



Evaluation of an anti-slavery hotspot project in the Thai seafood sector: Summary report

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Asian Research Center for Migration
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ARCM



Background

To counter human trafficking and forced labour in the seafood industry in Thailand, the Freedom Fund and Humanity United have been jointly supporting a hotspot project which tackles exploitation on multiple levels. The overall project works with both international and local civil society organisations (CSOs) and expert advisors to push for change and support systemic reform at the government level, business level and within worker communities.

One arm of the project focuses on partnering with a selected group of Thai-based CSOs in high-prevalence locations, primarily in Thai ports where billions of dollars of seafood are sold and processed. Under this arm, funding is provided to a selected group of CSOs to deliver assistance to people at risk of, or affected by, forced labour. In addition, these CSOs also work to transform the work environment through more effective government and business policies. The model encourages the CSOs to work together to deliver a range of frontline services that are mutually reinforcing and supports grassroots leaders in making unified demands for greater government and business actions.

The first phase of the project was implemented from September 2015 to December 2018, and the second phase is currently underway until December 2020. This report is a summary of the evaluation of the work of Thai-CSO partners during the first phase of the project. The six CSOs who were partners during this phase include: Foundation for Education and Development (FED), Human Rights and Development Foundation (HRDF), Labour Rights Promotion Network (LPN), MAP Foundation, Migrant Workers Rights Network (MWRN) and Stella Maris Seafarers' Center, Songkhla.

The Asian Research Center for Migration (ARCM) at Chulalongkorn University was commissioned by the Freedom Fund to independently evaluate the hotspot project. This summary report is prepared by the Freedom Fund, based on a longer evaluation report by the ARCM.

Methodology

The evaluation was based on three main sources of information:

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| 1. Desk review of publicly available reports and Freedom Fund's internal program documents. | 2. Survey of migrant workers in Samut Sakhon, Ranong, Songkhla and Mae Sot. N = 108 | 3. Interviews with CSO partners and migrant workers in the project locations. N = 29 |
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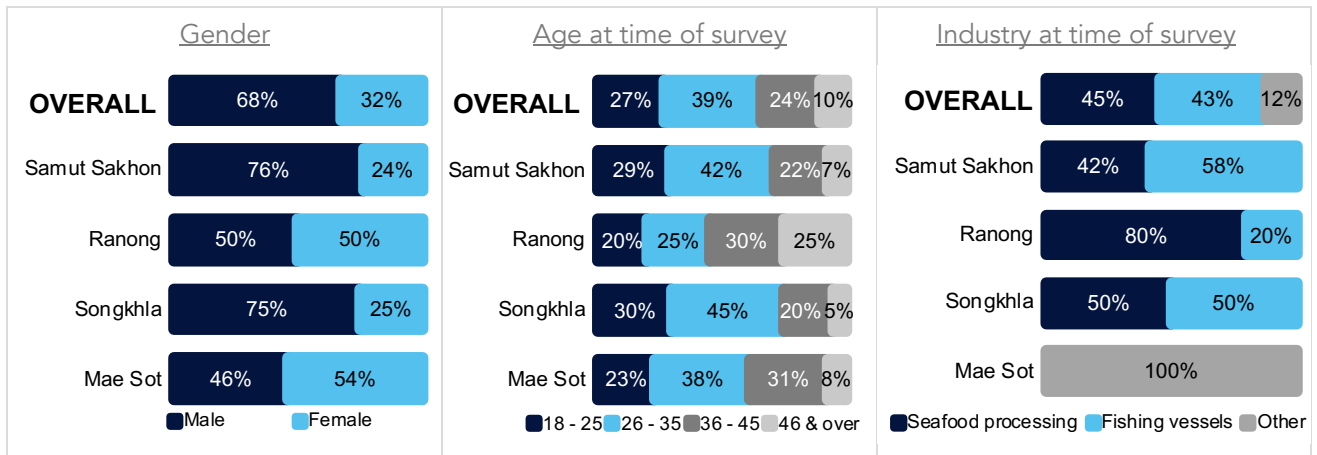
Survey questionnaires and interview guides were developed jointly by ARCM and the Freedom Fund. Ethical approval was obtained from Chulalongkorn University's Research Ethical Review Committee and data collection across various locations were carried out between August & September 2018.

Surveys and interviews were conducted by the ARCM and took place inside offices of Freedom Fund's CSO partners, as well as in temple compounds and in migrants' living areas where the interviewees were not being monitored by employers or other co-workers.

