

People's Radio: a friend to Burmese migrant workers in Thailand

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How should we build workers' media? With a small staff and volunteers, the MAP radio in Thailand provides both critical information and much-needed entertainment to migrant workers from Myanmar, while navigating logistical and political hurdles. Its experience offers important lessons.

In a tiny rental room around the Muang Mai market in Chiang Mai, Pee Lek, a 50-year-old migrant worker from Myanmar is sewing at home. As she works, MAP radio FM99 plays in the background, sharing news in Shan state and about the renewal of work permits.

She sometimes joins in on quiz games with the DJs, receiving prizes such as a MAP radio t-shirt, masks, and publications in Shan language.

Roughly 350 kilometers south, Ko Tin Mg Win, a 52-year-old in-house factory security guard lives in Hpa Tae with his three family members. Ko has been listening to MAP Radio FM102.5 since 2008 to learn about his rights as a migrant worker.

For decades, Burmese have migrated to Thailand to take up work in the manufacturing, fishery, agriculture, construction sectors, as a result of a shortfall of local Thai workers for the low-pay and labour-intensive work.

There are estimates of two million Burmese migrant workers in Thailand. For Burmese migrants, Thailand offers an opportunity for higher paying jobs and a higher standard of living compared to its neighboring countries.

Burmese migrants mostly choose to settle in Chiang Mai or Mae Sot, due to its proximity to the Burmese border. Many of these migrant workers are undocumented, low paid, indebted, and unable to access social security benefits. Thai's labor laws prevent migrants from establishing unions. Over the years, NGOs have provided assistance to migrant workers from Myanmar.

Birth of a Labor Radio

MAP (Migrants Assistance Programme) Foundation is one of the organizations aiming to protect the rights of Burmese migrants in Thailand. MAP started in 1996 by a group of concerned citizens at the height of the AIDS epidemic. Migrant workers were affected, and many died from HIV.

To address this, MAP organized migrant health volunteers to visit worksites and disseminate information on AIDS prevention. It was during this time, that they recognized a host of other issues that migrant workers were facing, especially regarding occupational health and safety and labor violations. [\[1\]](#)

In the late 90's, MAP recognized that migrant workers felt alienated and lonely, and although many

were not able to read, they had radios. Exploring this, MAP started at first with a segment on FM99 broadcasting serial soap operas about being a migrant worker, about HIV/AIDS, to raise awareness but also as a form of entertainment.

"A lot of people became very devoted to these soap operas," chuckles Brahm Press, Director of MAP Foundation, during an interview. Many migrants are in Thailand by themselves, missing family, work a lot and without much down time to really socialize. At the outset, MAP's radio station was more a creative outlet that aimed "to entertain, inspire, and inform," as Press describes.

Several years later, the owner of FM99 was retiring and asked MAP if they would like to take over the radio. MAP Radio FM99 in Chiang Mai was formally established in 2004. In 2010, MAP also established a radio station in Mae Sot, FM102.5. The two stations have been broadcasting programs related to HIV/AIDS, women's rights, children's rights, and labor rights.

Broadcasting in Thai, Shan, Burmese, Karen and Rohingya, the stations' targets are Burmese migrants in Thailand. On average, 50,000 to 100,000 have tuned into the radio station broadcasts. Both radio stations broadcast for about 11 hours a day and are run by volunteers and MAP Foundation staff.

MAP's listeners include domestic workers, construction workers, agricultural workers and service workers. Though it is difficult for agricultural workers to tune in given they generally work in remote areas where they cannot receive stable FM frequency.

"In the past, we heard stories that some factories were allowing migrants to put the radio over the public announcement (PA) system and they'd listen to MAP Radio... but then the employers started catching on, because sometimes the workers would approach them to improve the working conditions. Much less factories now allow our programs to be broadcast during work," says Press.

One of the serious challenges migrant workers face is the lack of official documentation to stay in Thailand. For MAP Radio's labor rights program, the most sought-after information is therefore related to maintaining their documentation status and what being registered means.

MAP Radio teaches workers how to understand their work IDs, given the police and immigration frequent work sites to check migrant workers immigration status. The work IDs have the employer's name, location of work and the occupation. If there is any inaccurate information, migrant workers can be arrested, and employers are forced to bail them out.

In just 2021 alone, police in Thailand [arrested over 42,000 undocumented migrants](#). This is despite the country experiencing a significant labor shortage. "We are rights-based, and we never call migrants who cross the border illegally, illegal migrants. We call them undocumented migrants," says Press.

