



# IMPACTS OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON SMALL- SCALE PRODUCERS AND WORKERS

Perspectives from Thailand's Seafood  
Supply Chain



**CSO Coalition**  
for Ethical and Sustainable Seafood  
— Rights above the sea level —



**OXFAM**

The COVID-19 pandemic and the Thai government's immediate responses have significantly affected workers and small-scale producers in the seafood sector. The briefing note identifies these impacts, offers reflections on the remaining challenges and further measures to support small-scale producers and workers during the ongoing pandemic.

The briefing note addresses the inadequate protection and support offered to workers and small producers with a set of policy recommendations for a wide range of stakeholders involved in the seafood and fishery sector including the national seafood exporters, vessel owners and global buyers.

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For further information on the issues raised in this paper please email [advocacy@oxfaminternational.org](mailto:advocacy@oxfaminternational.org)

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Cover photo: Workers on a Thai fishing boat during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Back cover photo: A seafood worker moves a bucket of fish in Thailand.

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# SUMMARY

The COVID-19 pandemic (the ‘pandemic’) and the Thai government’s immediate responses have significantly affected workers and small-scale producers in many aspects. To explore these impacts and the responses, the Thai CSO Coalition<sup>1</sup> has prepared this briefing note, based on extensive consultations with national stakeholders, to assess the impacts of COVID-19 on small-scale producers and workers. The briefing note is based on key interviews with workers in the Thai seafood supply chain and frontline labour rights civil society organizations (CSOs). Additionally, consultations were held with leading Thai seafood exporters, namely Charoen Pokphand Group (CPF), Seafresh Industry Public Company Limited (Seafresh), and Thai Union Group (TU), to conduct an initial assessment of the company’s policy responses on the ground, reflect on the remaining challenges and discuss further measures to support small-scale producers and workers during the ongoing pandemic.

Based on key stakeholder’s interviews, the assessment found a number of challenges, including both health and safety issues and economic impacts resulting from the government’s and employers’ responses:

- Migrant workers face obstacles to accessing their rights to social security benefits, particularly those related to unemployment or furlough without pay because of language barriers and ambiguous policies.
- Stricter measures in response to the pandemic pose additional challenges to workers, as they are now responsible for finding and purchasing their own protective gears before they can enter their workplace or during their daily commute.
- There is still a lack of understanding among factory workers and fishing workers about how the virus spreads, which poses a significant risk.
- Workers continue to live in close quarters aboard fishing vessels without wearing proper protective equipment, and their families often live in cramped conditions.<sup>2</sup>
- The pandemic has had a significant economic impact on small-scale agricultural producers and small-scale artisanal fishers, as intermediaries had halted the purchase of products from suppliers, and many sub-markets have closed for several months.
- The demand drop in some seafood products has meant that a significant number of workers could no longer survive, since overtime and incentive pay are composed as a significant part of their total incomes, and have decided to leave their jobs.<sup>3</sup>

As of June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020, the government’s aid package has only recently reached some small-scale agricultural producers and small-scale artisanal fishers, while some are still in the process of eligibility checks.<sup>4</sup>

National seafood exporters have put in place several preventive measures to respond to COVID-19. Some companies go beyond their factories to support and prevent the risks of an outbreak in workers' households and communities. However, while some companies may have shared COVID-19 educational materials to some of their suppliers, there is still a lack of additional support to their suppliers' facilities and fishing vessels, which are still at risk of an outbreak due to lack of proper preventive measures.

Although the interviews focused on fishery and seafood workers, and some of the largest seafood companies in the Thailand, the results only provide a snapshot of the complicated and evolving situation during the pandemic. The briefing note aims to reflect perspectives on the ground and highlight some notable examples and remaining gaps. It also provides a set of important recommendations for seafood exporters/vessel owners and global buyers/retailers.



Seafood workers on a Thai fishing vessel © Vinai Dithajohn/Oxfam

# PERSPECTIVES FROM THE FRONTLINE

The COVID-19 pandemic and the government's virus preventive measures have considerably affected workers and small-scale producers. At present, goods from small-scale producers have failed to reach key markets, such as Simummuang Market and Talad Thai, which support urban residents.<sup>5</sup> Moreover, due to the public's low demand for fresh food products in favour of dried or non-perishable goods, intermediaries have halted the purchase of products from producers. The closing of various sub-markets has also forced small-scale producers to locate markets in their own areas. Some are adapting by becoming involved in the processing of fresh foods into non-perishable items.

