is charging. They may say 3000 Baht. I will then advice to negotiate it down to 1000.” The art of negotiating a bribe easily transposes from U San Tint’s former role as a migrant broker to a migrant assistance worker.

Migration assistance as brokerage

Maung Thawdar, Siriwan, U San Tint, and Ko Thein Phay share one thing in common. They self-identify as brokers in relation to their role in migration assistance. Through our conversations, either the Thai word *nai na* or the Burmese phrase *carry* (transporter) or *boisa* (broker) were used without any qualms. Indeed, none of them saw their double roles as problematic. Being part an entrepreneur profiting from transposing spheres of sociality (as explicated in Fredrik Barth's seminal transactional analysis 1967) and part a Weberian bureaucrat interlocking regulatory migrant formalities, they are at the same time echoing a moral economy of assistance (Scott 1977). As other parts of this book and other literature have observed (Lindquist 2015b; Missbach 2015), brokers are a well-known social category in any migration context in the Mekong region. Yet, brokering goes well beyond the conduct of social actors who self-identify as brokers; for instance, consider U Sant Tint's aforementioned example of remuneration for NGO training becoming an opportunity for brokerage. This phenomenon is partly recognised in the migration assistance sector: some NGOs have discontinued providing financial benefits for workshop attendance for this reason (though many others, such as MRC1's training described in Chapter 6, continue with this practice). Yet, removing financial incentives does not necessarily remove brokering practices within safe migration workshops.

One NGO official who provides training for migrants on topics ranging from compensation claims, visa and work permit procedures, and labour law told me that in his estimate, at least 60% of the attendants either were brokers, or ended up working as brokers as a result of the training.² The reason why these training sessions either produced or skilled up brokers is simple: when worker rights, labour law, visa processing, and healthcare insurance are covered in class, this is precisely the kind of information that is useful to brokers. A Thai official working for another large international NGO reported to me a similar problem in their work on peer education amongst young migrants, a popular strategy amongst NGOs working with migrants worldwide (Alcock et al. 2009). After several years employing experienced migrants as peer educators under the auspices of safe migration and anti-trafficking interventions, local staff discovered that at least one of their peer educators had graduated to become "a trafficker." "We cried when we realised this!" the NGO officer said. Despite academic writings highlighting this possibility several years ago (Molland 2012a), the fact that this came as a surprise to NGO workers is telling of something else: aid agencies' obliviousness of how safe migration interventions can become complicit in producing the phenomenon it wishes to eliminate: unscrupulous brokerage.

But, the conundrum is both broader and deeper than this. I would often hear aid officials juxtapose their work with migrant brokers. "They [brokers] are helping too," they would say. "Brokers should not be demonised in a broad-brush fashion." Yet, a distinction between migration assistance groups

and (good) brokers, NGO officials told me, was that brokers had the added benefit of providing actual work for migrants. NGOs were not employment intermediaries, and that is why migrants gravitated towards brokers. Yet, throughout my fieldwork, the practice of several NGOs and smaller migrant-based groups contradicted this claim. One morning whilst hanging about in Migration Aid's office, a group of stranded migrant workers appeared. They had been cheated by a broker. It made me curious how Migration Aid would handle the situation. After conversing with some of Migration Aid's staff, it became clear that the circumstances made it too difficult to chase the broker. Their efforts would concentrate on lining the migrants up with work in a nearby factory. Although rarely acknowledged as a formal objective of their work (some exceptions exist), connecting migrants with employers becomes a residual service which stems from the social position of the NGO. This is precisely what Maung Thawdar did when he offered a job to an aspirational domestic worker as part of his health translation service at his hospital at the end of the previous chapter.