Profile of survey participants

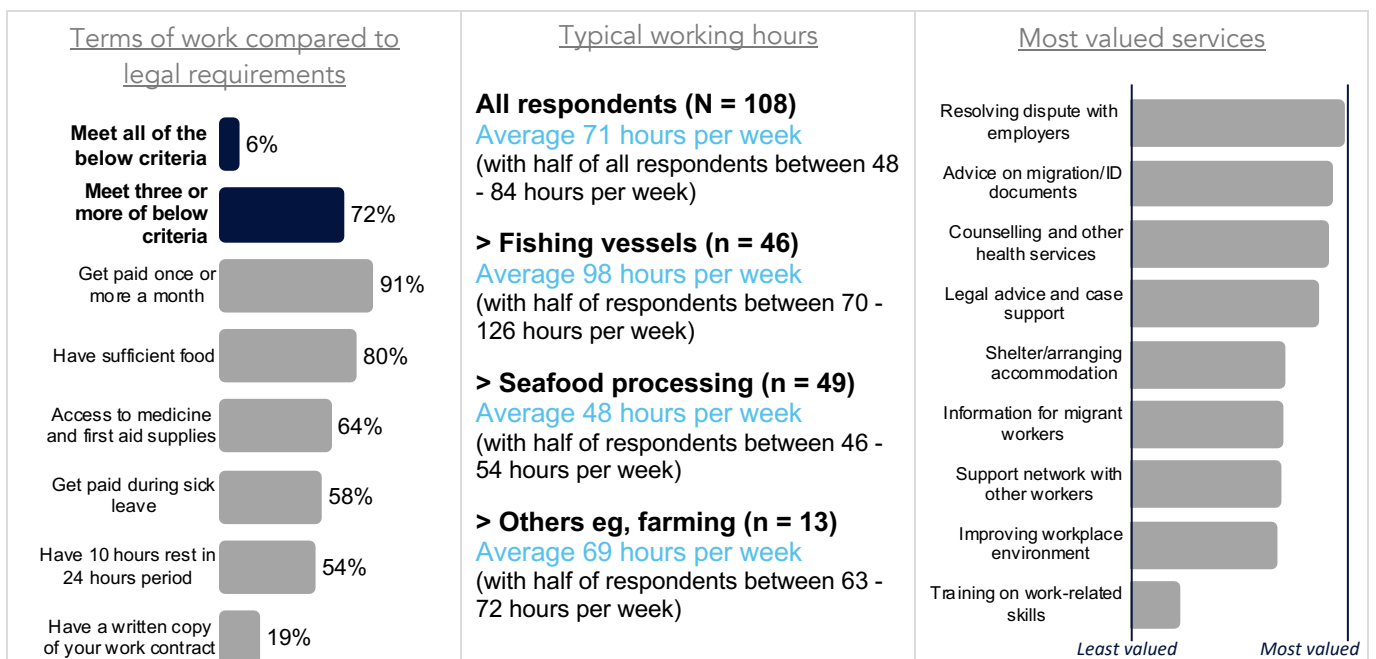
A survey of 108 migrant workers was carried out in three port cities (Samut Sakhon, Ranong and Songkhla) plus a border town (Mae Sot) where a majority of Myanmar migrants enter Thailand. The majority of respondents are male (68 percent), under 35 years of age (66 percent) and work either in seafood processing plants (45 percent) or on fishing vessels (43 percent).

Note that this survey is not a probabilistic sample of all migrant workers in the Thai seafood industry. Instead, it reflects the profile of workers who were identified in the project locations and willing to participate in an anonymous interview conducted by ARCM in Burmese, Khmer and Thai.



Working conditions and service needs

Overall, the migrant workers surveyed reported harsh working conditions, with the worst conditions faced by fishing vessel workers. On average, fishers worked 98 hours per week, or roughly 6.5 working days per week x 15 hours per working day. Among a list of services which are being / could be offered by CSO partners, the migrant workers identified 'resolving dispute with employers' as their top priority.



Evaluation questions and main findings

Question 1: To what extent is the hotspot project, through its six partners, making progress towards the objectives of (a) empowering migrant workers and (b) monitoring the situation of forced labour among migrant workers in the Thai seafood industry?

In regard to empowering migrant workers in the project locations, the six CSO partners have all made significant progress in supporting over 50,000 vulnerable migrant workers since 2015. This is primarily achieved through activities such as the dissemination of information, development of networks of community leaders, establishment of workplace welfare committees, training workers to address their own concerns, resolving disputes with employers, cooperation with local government authorities, pursuing legal action when necessary, and pre-departure training in Myanmar.

However, the progress in empowering migrant workers has been uneven. Many of the CSOs interviewed discussed their engagement with migrant workers in seafood processing plants, but also noted the ongoing challenges of connecting with fishers who are only present at the port during short and irregular intervals – a known obstacle at the onset of the project which remains a challenge. The CSO partners mostly rely on face-to-face interactions as well as phone helpline to deliver their services - both of which are often inaccessible to migrant workers on fishing vessels. This limits the extent to which the project can engage with and empower fishers who face a higher risk of long working hours and limited access to medicine and paid sick leave compared with processing plant workers.