Local artisanal fishers shared that their regular customers have not purchased goods for several weeks due in part to the decrease in market demand. Major buyers, such as hotels or restaurants, have temporarily halted operations, and the reduced prices of seafood have resulted in unprofitable fishing. Local fishers are adapting by driving to nearby communities to sell their products, as well as by advertising goods for seafood production or processing online via a Facebook group, designed to cut out those intermediaries. In these times of economic downturn, although local fishers have been able to adapt to some extent to the present situation, the closing of many vital markets has led to decreased incomes. If the outbreak is prolonged, its effects could become even more damaging.

The pandemic has impacted workers in many sectors, including tourism, hospitality and construction. Many workers have been laid off or furloughed without pay, and many are now suffering from financial problems. Upon hearing that the borders would be closed, some migrant workers chose to return to their home countries. 'One migrant worker's mother called and told her child to return home, as she did not want him to die in Thailand,' Ms. Suthasinee Keawleklai, the coordinator of the Migrant Workers Rights Network (MWRN) stated. However, some workers in the seafood processing industry have not yet been as badly affected, as most factories have continued normal operations. Although larger factories tend to adhere to stricter standards than smaller ones, most seafood processing factories follow general standards for cleanliness, as workers are required to wear the personal protective equipment in food production lines, leading most workers to feel as if not much has changed in response to the virus. However, a significant number of workers could no longer survive with decreased income due to the demand drop in some seafood products and had to leave their jobs since overtime and incentive pay are composed as a significant part of their total incomes.

It is evident from the interview that there are still unclear messages at some of the company's operational levels regarding the conditions set by foreign buyers that call for the shutdown of production in the event that a worker has contracted COVID-19. Pressure caused by such conditions

may have led factory managers to conceal information on the risks of COVID-19 infection among factory employees from the public. Yet such information is vital to efforts to control the spread of the virus, particularly in the workplace. At present, factory employees are encouraged to travel to work via factory-provided transport. To prevent overcrowding on board the vehicles, factories have arranged for additional rounds of pick-ups and drop-offs. Employees must also disinfect and put on protective equipment before entering the factories.

The majority of those who work on fishing vessels do not feel as if operations have been impacted by COVID-19 when compared to other industries. Fishers are likely to continue working and living as normal, despite the fact that many work in at-risk provinces such as Songkhla or Pattani. Key risks for fishers are related to the lack of understanding about how the virus spreads. At the time of writing, many did not seem concerned about the dangers of COVID-19 and were continuing to live together in close quarters aboard fishing vessels without wearing proper protective equipment. It shows that the government and private sector have not made sufficient efforts to inform vessel workers about the virus and/or enforce health and safety practices. Apart from this, families of fishers tend to live in cramped conditions, with many often in one room. This will pose a major challenge in the event of an outbreak in these communities. If the virus does spread within fishing communities and fishing is halted, many fishers will be impacted due to conditions prohibiting them from seeking other types of work. Many fishers are also not covered by the social security system, rendering them ineligible to receive benefits or compensation if they are affected by COVID-19.

## THAI GOVERNMENT'S INADEQUATE RESPONSES ON WORKERS AND FARMERS

Implementation of the government's Emergency Decree and curfew has not directly affected small-scale business owners. For instance, fishers are still able to work as they would normally. However, compensatory mechanisms for those affected by COVID-19, particularly as they apply to small-scale producers, are insubstantial. To promote economic recovery, the Thai government released an Emergency Decree allowing the Finance Ministry to borrow up to 1 trillion THB, of which 600 billion THB would be set aside for public health planning and remedial measures for those affected, including local fishermen and other workers.<sup>6</sup> On 28 April 2020, the Cabinet approved the resolutions with regards to payment of 5,000 THB per household for three months (May–July 2020) for farmers as well as those in the fishing sector. They can sign up online to the Bank for Agriculture and Agricultural Cooperatives (BAAC). However, they need to enter a national ID number, mobile phone number, and savings account number, along with other personal information, during the registration process. Online-only applications are an obstacle for small-scale producers that may not be familiar with online

platforms or have internet access. Further, all applications have to be verified by the Ministry of Agriculture and Cooperatives, and the timescales for this are still not clear.