In some cases, the NGOs become complicit in farming out workers to workplaces that are – by admission of the NGO – highly exploitative. One afternoon, I was sitting together with Ma Ni (see Chapter 3) who is the manager of one of the numerous small-scale migrant groups, which in this instance is funded by an International NGO. While we discuss the range of assistance and migrant services they provide, Ma Ni explains the difficulty with assisting “MOU deserters” (Burmese: *MOU-Pyay*), that is, migrants who have run away from their workplace under the auspices of an MOU contract. When they come to us, Ma Ni explains, they have often abandoned their workplace. But, the MOU system does not allow for that, she says. Either they have to return to the employer or return to Myanmar. Ma Ni tells me that in practice that many of them don't want to pursue either option. Such workers are in effect undocumented as they are in breach of their MOU contract, Ma Ni explains. Many factories will not take on undocumented workers as it is illegal and risky. “These migrants are desperate.” Ma Ni explains to me that the only places left for them are small-scale textile factories, iron and metal shops as well as rubber factories. They accept any type of worker regardless of their migrant status. She explained: “I tell the migrants to go to these places.” She described the work in such places as “dangerous work” where salaries are below the minimum wage.

In effect, Ma Ni lines up despondent migrants for workplaces that she knows are both dangerous and below legal minimum standards. Although Ma Ni alleges that she does not charge any commission for such introductions, one would otherwise be hard-pressed to explain how such migration “assistance” differs from willed recruitment into exploitative employment. This constitutes what many government and aid agencies (including the one that funds Ma Ni's project) would describe as human trafficking. Yet, despite my delicate probing on this point, Ma Ni seemed unable to recognise how her assistance had turned into what her organisation attempted

to work against: labour exploitation. From the migrants' perspective, she tells me, having any job – even an exploitative one – is better than nothing. Therefore, why not help?

Brokers and helpers

Is Ma Ni exposing migrants to safety or risk? Given that Maung Thawdar's assistance with formal documents – in exchange for a commission – ensures the speedy delivery of legal migrant status, should this be considered a form of migrant protection or extortion? After all, what is the principled difference between how Siriwan aids migrants under the auspices of being an aid worker as opposed to a licensed broker? And what are we to make of the efficacy of how U San Tint draws on his broker experience in asserting negotiated outcomes for migrants' welfare; is this ultimately a form of abuse or help? The way in which assistance and brokerage bleed into each other makes it difficult to answer these questions. Similarly, their double roles as brokers and officials operating under the auspices of safe migration assistance delivery are interlaced, as are the outcomes of their conduct. Risk and safety, protection and extortion, and help and abuse are conjoined. How can we account for the social grammar that underpins these merged relations and practices?

Consider, for example, how U San Tint assists with negotiating down the price of bribes for migrants. It results in two important outcomes for the migrant: the cost is significantly reduced, and they avoid more serious trouble (arrest and deportation). At the same time, the police receive a cut nonetheless (although not as much as initially hoped) and U San Tint's translation assistance eases police's communication with migrants. In addition, U San Tint achieves multiple things: in addition to a (possible) financial kickback (migrants often provide a financial "gift" for the favour for such assistance), it also becomes an opportunity for U San Tint to reinforce social relations with migrants, other brokers, and officials. A satisfied migrant worker due to a well-negotiated bribe helps reinforce U San Tint's reputation as a "good broker," yet at the same time, the encounter helps grease the reciprocal wheels with police officers. In the words of Siriwan, such arrangements ensure that "everybody wins." It is within this logic we need to grasp the phenomenon where brokers are helpers and helpers are brokers within safe migration as this is central to how we understand the social and institutional significance of their ubiquity. Here, it is instructive to juxtapose brokers with formal aid assistance.

Several shared characteristics are notable regarding Siriwan, U San Tint, and other actors who engaging in brokered assistance. First, their social position stems from their own background being migrants. Their knowledge of migration and migration infrastructure is experiential, based on ongoing, situated embeddedness within migrant worlds. Both Siriwan and U San Tint explain to me their roles in contrast with my status

as a university lecturer. “One must learn from real life experience, rather than only from a classroom, at a University, or Facebook or a computer,” Siriwan tells me as “in contrast with Ajarns (lecturer/teacher) like you” U San Tint says, “I have learned from experience.” Hence, in methodological terms, both brokering and assistance can be considered homologous to ethnography.