In regard to the second objective of monitoring the situation of forced labour in the seafood industry, notable progress has been observed in some, but not all areas. One positive example is

the formation of the CSO Coalition for Ethical and Sustainable Seafood, which is supported by the hotspot project. In 2018, the Coalition published a report, titled 'Falling Through the Net', which was based on a survey of 300 migrants from Cambodia and Myanmar who work onboard fishing vessels. The survey obtained detailed data on recruitment, contracts, payment systems, working hours etc. and received widespread media coverage. This is a clear illustration of CSO partners moving beyond their traditional service delivery activities, working jointly to monitor and report on situations of forced labour.

Aside from the CSO Coalition, the scope of work that CSO partners do to monitor could be improved on two fronts. Firstly, the NGOs are mostly focusing on documenting cases that they are directly involved in, rather than thinking about monitoring wider conditions and trends in the seafood sector beyond their own scope of work. Secondly, even with the documentation of cases, it is not done in a consistent way across CSO partners, making the data difficult to collate and analyse. To address this, investment into standardising case information and having a shared database to store and report data across partners could be worthwhile.

Question 2: Are the approaches and activities for empowering migrant workers (e.g., through collective mobilisation of workers, and legal case work) still aligned with the evolving needs of the workers themselves? Are there other emerging priorities that should be incorporated into future project activities, or existing activities that could be given lower priority?

Based on the survey of the 108 migrant workers in the project locations, the top five services that they most valued were (in order of most to least valued):

1. Resolving dispute with employers
2. Advice on migration/ID documents
3. Counselling and other health services
4. Legal advice and case support
5. Shelter/arranging accommodation

This broadly reflects the type of activities that are being funded by the hotspot project and implemented by its CSO partners. Delivering social and mental health services, supporting legal cases and assisting migrant workers with their ID and documentation form a large component of the project activities. It is worth noting that much of what the workers want, and what the project is delivering, are services that are not specific to human trafficking and forced labour but more generally to protect the rights of migrant workers so that they are less susceptible to exploitation. In other words, the project's preventative approach seems to be preferred by the migrant workers in comparison to a heavy law enforcement and rescue approach. This is in line with the overall aim of the project to support both those affected by, and vulnerable to, forced labour.

The project's focus on collective mobilisation of workers has not emerged as a priority according to the migrant workers surveyed, but this needs to be put into context. Foreign workers are not permitted by Thai law to form their own unions. Therefore, rather than focusing on formal unions to collectively bargain with employers, the project has used more informal mechanisms for migrant workers to come together as a group and address workplace concerns, for example, community-based worker networks or associations (MWRN or working with Yaung Chi Oo Workers' Association). Despite the challenges with unionising, partners do help migrant workers connect to local Thai-led unions when appropriate as well.

The education and outreach activities delivered by CSOs, in general, are greatly valued by migrant workers. Yet at the same time many of the migrants are not aware of *specific* CSO partners or their range of services. In order to

reach a greater number of vulnerable individuals, the CSOs should invest in making their services more visible (eg, via social media) and easier-to-remember (eg, by using shorter names and simpler logos, a catchier number for their phone helpline) in order to increase awareness and access to their services. When in need, migrant workers should be able to easily recall who to go to and how to reach these support organisations.

Question 3: Are the approaches and activities for monitoring the situation on the ground still reflective of the current needs of worker networks, CSOs, policy makers and advisors, and employers?

The CSO partners tend to share information with policy makers and employers as and when it relates to particular cases, but typically on an ad-hoc basis. A more systematic approach could be introduced so that the partners are more proactive and routine in sharing their observations and data with government officials and business representatives.

It is worth noting that many international stakeholders are also monitoring and sharing information on the situation of workers in the seafood industry, this includes Human Rights Watch, the International Labour Organization, the European Union and the United States' Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. The Thai CSO partners should not duplicate and instead focus on complementing these monitoring efforts, especially by drawing on their core strength of having access to tens of thousands of migrant workers and being able to credibly represent workers' situations and priorities. This opportunity is not currently being realised due to fragmented information being collected by each CSO partner, and as noted earlier, is an area that needs to be strengthened across the hotspot project.

Going forward, CSOs could play a more active role in monitoring and supporting the implementation of recently enacted laws and

policies. These approaches, which are currently employed to some degree by CSO partners, would involve shifting their monitoring and advocacy work to a broader and more systematic level, going beyond the grassroots services and cases that they are directly involved in.