The government maintains that those who work aboard fishing vessels or in food processing factories have access to social security benefits related to unemployment or furlough, according to social security law. However, migrant workers face many obstacles in exercising these rights, as those who have been laid off during this time are still bound by migrant worker management law to find a new employer within 15 days and must also file a request for benefits. In reality, it is nearly impossible for migrant workers to simultaneously find a new employer and file a request for benefits in the allotted period of time. It is also difficult for migrant workers to file such requests online, as services are not offered in their respective languages.

The findings also indicate the lack of understanding among factory workers and fishing workers about how the virus spreads, which poses a significant risk while workers continue to live in close quarters aboard fishing vessels without wearing proper protective equipment, and their families often live in cramped conditions. Moreover, migrant workers face obstacles to exercising their rights to social security benefits, particularly those related to unemployment or furlough without pay because of language barriers and ambiguous policies. Furthermore, most of the vessel owners/employers opt for private healthcare packages instead of the state social security, so many fishing workers are also not covered by the social security system, rendering them ineligible to receive benefits or compensation if they are affected by COVID-19.

## THE POLICY RESPONSES FROM THE PRIVATE SECTOR

The Thai CSO Coalition has been in dialogue with three companies – Charoen Pokphand Group (CP), Seafresh Industry Public Company Limited (Seafresh), and Thai Union Group (TU)– since 2018, discussing three key areas of workers’ rights: (1) responsible recruitment; (2) grievance mechanisms, freedom of association and collective bargaining; and (3) occupational health and safety. However, regarding the COVID-19 situation, the companies shared with Oxfam (a member of the CSO Coalition) details of their response to COVID-19 in their context, including the challenges and gaps in the response, and the way forward.

## How have businesses responded to the COVID-19 situation?

The three companies have implemented a range of preventive and responding measures.

**Table 1 Measures undertaken by companies in response to the COVID-19 pandemic**

<b>Responding measures</b>	<b>CPF</b>	<b>Seafresh</b>	<b>Thai Union</b>
<i>Provision of face masks to all workers<sup>7</sup></i>	Fully provided to all workers in every factory	Fully provided to all workers in every factory	Fully provided to all workers in every factory <sup>8</sup>
<i>Handwashing and alcohol gel stations in various locations throughout the factories</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>COVID-19 awareness programme to workers in worker own languages</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>Social distancing practices within the factory's floor and during workers' transportation</i>	1.5m – 2m between workers	1.5m – 2m between workers	1.5m – 2m between workers
<i>Health guidelines in worker dormitories</i>	Yes	Yes	Yes
<i>HR support on social security scheme<sup>9</sup></i>	Yes	Yes	No applicable case so far
<i>Corporate support to suppliers and vessels</i>	No existing interventions/policies	No existing interventions/policies	In some fishery supply chains, TU shared COVID-19 educational materials to its suppliers

- **Facial masks:** The three companies have provided face masks in addition to the personal protective equipment that workers already have to wear in food production lines.
- CPF and Seafresh provided two washable masks to all workers in all factories to be used inside and outside the companies' facilities, while TU provides free washable masks and face shields to all workers in most facilities. However, frontline CSOs still reflect that some factories, not specifically on the three companies, do not distribute



protective gears continuously, resulting in workers having to find gear themselves in order to ensure compliance with regulations. On this issue, Ms. Suthasinee Keawleklai (MWRN) stated, 'Some factories only distribute masks to workers one time. Afterwards, workers must find and purchase masks themselves, otherwise they will not be permitted to enter the factories.'