Second, their practices bring together social actors that are otherwise considered socially separate and oppositional. After all, police, employers, state agencies are often thought of as “enemies” of migrants. Third, interdependency between social actors structures their social position and practice (e.g. police exchange translation for leniency with how migration cases are managed). Exchanging money or favours is both how cases are “solved” but also what gives the brokers their reputation. Fourth, although their practice engages laws and regulation, the key point is not skills to produce an ordered, rule-bound practice, but rather how to navigate hypercomplex regularity frameworks. Brokers are rule-benders, not rule-(re)producers.

Note how different this is from formal migration assistance work, which is aimed at Weberian technical rationality with rule-bound policies (which contributes to siloed bureaucratic practice) aimed at formalisation (which makes extra-legal intervention – such as assisting undocumented migrants – difficult) where knowledge is premised on positivist data (surveys, questionnaires) and abstract prescriptive intervention modalities (see Chapter 4 on pre-departure awareness raising). Yet, a range of immediate challenges that migrants face – ranging from police extortion, to well-connected employers withholding salaries – cannot easily be addressed through formal aid assistance. These are precisely the problems MRC1 and MRC2 faced in their outreach work (see Chapter 6). In effect, brokers and brokerage bridge a void that formal assistance cannot fill. Informal assistance provided by brokers, in contrast to formal assistance, has considerable spatio-temporal elasticity. As Ko Htay once told me, brokers “dance according to the light,” adapting to whatever the situation requires to get things done. At the same time, migration assistance, which is often funded through foreign aid, is socially removed from migrants. Expatriate aid officials become dependent on chains of programme delivery, whereby international organisations fund local partners which, in turn, engage local actors in order to access migrants. In this sense, it is unsurprising that migration assistance that moves through the complex chains of donor-recipient relations ends up resembling broker practices.

Analytically, all of what has been said so far is not new. The way in which brokers straddle social domains premised on inter-personal and reciprocal – as opposed to scripted and abstracted – relations within context of institutional ambiguity has been widely pointed out in literature on brokers (Bierschenk et al. 2002; Lindquist 2015b, 2015a; Lindquist et al. 2012; Molland 2012a). What is of anthropological interest is how the ubiquity of broker and brokerage practices can be reconciled with migration assistance

given that safe migration's discursive opposition to it. The answer, I suggest, has to do with how brokered assistance constitutes a play of the visible and invisible.

As my fieldwork progressed, I had several conversations with aid officials working for international safe migration programmes regarding my hybrid informants who mixed migration assistance and brokering. My revelation was met by surprise and in some cases disbelief, despite the fact that some of them were funding activities which included migration awareness raising training which became "broker schools" (see Chapter 1). In stark contrast to brokers' ability to connect across social divides, expatriate aid workers were notable for their social disconnection from the migrant worlds' they were aiming to intervene in (Feldman 2011a).

At the same time, some aid officials – especially Thai and Burmese – would be aware of brokers within safe migration aid delivery. The presence of brokers within the ranks of migration assistance was both known and unknown. The simultaneous visibility and invisibility of brokering is reflected through subject positions. As we have seen above, in some cases, brokers constitute a recognised social category which is part of social actors' self-definition. Both Siriwan and U San Tint are clear about who they are: brokers. At the same time, a range of brokering practices take place that are not recognised as such, and appear to unfold behind the back of individuals who act them out. As far as I am aware, Ma Ni does not see herself – or is seen by others – as a broker in terms of who she is and what she does. Yet, as argued above, her conduct is clearly within the realm of brokering, with possible nefarious results. Brokering manifests itself both through explicit social identities and conduct as well as through its (unacknowledged) counter-intentional effects. Paradoxically, the organisations that knowingly employ former brokers do so in order to make migration world visible, knowable, and accessible. Yet, at the same time, the use of brokers in safe migration assistance remains formally unacknowledged. It is not part of the formal self-definition of safe migration. The role of brokers and brokerage in safe migration service delivery conceals just as much as it reveals.