Migrants face another key issue: access to social security. Thailand has established three social protection programs for migrant workers, including the Social Security Fund, the Workmen's Compensation Fund and the Migrant Health Insurance Scheme. But access to each of these programs differs depending on the status of the migrant worker.

MAP provides information on the conditions needed to qualify for social security, how to access benefits, and confirm they have been enrolled. There have been many cases where employers deduct social security fees from workers' wages but fail to enroll them.

There have been negative attitudes towards migrant workers in Thailand, as locals see them as taking their jobs. MAP Radio tries to dispel these attitudes. Locals simply do not want to take these

jobs, which are known as “3-D jobs”: dangerous, dirty and demeaning.

“We want to increase the Thai community’s understanding towards migrant workers, and explain to society the situation of migrants,” explains Toom Mawk Harn, MAP Multimedia Program Coordinator, “Migrants who come to Thailand help the economy. They are not criminals.”

Producing Radio

MAP Radio’s office in Chiang Mai is located west of the Old City in a residential area. I visited their office in early October when the weather was still hot and humid. The office is dimly lit, with three desks, and the wall next to the entrance displayed photos of the workshops that MAP Radio held previously.

The recording studio was soundproofed, a simple layout with the essentials required for a radio station: a computer, a mixing board, microphone and headset. Two shelves at the back of the room are lined with files and books.

MAP Radio runs on a small team. The radio manager monitors the broadcasts and collects the comments, questions, and call-ins to share with the team. Its broadcasters include MAP Foundation staff, staff from other organizations and also volunteers who are mostly migrant workers themselves.

MAP Radio publishes its new schedule every six months and holds monthly meetings to plan the content of the radio for the month. “Most of the DJ’s have experience already ... so they make a monthly work plan, so [for example] they may plan to have broadcast four times a month and also have the topic they will talk about each time,” says Harn, “And some broadcasters may not have a monthly work plan but provide content depending on feedback from listeners.”

The amount of time to prepare the broadcasters before going live also depends on their experience. If they have experience, it may take an hour and for others it can take up to three hours as they ask MAP Radio staff to provide feedback and suggestions. Most of the broadcasters have been trained, having joined the workshop so MAP Radio does not need to sit down with them to prepare.

To understand the sort of content listeners are interested in, MAP Radio holds periodic in-person listener panels, where they gather around 20-25 migrant worker listeners working in a diversity of sectors to provide feedback on the radio content, to share what they like or don’t like and also the topics they’d like to hear more of. “We want to hear from them as much as we can”, says Harn.

Radio as an Organizing Tool

“We try to use our radio as a two-way channel,” explains Press, “We encourage people to call in, if they have questions or an announcement.” Over the years, migrant workers have called in regarding work accidents, not receiving proper wages and to understand the justice system.

“How to extend my visa if it has expired? How do I change to a new employer for my work permit? I’m in Thailand without any documentation, if I’m caught by Thai authorities, will I be sent back to Myanmar or will I go to jail?” These are just some of the questions MAP Radio receives from listeners calling in.

Sometimes, workers share their own experiences of success, with domestic worker groups previously coming on the radio to give advice. “There have been worker groups in Mae Sot who have gone on the radio to speak about how they’ve managed to collectively bargain,” explains Saengmuang Mangkorn, Secretary of the Board and MAP Radio Proprietor. And for those who wish to present on the radio, they’re provided with training on how to use the mixing boards, prepare a

script and make an engaging and interesting broadcast.

Listeners take action after receiving information from MAP. For example, a worker who approached her employer for paid time off after [learning about this right from the radio](#). In another case, Nang Wan, a domestic worker in Chiang Mai learnt that the chemicals she used to clean the toilet could damage her hands and realized the importance of wearing gloves.

MAP continues to reach out to remote communities where migrants generally work, setting up booths with information, education and communication materials in Burmese and distributing these, introducing MAP radio and helping workers download the app. The communities are rural settings with housing, factories or agriculture in the Mae Sot area, which can take 15 to 40 minutes to drive to.

They set up booths during Buddhist holidays, and advocacy events on May Day, International Migrants Day and International Women's Day. MAP livestreams events and conferences which are held publicly on these days to make workers feel included.

Navigating Politics

On May 22, 2014, a military coup in Thailand took place after several months of political unrest and protests. Following the coup, community radio stations were forced to close down following allegations that the opposition party had used them to foment unrest. MAP Radio too was forced to close. All community radio stations were asked to reapply for a license to broadcast.

At that time, MAP had already started exploring Facebook and had a mobile application and while it was clear that the internet was also becoming more popular, not everyone had access.