- **Handwashing and alcohol gel stations:** The three companies have provided handwashing and alcohol (70%-plus) gel stations in various locations throughout the factories.
- **COVID-19 awareness programme:** The three companies are providing Covid-19 awareness programmes for workers by using posters and/or audio and video recordings in workers' own languages. Staff are also conducting temperature checks on workers before they enter company facilities. TU also shares educational materials such as videos to its migrant recruitment agents and partner NGOs who can help to disseminate the materials to workers in their networks. Seafresh collaborates with Issara Institute to produce sources of information about COVID-19 in languages spoken by workers.
- **Social distancing practices within the factory:** The three companies are applying social distancing measures in their factories, such as keeping a distance of 1.5–2 metres between people at all times. This is mostly important in the canteen area and waiting areas during lunchtime.
- **Social distancing measures in workers' transportation:** The three companies are also applying social distancing by increasing the number and frequency of transportation trips between dormitories (residential areas) and the factories, to reduce the number of passengers per trip. Seafresh works with shuttle bus services to clean the buses and put up signs so that workers know they are safe to use.

From the frontline CSOs and workers interview, in responding to the pandemic, factory employers have arranged for more frequent transport for employees to avoid overcrowding, have distributed protective gear, and issued regulations requiring employees to wear protective gear when inside the factories. However, there are reflections from workers that the stricter measures in response to the pandemic pose additional challenges to workers, as they are now responsible for finding and purchasing their own protective gear to ensure entrance into the workplace or to commute.

## STEPPING BEYOND COMPANIES' FACILITIES

The three companies have extended social distancing measures to cover worker dormitories. CPF works with provincial public health authorities to educate workers at their dormitories on how to prevent the virus, highlighting the importance of cleaning measures. Similarly, Seafresh extends preventive measures to worker dormitories, emphasizing cleaning and arranging distancing between workers of six persons in a

room of 24 sqm. They also encourage workers who live nearby to facilities to stay at the company facility to reduce the chances of spreading the virus, and in these cases, workers will be provided with rooms for free. For those staying in the facility's dormitories, they encourage workers in the same production line to stay together in the dormitory so that it will be easier to track and contain the spread if there are any COVID-19 cases reported. However, this initiative has not yet been warmly received by workers, who mostly prefer to stay with friends or relatives in groups not categorized by the production line. For TU, the company has promoted social distancing within worker dormitories and implements extra hygiene measures in collaboration with dormitory owners. In one facility, TU provides a separate building as a quarantine space for workers who are identified as high risk and need to self-isolate away from their co-residents and closely monitors the health condition of workers.

## TACKLING THE CHALLENGES OF THE SOCIAL SECURITY SCHEME

Company support to workers (from Human Resources (HR) departments) in accessing government welfare schemes is particularly important, as most workers are migrant workers who cannot write or read Thai. Without support from their employers, it would be almost impossible for migrant workers to access government COVID-19 response schemes.

Seafresh's HR department extends support to workers who may need to apply for the government's social security benefits, or applying on behalf of the workers if need be. At the time of writing, workers who have applied for benefits on the basis that they have been requested to conduct 14 days self-quarantine, have still not received any money from the social security office, but HR departments have been helpful in following up applications.

For CPF, if workers have been requested by a doctor or the company to self-quarantine, workers will be paid normally and treated as working from home. The company also provides food and other necessary items to workers at their dormitories during quarantine.

Finally, from the dialogue with the three companies, we were not able to identify any particular explicit action or initiative from the global seafood associations designed to tackle the challenges faced by seafood processing workers or workers on fishing boats. However, one interviewed company identified that there were initiatives where UK supermarkets have collaborated to provide a series of supplier-facing COVID-19-management webinars, with both UK and global focuses, to provide guidance and support to protect workers during this period of unprecedented change.

We call on industry associations and international seafood platforms to step up their COVID-19 response plan in order to ensure that risk mitigation plans are being applied consistently throughout supply chains.

From the interviews conducted, we could see that national seafood exporters have put in place several preventive measures to respond to COVID-19. Some companies go beyond their facilities to support and prevent the risks of an outbreak in workers' households and communities. However, while some companies may have shared COVID-19 educational materials to some of their suppliers, extended support to their suppliers' facilities or boats is still lacking, and workers are at risk of an outbreak due to lack of proper preventive measures.

