

THINKING TWICE: MYTHS ABOUT MIGRATION



By its very nature, migration spans the breadth and depth of the world: it encompasses an atlas of topics, ranging from child migration to refugee settlement; from remittances to diaspora entrepreneurship. So what are we talking about when we talk about migration?

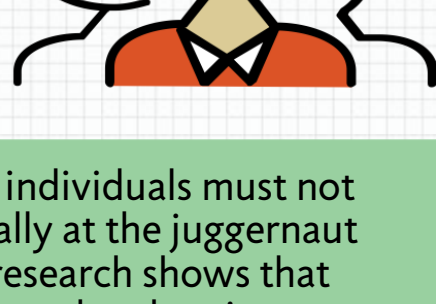
Through exploring on-the-ground realities in Asia and Africa, we draw attention to five broad assumptions which underpin many civil society and policy-related conversations about how migration works and how migration should work. In challenging them, we seek to strengthen policy and advocacy by centring the lived realities of the men, women, and children who move.

MYTHS ABOUT MIGRATION

- 1 Migration agents are inherently exploitative.
- 2 Improving migrants' access to information is an obvious path towards positive change.
- 3 National level policy change is the main way that we will improve migration outcomes.
- 4 Regular migration always produces better outcomes than irregular migration.
- 5 Migration from rural areas to urban informal settlements is a negative move.

1 MIGRATION AGENTS ARE INHERENTLY EXPLOITATIVE

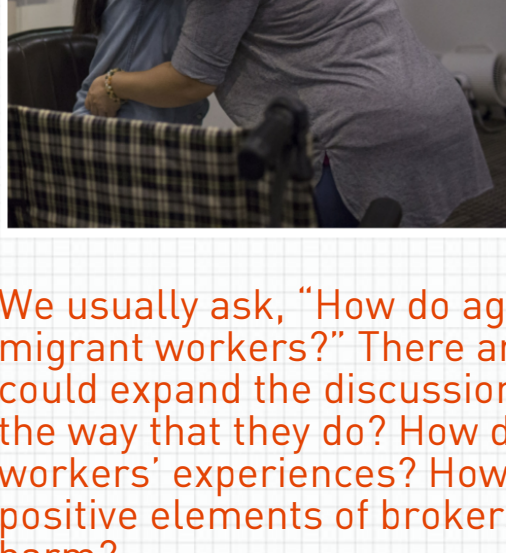
The migration business can spell big bucks, especially in Asia, where going abroad on short-term labour contracts is a key livelihood strategy for many. An industry that operates in the twilight zone between states offers room for brokers to manoeuvre, and brokers can take advantage of this space to exploit vulnerable migrants.



However, condemning the middleman as evil individuals must not become an excuse for not looking more critically at the juggernaut structure that is the migration industry. Our research shows that we must turn our attention to the broad structural and socio-cultural forces that enable behaviour.

In Singapore, we found the debt-financed migration system for migrant domestic workers spurs employers and agents to enforce conditions of control and compliance, because they do not want to risk becoming liable for defaulted loans (Goh, Wee, & Yeoh, 2016).

Additionally, brokers do not work in the same ways. While some agents do exploit workers, others are explicitly ethical in their orientation, striving to reduce recruitment costs and mandating days off in workers' contracts. Similarly, employment agents are challenging older industry models by innovating new information platforms and reconfiguring supply chains.



THE SPECIALISTS

Active Global Specialised Caregivers in Singapore control their supply chain from start to end; as a result, candidates pay nothing to work as professional live-in caregivers in Singapore, while employers pay a one-time fee of SGD \$2,000 (USD \$1,400 as of 2016). Caregivers are currently recruited under the Work Permit (Domestic Worker) visa, although the agency is careful to distinguish their candidates' duties from that of domestic workers'. CEO Yorelle Kalika says, "It's not just because we are nice guys. It's because it makes good business sense. It gives us a real competitive advantage."

We usually ask, "How do agents exploit vulnerable migrant workers?" There are other questions which could expand the discussion: Why do agents work the way that they do? How do agents impact migrant workers' experiences? How can we maximise the positive elements of brokers' roles and minimise harm?



2 FILLING THE INFORMATION GAP HELPS MIGRANTS MAKE BETTER DECISIONS



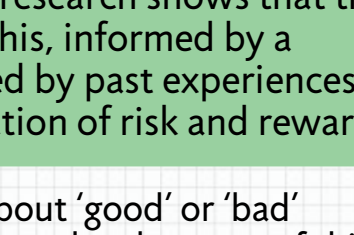
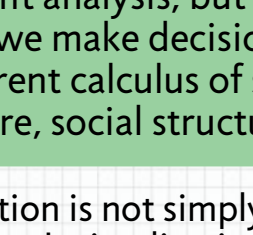
\$6,394 SGD

AVERAGE DEBT IN 2014*

Readily available information, stated terms of contracts, and well-enforced regulations aim to empower migrants by fixing the information gap in migrants' knowledge. We found that Bangladeshi men heading to Singapore to work in the construction sector are often misinformed about their work hours and their salaries, which could have disastrous effects (Baey & Yeoh, 2014).