Nonetheless, MAP decided to continue broadcasting on the internet to maintain their presence. When their radio station was able to register about a year after being closed, they realized that the internet had a lot of potential and Facebook was becoming more widely used. They started emphasizing the use of Facebook Live.

Currently, there are five Facebook pages related to MAP Radio. Today, the main MAP Radio page which provides content from both FM radio stations has over 54,000 followers. Its cover photo has the slogan: "Voices Without Borders".

On February 1, 2022, the military launched a coup in Myanmar, deposing members of the National League for Democracy, and General Min Aung Hlaing the commander-in-chief of the military took charge. Many Burmese citizens have fled Myanmar and those already in Thailand have decided to stay given the risks of returning.

For MAP Foundation, they acknowledge that they do not discuss politics, which was one of the conditions to register their radio station. But MAP broadcasts Burmese news from Radio Free Asia and Voice of America. "We can transmit news... but we can't come up with our own ideas on what people should do about the coup in Myanmar," says Press.

MAP Radio continues to assist migrants during this time. Some migrants found during their passport renewal at the Myanmar Consulate in Thailand that there was a warrant out for their arrest. This is because they'd participated in the Civil Disobedience Movement or were associated with funding the People's Defence Force, the armed wing of the National Unity Government established to fight against the military junta. Because of this, migrants who had arrest warrants decided to instead apply for a certificate of identification, often even changing their names.

Since 2017, Thailand has allowed Burmese migrants to obtain a certificate of identification, a “lower-level ID” as described by Press. Given the registration period for documentation in Thailand is currently open, MAP has been inundated with questions regarding registering with a certificate of identification. Migrant workers are finding ways to stay legally in Thailand, especially as governments in neighboring countries are failing to take concrete measures to accept and settle Burmese migrants fleeing the coup.

Supporting Migrants during the Pandemic

Thailand was at first able to control the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic when it first began in early 2020. However, as cases began to rise, anti-immigrant sentiments became prevalent, as migrants were blamed for outbreaks.

In late December, an outbreak of the coronavirus at a seafood market in Samut Sakhon province where a large number of Burmese migrants live, was blamed on migrant workers. While migrants were prohibited from entering or leaving the province, these rules did not apply to local Thai citizens.

During this time, MAP radio transmitted important information on lockdowns and school closures in the country. [They spoke about coronavirus vaccinations](#), what vaccination is, its side effects and where to get vaccinated especially as there were difficulties for migrants to access vaccinations. Those who wanted to return to Myanmar also asked questions on the situation of the Thai-Myanmar Friendship Bridge and when it is expected to reopen.

MAP radio tries to translate government announcements and recognizes this can be complicated but sees this as important in transmitting information directly to migrants. “We’ve had government officers from the immigration department, department of employment do broadcasts on radio stations to provide up to date information,” says Saengmuang.

In the future, MAP is hoping to move their Mae Sot office closer to the Burmese border where the FM wavelength can reach deeper into Myanmar. The broadcasts currently can be heard in parts of Karen and Mon state. Myanmar has several ethnic languages, and there are also small ethnic media groups broadcasting over the radio and internet.

MAP is hoping to set up a network of ethnic media groups in the Myanmar side to strengthen the network so that they can agree on common and unified terms to be used when speaking about and understanding migration and labor rights.

But for now, Press feels content with the work of MAP Radio, and that the work they do provides information on migrant worker rights: “Migrants come to Thailand, and they stay. MAP radio has become a friend to many people”.

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P.S.

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Footnotes

[1] In 2003, MAP became involved in the first migrant worker case filed in court. In October 2002, 60 Burmese migrant workers were fired from the Nut Knitting factory in Mae Sot after they protested against the factory's failure to pay the minimum wage. The following year, 33 of the Burmese migrant workers decided to sue for insufficient payment of wages. At the time, the workers at the factory were paid only roughly half of the minimum wage in Thailand and did not receive sufficient overtime payment despite putting in 15 hours of work a day. The case was hailed a victory after the Nakhon Sawan Labour Court ordered the factory to pay 18 of the workers 1,170,000 baht in unpaid wages. The win inspired not only workers but also MAP, as it paved the way for what was possible for migrant workers in claiming their rights. Today, MAP disseminates information on labor rights, provides skill building on collective bargaining, trains paralegals and takes cases to court. "Oftentimes, migrant workers initiate the case, with MAP providing legal support or counsel," says Brahm Press. The labour rights program remains a significant program of MAP.