

USAID Asia CTIP and Freedom Collaborative COVID-19 'Rapid Response' Webinar

Updates from the frontlines in Thailand

12th May 2020

**Please note that this is an informal summary of a webinar hosted by [Freedom Collaborative](#) and [USAID Asia CTIP](#). For the full recording, please [click here](#).*

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Veerawit Tianchainan, The Freedom Story
Harley Hamilton, World Vision Thailand
Preeda Tongchumnum, Solidarity Center Thailand

Moderator: Kyril Sukklin, Winrock International

Summary

Thailand went into lockdown on the 18th of March, declaring a state of emergency that forced factories and businesses to close. We know that migrants and non-Thai populations – irrespective of their legal status – face a new set of challenges and vulnerabilities due to the current crisis.

Update from Nathalie Hanley, IOM Thailand

Since the state of emergency was declared in Thailand, there have been an estimated 200 000 returns of migrants to neighboring countries such as Myanmar, Laos, and Cambodia. There continue to be mobility restrictions imposed within Thailand, as well as continued postponement of approval for MoU workers to return back to Thailand. Discussions about potentially reopening the borders in June are ongoing.

There are several challenges linked to the current situation, including the capacity of quarantine facilities in bordering provinces. Currently most quarantine facilities only have capacity for about 100 or 200 returns. The Thai government has indicated that they will not cover the costs for multi-nationals to be quarantined, so this supplementary cost will have to be borne by the migrant workers.

There have been a number of supportive measures by the Royal Thai government:

- **Extensions of stay** that are depending on the type of work permit and whether migrants were registered.
- **Launch of the COVID-19 hotline** by the Ministry of Public Health in partnership with the World Health Organization, and other NGOs for migrants from Cambodia, Laos and Myanmar to access information in local languages about COVID-19 and access to COVID-19 related health care.

Areas of concerns include:

- **Continued detention of migrants** that don't fall under the categories eligible for extension of stay. Unfortunately, this includes mothers and children. This is especially concerning, because of [recent outbreaks in immigration detention centers](#).
- **Very severe socio-economic impacts** on non-Thai nationals in Thailand. Many have not been able to access the 5000 THB payment for those working in the informal sectors, and even those who have been employed have reported challenges in accessing compensation payments from the Office of Social Security.

IOM has worked to address these issues through the following:

- **Supporting coordination** with respect to issues affecting migrant workers or other categories of multinationals;
- **Advocacy** with a range of different stakeholders;
- **Facilitating access to information** for migrants, as well as employers and recruiters;
- **Data collection efforts,**
- **Direct assistance,**
- and also efforts to support **health and border management.**

Update from Harley Hamilton, World Vision Thailand

World Vision has seen a large impact on the work of local governments in Thailand. Central government ministries and departments of Bangkok have started to pull **funding from provincial government offices** to repurpose some of those funds to respond to COVID-19. As a consequence, local governments responsible for providing services to migrant populations, survivors and victims of human trafficking have had no money to carry out any activities.

Due to these budget restrictions, there has been very **little research or data collection on a local level.** Feedback from local government departments has been that they are relying on NGOs for data and understanding what the impact of COVID-19 has been on migrant populations, and the lack of official statistics at provincial local level means that the scope of the problem and the level of vulnerability is not fully understood.

World Vision's initial response has primarily been a **public health one,** and includes:

- Provision of Personal protective equipment (PPE)
- Information materials on protection and prevention of COVID-19 in various languages
- Trainings for community health volunteers, ToT trainings around media and resources to be distributed both online and offline

Discussions on **economic recovery response** continue:

- Exploring the possibility of cash transfers
- Social security for migrants and ensuring that migrants can access their entitlements and rights that they're entitled to under law

Update from Veerawit Tianchainan, The Freedom Story

The Freedom Story works with the stateless and migrant populations in Chiang Rai. The Freedom Story has set **up a coalition, called the Coordination Center for COVID-19 assistance, together with 12 organizations,** and work closely with the USAID Thailand CTIP program.

Assistance efforts currently focus on three areas: food, public health, and access to information. The Freedom Story has been setting up a task force to distribute facial masks and hand sanitizer, and providing health information. Together with Winrock International, the Freedom Story is working to provide a standard COVID-19 training to community volunteers.

There are a lot of practical problems that happen locally:

- 1) First of all, many of the migrants are affected because they lost their job, or they have been told by the employer to reduce their working hours or the number of days of work. They don't have enough money to buy food or pay rent, risking eviction. So far, the Freedom Story has been providing some support and help in negotiating with landlords.

- 2) Some pregnant women the Freedom Story works with no longer have the financial means to care for their children after delivery.
- 3) There is little cooperation from the government agencies in Chiang Rai. For example, the Department of Labor are not really cooperative. The practical challenge is that the workers either don't know about a right to Social Security, or if they are aware of their rights to social security, but they cannot access for a practical reason and are afraid to enforce their rights.