\$24 SGD OR LESS

DAILY WAGE FOR 74.4% OF WORKERS



Looking at numbers alone, the odds seem stacked against these workers. If the men were fully aware of the costs of migration and the risks that they might face, would it change how they make their choices?

We assume that individuals make choices on the basis of a rational cost-benefit analysis, but this isn't always true. Our research shows that the way we make decisions is more complex than this, informed by a different calculus of sense-making that is shaped by past experiences, culture, social structures, and a careful anticipation of risk and reward.

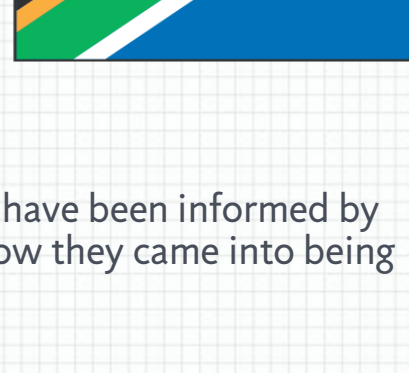
Information is not simply a bundle of neutral facts about 'good' or 'bad' migration. Its implications change as people transmit and make sense of this information within social and cultural contexts.

For example, NGOs in Indonesia have set up an information database allowing would-be migrant domestic workers to rate recruitment companies in the hopes that women will use this information to choose ethical agents to migrate with. Researchers find, however, that women make decisions on the basis of trust relationships with village brokers (Lindquist, 2012) as well as the immediate advancement of a 'micro-loan' to the worker and her family upon the decision to migrate (Wee, 2016).

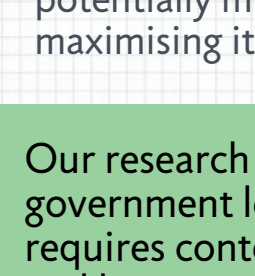
We cannot assume that better information will unequivocally change behaviour or protect migrants. Instead, we should have a different starting point, asking, "How is information disseminated and made sense of in communities of origin? What effects does this have on the ground?"

3 NATIONAL LEVEL POLICY CHANGE IS THE MAIN WAY THAT WE WILL IMPROVE MIGRATION OUTCOMES

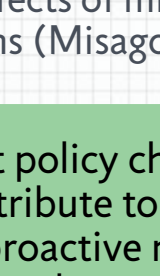
South Africa's social, economic and political environment has been shaped by a sustained restriction on international migration. Many academics, advocates and lobbyists interested in social change have targeted their efforts towards national institutions to create inclusive policies that can facilitate migration and development. Local and national policy makers believe that immigration and migration are exclusively matters of national policy concern.



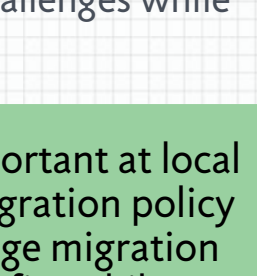
However, policy responses to issues linked to migration have been informed by myths and perceptions, with little evidence to explain how they came into being (Palmary & de Gruchy, 2016; Vanyoro, 2015).



ECONOMIC MARGINALISATION



INTER-GROUP CONFLICT



LACK OF ACCESS TO SERVICES

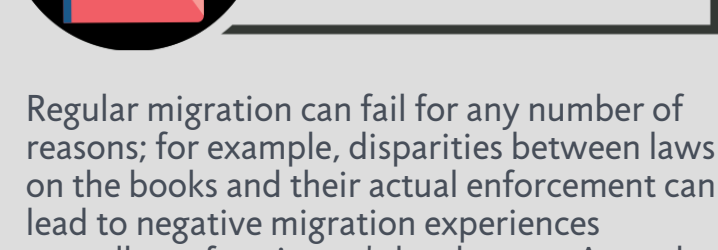
Despite their importance to the lives of migrants, municipalities have often shown little enthusiasm for developing approaches that would potentially minimise the effects of migration-related challenges while maximising its contributions (Misago, 2016).

Our research suggests that policy change is more important at local government levels. To contribute to development, migration policy requires context-specific proactive measures to manage migration and human mobility in ways that maximize their benefits while minimizing their costs. International treaties and national policy frameworks may regulate migration, but it is ultimately a local government matter. To counter poverty, local governments—sending and receiving—must proactively respond to human mobility. At the end of the day, all migrants live in municipalities.