In this context, it is instructive to revisit David Mosse's influential work on brokers in aid. Rather than translation and meaning, it is rather the obfuscation of meaning that is central to brokering within migration assistance. In this sense, brokerage lubricates a collective bad faith where it becomes possible for aid assistance to resemble what it claims to oppose. Similar to how anthropological scholars demonstrate how the fairtrade movement does not transform markets but the reverse (rather than achieving "ethical markets" fair-trade programmes are perfected expressions of a neoliberal logic), a similar reversal is evident in safe migration. In a broader sense, whereas as safe Migration Aid delivery aims at formalising migration mechanisms to ensure safety, in practice, it heavily depends on – and produces – informal practices. And brokers and brokerage encapsulate this process so well.

Conclusion

This chapter has explored the role of brokers and brokerage in light of safe migration aid delivery. Rather than constituting separate social worlds, this chapter has detailed how brokers and assistance are heavily intertwined. It is not unusual for NGO outreach workers to hold previous roles as migration brokers, and the reason for why aid agencies end up employing former brokers can be explained in light of the social positional skill-set they hold in order to gain access to (and trust) within migrant communities. Hence, safe migration assistance depends on and produce brokering practices. At the same time, the chapter has pointed to how brokering practices serve as a form of bad faith, where safe migration interventions both depend on, yet disassociate itself from brokered migration assistance. Hence, rather than translation of meaning and discourse, obfuscation and disarticulation are central to brokered safety. Yet, regulation of labour migration and migrant assistance cannot simply be reduced to a question of brokers. An analytical problem with brokers and brokerage resembles a common critique of patron client relations. Although they are easy to point to empirically – the mediation of social relations across social domains – one is left wondering how much analytical power brokerage entails. After all, an analytical construct that explains too much explains too little. To make our analysis of brokers useful, it is instructive to consider how brokerage connects to institutional dimensions of migration assistance. Whereas this chapter has examined this relation in contrast with formal aid assistance, the following chapter will consider how brokerage is situated within informal migrant associations and the broader context of migrant sociality.

A few weeks had passed. My research assistants and I are back at the one-stop centre carrying out a survey amongst the migrants who are queuing up for their new smartcards (see Chapter 5). While we were carrying out our survey, I happened to spot Maung Thawdar escorting a small group of migrants through the labyrinth of queues, forms, health check stations, and processing counters. It was hard to tell whether he was acting in his role as a formal health worker servicing the health screening counter within the centre or acting in his capacity as a broker. Despite all the efforts by the Thai and Myanmar governments to eliminate brokers within the registration process, brokers and brokerage remained omnipresent.

As previous chapters have shown, migration assistance comprises international donors, UN agencies, government bodies, NGOs, as well as numerous informal migrant groups amongst Myanmar migrants (see Chapters 2 and 3). Through our surveys of migrants at the one-stop centre (see Chapter 5), it also became clear to us that migration assistance went beyond both formal aid delivery and brokers. Within our survey, we asked migrants “Have you ever been in contact with an organisation that assist

migrants in Thailand?” Of all the 54 migrants surveyed, six had not had any contact with any organisation. In addition to the Myanmar Embassy (two responses), three others had been in contact with *Migrant Assist Migrants (MAM)*, a Myanmar migrant assistance group whom we encountered in Chapters 4 and 5. Many more were familiar with MAM through Facebook. Notably, not a single migrant reported having had any contact whatsoever with a safe migration project implemented by a UN agency or a formally recognised NGO. Informal migrant self-help groups, such as MAM, that exist outside development aid funding structures were far better known than the well-funded formalised aid groups. The next chapter explains why.

Notes

1. It is worth noting that this anecdote contradicts common claims within anti-trafficking discourse: that traffickers and police collude. In this case, “traffickers” are not even visible to police.
2. The reason he could tell was that participants would often ask specific questions unrelated to their own circumstances.