The reflection from frontline CSOs in Thailand is that the protection and support offered to fishers has proven inadequate. This could be due to the fact that an outbreak has not yet occurred in the areas in which they live and work. As of June 16<sup>th</sup>, 2020, there are no official cases of COVID-19 among factory workers or fishers, though this could be due to inadequate testing among these populations. Some migrant workers believe they will be shunned if they contract COVID-19 – a fear that could cause any who become infected to conceal this information. Given the findings, the Thai CSO Coalition would like to propose policy recommendations for a wide range of stakeholders involved in the seafood and fishery sector including the national seafood exporters, vessel owners and global buyers. This set of recommendations could not respond to all the problems facing workers and food producers, but address the challenges derived from the findings.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR COMPANIES

### **Recommendations to national seafood exporters and vessel owners:**

- Employers must guarantee safe workplaces and establish a scheme to promote health, safety and well-being of workers while at work, during transportation and in the workers' community, including:
  - Updating the training programme on the COVID-19 prevention measures and provide access to healthcare and state benefits if workers and their families are unwell because of COVID-19 related illnesses;
  - Providing adequate protective gears and effectively implementing social distancing measures as advised by the health authority, such as facial masks, gloves, plexiglass barriers (where applicable), and temperature checks;
  - Establishing additional HR support to workers helping access state benefits and ensure that support is readily available across all factories throughout the company's operations.
- Seafood exporters and vessel owners should engage directly with workers and producers in order to learn the day-to-day challenges of working in the pandemic. More fundamentally, workers should be empowered to organize amongst themselves and to engage in

dialogue with their employers without fear of retaliation. This type of consultation and engagement would mean that employers will be in a better position to support workers during this difficult time and prevents the risk of potential outbreaks and business discontinuity.

- Employers must do more to protect the health and safety and rights of migrant workers who are particularly vulnerable to the risks posed by the pandemic. To address significant risks faced by migrant workers in Thailand, employers should ensure that:
  - All migrant workers have access to health and prevention information in their own language and are able to seek additional support from the company's human resources team and external civil society groups that empowers and takes into account the wellbeing of migrant workers;
  - All migrant workers should have adequate access to paid sick leave and be supported with essential food and shelter if they are unable to return to their country of origin or are unable to support themselves because of the pandemic;
  - All migrant workers should be treated fairly and with transparency in the case of termination of employment and/or furlough. They should be supported with legal assistance and should be compensated with any wages owed to them. Workers who have paid recruitment fees should be remedied by their employers.
- Suppliers and vessel owners should disclose and share information related to confirmed COVID-19 cases with the appropriate government agencies and local civil society organizations in a transparent and coordinated way. This would help to ensure that a potential outbreak can be prevented and affected workers can be supported in a timely way.

## **Recommendations to global buyers and retailers, including pre-competitive industry platforms such as the Global Seafood Task Force<sup>10</sup> and the Seafood Ethics Action Alliance:<sup>11</sup>**

- Establish clear guidelines to tackle the emerging risks and challenges faced by seafood processing workers or fishing workers – buyers and retailers must do more to increase the level of transparency and traceability of their global supply chains. The first critical first step is to conduct more robust human rights due diligence measures in their high-risk supply chains.
- Global buyers must support their suppliers with business continuity and encourage transparency in their COVID-19 responses and management in their supply chains. In addition, **buyers should require all suppliers to promote freedom of association and collective bargaining among workers and farmers in their global supply chains**, as well encouraging direct engagement with local trade unions and labor rights organizations to support their workers.

- In the first instance, global buyers should refrain from cutting and running from a supplier, if and when COVID-19 cases or human rights violations are found in their supply chains. Instead, they should provide both notification and support to work with the respective supplier to urgently address the situation, based on consultations with local stakeholders. This will encourage suppliers to be more transparent and share information with the buyers and key stakeholders.
- Global buyers should require their suppliers to treat both domestic and migrant workers consistently when it comes to workplace safety, protective gears, paid sick leave and workers' engagement. Migrant workers in global supply chains are vulnerable and their grievances must not be overlooked especially when national legislations are weaker and less inclusive. All workers must have access to healthcare coverage and a minimum of 30 days paid sick leave regardless of status and size of workplace, and regardless of their migration status.
- Global buyers should urgently update their Supplier Code of Conduct and contracts in order to reflect the emerging risks and challenges posed by COVID-19 on their global suppliers.
- The measures advocated for herein to protect the health, safety and socio-economic livelihoods of workers at the producer and processor level will undeniably incur additional costs and those costs should not be born entirely by suppliers alone.