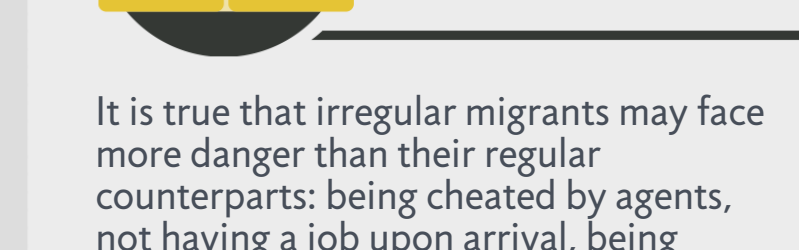


4 REGULAR MIGRATION IS ALWAYS BETTER THAN IRREGULAR MIGRATION

One might think that migrants who migrate through regular channels would have higher chances of success than those who migrate through more irregular routes. While this is often true, it is not always the case.



REGULAR MIGRATION



IRREGULAR MIGRATION

Regular migration can fail for any number of reasons; for example, disparities between laws on the books and their actual enforcement can lead to negative migration experiences regardless of a migrant's legal status. A regular legal status does not prevent a bad employer. Nor does it guarantee that a migrant's rights are systematically well-enforced, especially when migration streams and labour sectors are so gendered.

Migrant domestic workers perform feminised work that is socially devalued; even when migrating regularly and, in theory, protected by law, they are often sequestered in the private sphere of the home. As a result, they face profound vulnerabilities, such as the potential for absolute isolation, few to no rest days, and little recourse for help (Koh et al., 2016).

It is true that irregular migrants may face more danger than their regular counterparts: being cheated by agents, not having a job upon arrival, being trafficked, abused, or even killed, in extreme (but all too common) cases. However, some migrants find every level of success, despite being irregular. Many can work even while hidden from local law enforcement, and send their money home through irregular channels. Many are even able to find good jobs, covering living expenses and paying decent wages, through informal migration agents.

We do not claim that irregular migration is preferable to regular migration. However, we must look beyond formal regulation mechanisms to their enactment, with an in-depth and nuanced understanding of how social and cultural relations play into the situation. The regularisation and legalisation of migration is less important than ensuring a migrant's safety and access to recourse, regardless of legal status. To decide if migrants are sufficiently protected and empowered or not, we must look at broader structures of power.

5 MIGRATION FROM RURAL AREAS TO URBAN SETTLEMENTS IS A NEGATIVE MOVE

Migrant livelihoods can be threatened by unsafe living conditions in slums and a lack of basic services. Improving the lives of urban migrants requires an upgrading informal settlements, support for informal sector workers, facilitation of remittances and savings, and inclusion of vulnerable migrants in social protection schemes.

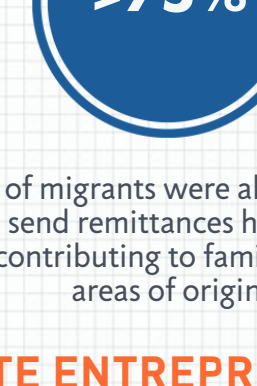
Despite negative policy stances toward rural-urban migration and urban informal settlements in Ghana, our research shows that rural-urban migration can also provide opportunities for migrants to create livelihoods, engage in entrepreneurship, and accumulate assets, thus contributing to human capital development (Awumbila, Owusu and Teye, 2014).



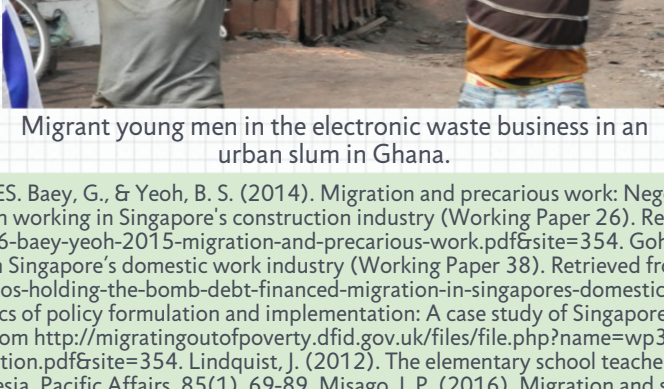
Urban slums in Ghana are sites of vibrant economic activity, providing migrants opportunities not available in communities of origin



88% of migrants felt that their overall household well-being had improved after migration



>75% of migrants were able to send remittances home, contributing to families in areas of origin



THE E-WASTE ENTREPRENEUR

Mashud, 32, is a Nigerian migrant in Ghana. He has a wife and three children. After a year's work in the e-waste with his friends, he saved enough to buy his own container and tools to start his own business. He is now an e-waste refurbisher who buys old computers and sells the wires and other parts to a Chinese company in Tema. Mashud earns an average daily salary of between 300 Ghana cedis (US\$150, as of 2014) and 500 Ghana cedis (US\$250, as of 2014). Within the few years that he has worked in Ghana, he has bought a taxi cab and bought a plot of land in Accra to start the construction of a house. Mashud also remits between 400 and 800 Ghana cedis to his wife and parents back in Nigeria every month. While the job is tedious, Mashud has also found it to be lucrative.

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