While we can expect a relaxation of the current lockdown in Thailand, we can also expect a second lockdown, like in Singapore, South Korea and other countries. Many migrant workers are now waiting at home to return to normal, but this is unlikely to happen. So the Freedom Story is also working with migrants to identify the longer term needs if they're still in the same situation.

According to the official numbers, there are 30,000 migrant workers in Chiang Mai alone. Without an official survey, we do not know what exactly the situation is and cooperation with local government is crucial to conduct an official data collection. The Freedom Story have seen great support from other organizations in Chiang Mai, and have been negotiating with donors to adjust activities to cater to the immediate needs of migrant workers during this situation.

Update from Preeda Tongchumnum, Solidarity Center Thailand

Issues to highlight on the current situation:

- 1) The One-Stop-Service centers that facilitate the national verification process, which allowed migrants who had arrived via irregular channels to obtain a quasi-legal status, are closed. Many migrant workers were not able to process their documentation by the end of March. Solidarity Center, together with the Migrant Worker Group, issued an official letter to the government urging them to extend the period for the extension of the NVP for workers that were not able complete the process. The government decided to extend the deadline to the end of November.
- 2) Many workers under the MOU and Border-Employment Program are unable to cross the border back to their country of origin. Solidarity Center requested an extension of the right to stay and work for workers under the MOU and Border-Employment Program. Workers are allowed to stay in Thailand until the end of May, and for now the borders are scheduled to re-open in June.
- 3) Unemployment benefits under the social security system are difficult to access for migrant workers. Even if they are registered with the social security system, the forms to apply for benefits are only available in Thai language. They are usually no interpreters available. In many cases, the employer also failed to register the migrant worker, so that they are not eligible – which is not the migrant workers' fault. This is particularly prevalent in the border area of Mae Sot, where many factory owners failed to provide a social security ID for migrant workers.
- 4) As of mid-May, 260,000 migrant workers have registered with the Migrant Worker Group and require humanitarian support and basic assistance. There is still limited support and a need for more resources.
- 5) Migrant workers want to return home. In some cases, these migrants were deceived by brokers that promised to provide transportation, but found themselves unable to cross the border. Updated, reliable and safe migration information is very much needed.
- 6) Thousands of migrant workers would like to return to Thailand from Myanmar and there is need for a plan once borders open again. Currently, provincial governments are awaiting an official plan from the central government.

Q&A

Question for IOM - you mentioned that the Government will not cover costs for quarantine for returning migrant workers, and that migrant workers will have to cover those costs. Did the government state that the migrant workers will have to cover, or is there scope to call on employers to pay these costs?

(Nathalie) There hasn't been a final decision yet. It has been estimated that the cost for quarantine will be 15000 Thai Bath and that Non-Thai national have to cover these costs. IOM is currently having discussions with government how these costs could be covered for migrant workers, and if these costs could potentially be drawn from the social security fund or whether employers could take on some of these costs.

My questions to every panelist in relation to the response to the fishermen who are working on the boat during the Covid-19 pandemic. What are the responses of Thai governments, private sectors and other stakeholders in Thailand?

(Preedha) Fishers have issues to work off-shore, because of time limits for those who would like to go out under the current curfew. Government issued an announcement of relaxations for specific sectors, including fishing. The government also recently announced that they would like for more fishermen to register, and that those who live in Thailand and have their identification documents can register under the current policy.

The Fishing Right Network reported that many fishers have moved back to their country of origin and intend to come back, but because of border closures are still stuck at the Cambodian-Thai border.

Do you observe any significant gap in the social safety net to meet the needs of returned migrant workers (and their families) and the internal displaced persons in Thailand? Otherwise, is there any loophole in current government system for migrants' access to government social support and compensation?

(Veerawit) There are many issues even for Thai nationals to register under the social security system and access benefits, which is the main concern of the government right now. For migrant workers, in many cases the employer either did not register or did not pay into the social security fund for the migrant workers. Migrant workers are only aware of this issue now when claiming benefits. (Preeda) The Social Security Law itself does not cater to some work sectors such as Agriculture, Domestic Work and Fishing. Over 100 000 migrant workers will probably not be able to access the benefits under the Social Security law.

Are the persons infected with Covid-19 in the Sadao IDC mostly Rohingya coming from Malaysia?

(Nathalie) Most of the migrants that have been infected at the Sadao IDC are migrants from Myanmar, 18 of them are Rohingya but the majority are from Myanmar. The remainder are from Vietnam, Myanmar, Yemen, Cambodia and India.

Are those 60+ cases of COVID found among migrants in the Sadao IDC (and other such cases in other IDCs) included in the govts publicized numbers on nationwide COVID cases?

(Nathalie) Yes.

Is there any advice from Thai authorities when the Cambodia-Thai border will be open to migrants?

Returns are still going on between Thailand and Cambodia, with about 100 returns a day. At the moment, the potential date for re-opening the border crossings is 1st June, but a lot remains to be determined.

Thank you all and stay safe.