Question 4: Of the existing approaches and activities carried out by the CSO partners, which are most valued by the migrant workers? How does this compare against the distribution of CSO staff time/efforts across the different activities?

As discussed in the findings for Question 2, the services that were most valued by the surveyed migrant workers broadly mirror the activities that have been carried out by the CSO partners.

In regard to the distribution of staff time and resources, however, this is difficult to assess though simplistic cost-per-person calculations. Some of the most valued services - resolving employee-employer disputes, assisting in securing legal ID documents and supporting legal cases - have to be delivered on a highly individualised basis. This also makes these services more time intensive and therefore costly to deliver. The hotspot project needs to carefully consider the allocation of resources and the balance between a lighter-touch approach to knowledge building among larger groups, versus supporting more serious and specific cases of exploitation. The latter services may have a higher cost-per-person but are nevertheless important and necessary work.

Education and outreach activities are integral to the partner CSOs. Activities such as information dissemination, organising community events, awareness-raising activities and pre-departure training courses, are highly valued by migrant workers and should generally be continued. In addition, there is opportunity to leverage existing content to reach a larger audience. For example,

radio programs in the Myanmar language reach tens of thousands of migrants in Mae Sot. Other CSOs should take advantage of the system of community radio in Thailand to air programs in Ranong and Samut Sakhon.

In terms of pre-departure training, while the participants involved in the pre-departure training courses believed they were valuable, Freedom Fund could consider whether resources invested in pre-departure training could be better spent on scaling up post-arrival training on the Thai-side of the border. This way, the courses would be targeted at newly-arrived migrants as opposed to potential migrants or their family members.

Question 5: To what extent is the hotspot model likely to lead to sustained progress in the capacities and influence of civil society organizations and workers networks, and coordination between them?

Based on the observations of the evaluation team, the hotspot model is likely to lead to a degree of sustained progress in empowering migrant workers. The strength of the project, and reflected in each of the CSO partners, is its grassroots approach in protecting the rights of migrant workers and credibility in representing their voices.

Cooperation among the six partner CSOs is evident at the strategic level, through co-branded reports and joint requests to governments and businesses. It is also evident at a pragmatic level, in the cross-referral of cases and regular meetings to share lessons learnt.

However, the sharing and collaboration between partners could be strengthened. More efforts could be invested in adopting common standards for monitoring of cases and responding collectively to incidences of abuse (rather than as separate service providers) to create more outsized and sustainable impact.

Recommendations

The following recommendations pertain to the overall Freedom Fund hotspot project.

Strategic focus of the hotspot project:

1. Vulnerable migrant workers also exist in other sectors in Thailand, such as agriculture, construction and domestic services. Given the progress observed and continued global attention on the seafood sector, Freedom Fund should consider whether the hotspot project could be expanded beyond the seafood sector in Thailand to address the vulnerabilities of a larger population of migrant workers.
2. Besides the CSO partners, there are other large intergovernmental organisations who are also doing substantial work on human trafficking and forced labour in Thailand, such as the International Organization for Migration and the International Labour Organization. The hotspot project should explore more complementary partnerships with these parties, drawing on the CSOs' strength in credibly representing migrant workers, and harnessing these international organisations to embed survivors' voices into national, regional and global consultations. At the same time, being aware that such partnerships could entail significant investment of staff time and resources.
3. The project should consider to what extent it should continue to allocate resources towards non-labour related interventions by the CSO partners. These activities may involve handling the death of a migrant, traffic accidents, deportation of irregular migrants etc. A portion of staff time is currently devoted to these important activities but technically they are not directly related to human trafficking or labour exploitation.

Operational implications:

4. Freedom Fund should be clearer about how it expects the CSOs to monitor the situation of forced labour in the seafood industry. It should help develop joint standards for case documentation and broader monitoring tools (eg, worker surveys, case databases) that can be used across all its partners.
5. Freedom Fund could be more deliberate in conducting strategic planning exercises to encourage more joint programming and policy activities across its CSO partners. For example, identifying and replicating successful interventions from one partner to others, or setting regular milestones that encourages ongoing meetings between CSO leaders with business and government representatives.
6. Given the legal restrictions in unionising foreign workers, and the practical risks of forming workers groups which may be perceived as threatening to employers, the Freedom Fund and its partners could consider focusing more on advocating to employers to allow informal worker collectives or workers' welfare committees to improve working conditions.
7. The partner CSOs should conduct an assessment of their communication plan and explore opportunities for joint campaigns and branding. Rather than expecting migrants to remember the details of individual CSOs, it would be ideal if there is one central information centre or phone line where migrant workers could then be referred onwards to different providers.
8. More activities via traditional media (eg, radio) and social media (eg, facebook, LINE, Twitter) should be considered, as these are relatively low-cost and enjoy high usage among the migrant worker community.

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