

EASTASIAFORUM

Economics, Politics and Public Policy in East Asia and the Pacific

- [Home](#)
- [Topics](#)
 - [Development](#)
 - [Economics](#)
 - [International relations](#)
 - [Politics](#)
 - [Trade](#)
 - [Year in review](#)
 - [2018 in review](#)
 - [2017 in review](#)
 - [2016 in review](#)
 - [2015 in review](#)
 - [2014 in review](#)
 - [2013 in review](#)
 - [2012 in review](#)
 - [2011 in review](#)
 - [2010 in review](#)
 - [2009 in review](#)
 - [2008 in review](#)
 - [Other topics](#)
 - [Editorials](#)
 - [ASEAN](#)
 - [Belt and Road Initiative](#)
 - [Climate change](#)
 - [China–Japan relations](#)
 - [Democracy](#)
 - [G20](#)
 - [Human rights](#)
 - [Military](#)
 - [Regional architecture](#)
 - [Security](#)
 - [South China Sea](#)
 - [Trans-Pacific Partnership](#)
 - [United States and Asia](#)
 - [US–Japan alliance](#)
 - [WTO](#)
- [Countries](#)
 - [Map Article Browser](#)
 - [Australia](#)
 - [China](#)
 - [India](#)
 - [Indonesia](#)
 - [Japan](#)
 - [North Korea](#)
 - [South Korea](#)
 - [United States](#)
 - [Other countries](#)
 - [Central Asia](#)
 - [Kyrgyzstan](#)
 - [Kazakhstan](#)
 - [Tajikistan](#)

- [Turkmenistan](#)
- [Uzbekistan](#)
- [East Asia](#)
 - [Hong Kong](#)
 - [Mongolia](#)
 - [Taiwan](#)
- [European Union](#)
- [Oceania](#)
 - [Fiji](#)
 - [New Zealand](#)
 - [Pacific islands](#)
 - [Papua New Guinea](#)
 - [Solomon Islands](#)
 - [Timor-Leste](#)
 - [Tonga](#)
 - [Vanuatu](#)
- [South Asia](#)
 - [Afghanistan](#)
 - [Bangladesh](#)
 - [Bhutan](#)
 - [Maldives](#)
 - [Nepal](#)
 - [Pakistan](#)
 - [Sri Lanka](#)
- [Southeast Asia](#)
 - [Cambodia](#)
 - [Laos](#)
 - [Malaysia](#)
 - [Myanmar](#)
 - [Philippines](#)
 - [Singapore](#)
 - [Thailand](#)
 - [Vietnam](#)
- [Russia](#)
- [Contributors](#)
- [Quarterly](#)
- [About](#)
-

Safeguarding labour migration in the Mekong region

20 June 2019

Author: Sverre Molland, ANU

In recent years, several UN agencies and NGOs have moved away from a narrow anti-trafficking focus to a broader focus on migration governance. It is within this context that ‘safe migration’ has become a popular approach for migration assistance provision.



The Mekong region is a fertile ground for investigating migration policy responses given its enormous migrant population, ranging from asylum seekers to huge pools of unskilled labour migrants. Thailand's booming socio-economic development relative to its neighbours and unskilled labour-dependent economy makes it a central migration hub. [Current estimates](#) of labour migrants in Thailand are as high as nearly four million.

The Thai government and its regional neighbours have put considerable efforts into formalising labour migration through pre-departure and post-arrival training, standardisation of travel documents and work permits, as well as access to social security and health services. Numerous NGOs and UN agencies also play a part in migration assistance, ranging from compensation claims relating to underpayment and work-related accidents, as well as other forms of para-legal assistance for migrant workers.

The large scale of aid agencies that provide labour migration with a 'humanitarian bent' make safe migration interventions in the Mekong region particularly interesting. Despite these developments, the impact of safe migration interventions is still poorly understood. How exactly is safe migration achieved? How can safety be ensured and for whom?

Safe migration recasts legal migration in a new programmatic framework. In addition to state actors, NGOs and UN agencies are central in shaping safe migration discourse and practice. While safe migration emphasises the importance of legal migration, it also recognises that legal pathways can be problematic. As a recent [ILO and IOM report](#) shows, legal status by no means ensures safe outcomes for migrants and can even be used as a tool to control migrant labour such as employers withholding passports.

Strengthening migrants' ability to navigate their way to employment opportunities — as opposed to deterring migration — is the central premise for safe migration interventions. Migrants are encouraged to seek advice from other migrants and use available hotlines if they find themselves in danger. They are also offered assistance relating to underpayment, work compensation claims and other problems they may face.

Eliminating extra-legal brokers is another important strategy within safe migration interventions. Migrating through a licensed recruitment agency or with an experienced migrant who is part of one's social networks (friends or family members) may be safer than with an unfamiliar migrant broker.

Despite policy efforts to streamline the migration process, state regulation seems to have increased the complicity and scale of migrant brokerage, resulting in increasing costs for migrants (who often end up in debt-bondage relationships in order to finance their migration).

Equating 'safety' with legal migration fails to appreciate how legal documents become a capital resource. It is almost impossible to migrate legally without the involvement of third parties. Even something as simple as obtaining a mandated passport stamp every three months — a requirement in Thailand — often requires the involvement of 'passport stamp brokers', as migrants may not get work off to visit the immigration office.