**Global food brands and retailers must assume their share of these costs to ensure that the workers on which they rely to produce and process the goods they sell are able to continue their vital work.**



A worker on a Thai fishing vessel. © Vinai Dithajohn/Oxfam

# ANNEX: METHODOLOGY

**Date of interviews:** 5–7 April 2020

**Interviewees:** Two male, three female from CSO staff, small-scale producers, and migrant workers. Six males and two female representatives from across the three seafood companies

**Geographical areas:** The southern region (Songkhla, Pattani, Chumphon) and the central region (Bangkok, Nonthaburi, and Samut Sakhon).

**List of questions:**

1. What do you see as the biggest risks most likely to disrupt/impact workers and small-scale farmers in the food supply chain as a result of the current crisis?
2. What changes to working practices are happening now at the national level? (E.g. abrupt migration, changes in government policies, overtime, lay-offs, additional recruitment, changed shifts, etc.)
3. What happens if workers/farmers in the supply chain get sick because of COVID-19?
4. What are employers and major suppliers doing to support workers and small-scale farmers at this time?
5. Have you seen some emerging examples of good practice? Have you spotted some unfair practices?
6. How has your organization been responding to COVID-19? Are there any organizational concerns that you would like to share?
7. What needs to be done right now and in the near future? What asks do you have for Companies, especially the global supermarkets?
8. Anything else you'd like to say to us?

# NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The Civil Society Organization (CSO) Coalition for Ethical and Sustainable Seafood (Thai CSO Coalition) aims to address human rights and environmental sustainability issues in the Thai fishing industry. This collective platform of frontline non-governmental organizations (NGOs) aims to fulfil the role of industry and government 'watchdog', as well as provide constructive feedback on ongoing reforms. There are 14 members: Thai Sea Watch Association (TSWA), the Federations of Thailand Fisherfolk Association (FTFA), Labour Rights Promotion Network (LPN), Migrant Workers Rights Network (MWRN), Stella Maris Seafarers, Human Rights and Development Foundation (HRDF), The Foundation for Education and Development (FED), Raks Thai Foundation, Andaman Foundation, the Sustainable Development Foundation (SDF), Oxfam, TLCS Legal Advocate, Freedom Fund, and Greenpeace Southeast Asia.

<sup>2</sup> International Organization of Migration, '*COVID-19 Related Vulnerabilities and Perceptions of Non-Thai Populations in Thailand*' page 4.

<sup>3</sup> Testimony from an interview by stakeholders with companies

<sup>4</sup> National News Bureau of Thailand, 'BAAC ready to pay 5,000 baht in compensation to farmers, starting mid-May', <https://thainews.prd.go.th/en/news/detail/TCATG200505144257314> accessed 05 May 2020 and the interview of Mr. Wichoksak Ronnarongpairee, Director of the Thai Sea Watch Associations

<sup>5</sup> Interview with Ms. Kingkorn Narintarakul Na Ayutthaya, Deputy Director of BIOTHAI.

<sup>6</sup> The Bangkok Post, Govt talks up B1.9tn aid: *Funds targeted for coronavirus battle*, <https://www.bangkokpost.com/thailand/general/1895100/govt-talks-up-b1-9tn-aid>, accessed 5 May 2020.

<sup>7</sup> The provision of personal facial masks is additional to the required PPEs in the processing/production lines/facilities

<sup>8</sup> This has been changed from the original publication, in which it stated that masks were provided 'in most' facilities, to 'fully provided' to workers in every factory, following TU requested on 30 June 2020, as the company informed that there was inadequate information at the time of interview.

<sup>9</sup> According to the Thai laws, employees are entitled to unlimited sick leave, but the number of paid sick days is only up to 30 regular workdays per year, thus in the interview we aimed to tackle companies' supporting mechanism to ensure that workers receive benefits or compensation if they are affected by COVID-19.

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.seafoodtaskforce.global>

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.seafish.org/article/seafood-ethics-action-alliance>



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