How regulation breeds — rather than eliminates — brokers is hardly a new insight, with research pointing to both [contemporary](#) and [colonial](#) examples of how brokerage and migration regulations constitute part of the same configuration. More surprising is how migrant assistance can have counter-intentional consequences. For example, hotlines [intended](#) to assist exploited migrants can serve as an extended arm of border control.

Noi, a Lao domestic worker who was subject to severe abuse and confinement, requested emergency assistance on an NGO-operated hotline. In order to rescue her, the NGO had to bring in assistance from the Thai police, who decided there was insufficient evidence to pursue the matter as a trafficking investigation. Instead they charged Noi with breaching Thai immigration law due to her lacking documents and she was deported back to Laos.

Noi's story is far from unique and demonstrates how hotline calls may serve as a 'dob-line' resulting in deportation (as opposed to assistance).

Safe migration attempts to eradicate migrant brokers and brokering practices, but brokers are [integral to](#) not only labour migration, but safe migration assistance itself. An NGO workshop on visa regulations for migrants provides a launch pad for migrants to become brokers. Some organisations — knowingly and unknowingly — employ former labour migration brokers as migrant assistance outreach workers. As such, migration assistance becomes an awkward blend of 'brokered safety'.

This is not necessarily bad. In contrast to anti-trafficking responses, safe migration is defined by a policy outcome (safety in migration) as opposed to a category of person ('trafficked victims'). This means migration assistance is not premised on adhering to definitional criteria, and so can apply to a larger migrant population. This is evident through the scale of migration assistance. Huge networks of assistance, ranging from hospital translators, worker compensation claims support and paralegal assistance, provide a range of opportunities for help.

Migrants cannot formally organise outside Thai labour unions but the scale of the migrant population means that social networks can form, often underpinned by social media. Some informal migrant groups have between 100,000 to 1 million Facebook followers. This involves both pooling resources for assistance such as hospital bills but also information sharing regarding migration policies and other migrant news.

Safe migration assistance has considerable potential due to the many ways it can intersect with migrant communities. Yet it is clear that safe migration interventions often depend on informal practices — the proliferation of brokers within migration assistance is one example of this. The key policy challenge is how donors and multilateral and bilateral aid actors can find ways where they can [engage with](#) (as opposed to ignore) these informal layers of assistance.

Dr Sverre Molland is Senior Lecturer in Anthropology at the College of Arts and Social Sciences, the Australian National University.

[Facebook](#)
[Twitter](#)
[Reddit](#)
[LinkedIn](#)
[Pocket](#)

View more posts by [Sverre Molland](#) [Print This Post](#) [Download PDF](#)

RELATED POSTS

- 





[ASEAN nations must talk so that their labourers can walk](#) by [Phidel Gonzales Vineles](#)

[Thailand's new migrant worker policy is a step onto...](#) by [Ruji Auethavornpipat](#)

[The 'strangest others' at home?](#) by [Hyun Mee Kim](#)

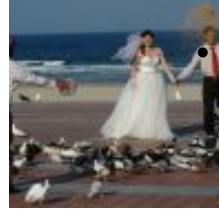
[The international politics of Bangladeshi 'boat people'](#) by [Mubashar Hasan](#)

[Solving China's savings situation](#) by [Xin Meng](#)

[What does the Manila](#)



[Consensus mean for migrant workers?](#) by [Tommy KS Koh](#)



[Love knows no boundaries](#) by [Kathryn Robinson](#)



[Migrant workers key driver of Chinese consumption](#) by [Cai Fang](#)



[Cause for optimism in the Rohingya crisis?](#) by [Trevor Wilson](#)

What Other People Are Reading

No Comments

[Post a comment](#)



[ASEAN distances itself from the United States](#) by [EAF editors](#)

East Asia Forum welcomes comments, both for



[Is Vietnam swimming naked?](#) by [David Dapice](#)

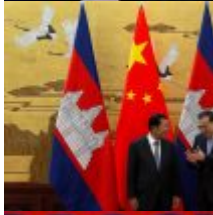
adding depth to analysis and for bringing up important new issues. Original comments adding insight and contributing to analysis are especially encouraged.



[Trump's incomplete Asia strategy](#) by [Nick Bisley](#)

The editors retain the right to refuse and edit comments at any time.

Your email address will not be



[Cambodia's electric Chinese aid and investment affair](#) by [Shahar Hameiri](#)



[Why ASEAN's Indo-Pacific outlook matters](#) by [Amitav Acharya](#)

published. Required fields are marked *

Comment



[How to defend Australia](#) by [Hugh White](#)

Name *

Email *

Address *

This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.

Notify me of follow-up comments by email.

Notify me of new posts by email.

This site uses Akismet to reduce spam. [Learn how your comment data is processed.](#)

Donate to EAF

As a freely accessible resource for the region, East Asia Forum relies on donations from those who believe in its importance. [More information.](#)

Contribute to EAF

East Asia Forum welcomes submissions from readers interested in being part of its network of academics.

[More information.](#)

Subscribe

Weekly digest Each post

This site is protected by reCAPTCHA and the Google [Privacy Policy](#) and [Terms of Service](#) apply.

[More info and unsubscribe](#)

Follow us



[Facebook](#)

[Twitter](#)



[RSS](#)

[Google+](#)

Article Browser



Features



[August 18: Dwindling hopes for North Korean denuclearisation](#)



[August 11: Why ASEAN's Indo-Pacific outlook matters](#)



[August 4: RCEP is now vital in defending the global trading order](#)



[July 28: Look beyond Europe for the IMF's new leader](#)

Editorials

About

Quarterly

Links

☺