



THAILAND

A TRADE UNION FOCUS ON THE SDGs

#HLPF2021

WORKERS DEMAND A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT FOR RECOVERY AND RESILIENCE

COVID-19: WORKERS NEED SDG-DRIVEN RESPONSES TO THE CRISIS

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Thai government applied an emergency decree to implement restrictive measures such as restrictions on travel and movement within the country, closing of certain categories of businesses and venues and prohibiting gatherings. Additional measures such as the screening of migrant workers arriving in the country were subsequently introduced.

With regards to measures designed to support the population in view of the economic impact of the pandemic, the National Housing Authority, a state enterprise responsible for the provision of accommodation to working class people, decreased the rent. Additionally, the Government Saving Bank suspended debt payments. While universal healthcare services are not available to all, health care was provided to Thai citizens who contracted COVID-19, and free tests were made available to people at risk of infection.

Trade unions call for the Thai government to tackle the crisis by providing universal social protection and free access to the healthcare for all, establishing an income protection scheme and a fund for workers who lost their employment (protecting workers from illegal work contracts termination) and take measures to lower the costs of living.

ARE TRADE UNIONS AT THE TABLE?

The Thai government has established a Sustainable Development Committee, whose work is coordinated by the Office of the National Economic and Social Development Board. The Sustainable Development Committee has approved Thailand's SDGs Roadmap and ensures that the country's development plan mainstreams the SDGs. It is further responsible for shaping the sustainable development strategy of the country, coordinating the work of government agencies with the private sector in this respect and following up and evaluating on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

While all ministries and government agencies, as well as employer organisations and representatives of the academia are constituents of the Sustainable Development Committee, trade unions are not. As a result, trade unions are not consulted on the planning of the realisation of the SDGs nor do they have access to transparent

information on their implementation. There is also no involvement of trade unions in discussions on the 2030 Agenda as social partners. Trade unions alert that this exclusion means that neither workers nor the Thai population in general can contribute to SDG process in the country.

Trade unions report that, six years after the adoption of the SDGs, the government strategy on decent work and SDG 8 implementation is still unclear. Trade unions are further worried by developments that put into question the government's commitment to meeting SDG 8, as Thai government agencies and state enterprises are themselves creating precarious working conditions to reduce spending on personnel by offering short-term or daily contracts. In addition, the Ministry of Labour has begun working on a regulation introducing an hourly working wage, which is the worst form of employment terms for workers.

TRANSPARENCY



No access to information at all

CONSULTATION



No consultation process at all

SOCIAL DIALOGUE



Social partners not involved in defining and realising government's SDG national plan



IS THE (DECENT) WORK GETTING DONE?

The indicators on **target 1.3 (implement nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures)** in Thailand give cause for modest optimism: 68 per cent of the population was covered by at least one social protection benefit in 2019 and 61 per cent of the unemployed were covered by unemployment benefits, a significant increase on 22.4 per cent in 2010. In addition, the proportion of the population above statutory pensionable age receiving a pension increased from 5 per cent in 2000 to 82 per cent in 2019. However, performance on **target 1.a (implement programmes and policies to end poverty in all its dimensions)** require further improvement, as government spending on healthcare as a proportion of the GDP stood at 2.9 per cent in 2017 and on social protection at 3 per cent in 2018.

Challenges to reaching **target 5.4 (recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work)** remain, as women and girls spent 11.8 per cent of their time on unpaid care and domestic work in 2015. More efforts are needed to reach **target 5.5 (ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels)** as fewer women and girls in Thailand have achieved at least a secondary level of education than men (43.5 per cent for women and 46.8 per cent for men). However, the 2017 Constitution introduced a provision on gender budgeting and a Women's Development Strategy for 2017–2021 has been developed as a planning instrument for Thailand's gender equality policy.

Target 8.3 (promote policies that support productive activities, decent job creation) is far off being met, as in 2018, the informal sector accounted for 64 per cent of non-agricultural employment, with women (65.2 per cent) being somewhat more likely to be employed in it than men (63.7 per cent). As for **target 8.5 (achieve full and productive employment and decent work)**, while the overall figures for 2019 are low for both unemployment (0.7 per cent for men and 0.7 per cent for women) and underemployment (1.7 per cent for men and 1.5 per cent for women), these are significantly higher in the 15–24 age group, 4.2 per cent of whom are unemployed and 5.5 per cent of whom are underemployed. Moreover, because of the crisis workers are subjected to illegal work contracts termination, being forced to submit resignation letters instead of getting due compensation and unemployment benefits. The number of NEETs mentioned in **target 8.6 (reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training)** show a disparity between the sexes:

18.6 per cent of young women compared to 11.2 per cent of young men were NEET in Thailand. Significant efforts are needed to reach **target 8.7 (eradicate forced labour, end child labour in all its forms)** as cases of forced labour persist and human trafficking remains a significant problem, especially in the case of undocumented migrants: 610,000 people were estimated to be living in modern slavery in Thailand in 2018. Meeting **target 8.8 (protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers)** is far off, as the government has not ratified the ILO Convention on the Freedom of Association (87) and Migration for Employment (97). Collective bargaining coverage and trade union density are both very low, standing at just 3.1 per cent and 3.5 per cent respectively in 2016.

Further progress is still needed for Thailand to reach **target 10.4 (adopt policies, especially fiscal, wage and social protection policies and progressively achieve greater equality)**, as the top 10 per cent of income earners had a 28.2 per cent share of GDP, with the bottom 20 per cent of income earners holding a 7.2 per cent share in 2015.

To reach the objectives of **target 13.2 (integrate climate change measures into national policies, strategies and planning)**, the Thai government has introduced a Climate Change Master Plan for 2015–2036 which aims to enhance adaptation and mitigation capacity of various sectors of the economy. In addition, 17 provinces and 32 municipalities have been trained and have developed climate action plans for their respective constituencies, complementing their provincial disaster risk reduction plans. However, no involvement of trade unions is observed at this stage in these processes.

Indicators on **target 16.10 (protect fundamental freedoms)** are highly worrying, as the rights to freedom of association, collective bargaining and strike have been severely restricted under two labour relations acts in Thailand, excluding around 26 million workers – out of a workforce of about 40 million – from coverage. As a result, civil servants, migrant workers, informal sector workers, private sector teachers, agricultural workers, temporary workers, and other subcontracted workers are prohibited or severely restricted from the right to organise.

TRADE UNION ASKS TO LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND

To ensure an SDG-led recovery and resilience from the crisis, trade unions are urging the government to:

- Provide universal social protection and free access to the healthcare to everyone equally.
- Establish income or wage protection scheme to help workers, including informal workers, against the COVID-19 impact.
- Fully protect workers from illegal work contracts termination, by getting the full amount of compensation and providing unemployment schemes.
- Introduce measures to promote the protection of employment, such as employment retention schemes.
- Fiscal and financial support measures to enterprises should be conditioned to maintain jobs and safe workplaces.
- Stimulate the economy by increasing government spending, for example by providing income support including to informal workers.
- Introduce economic measures to decrease the cost of living, such as reducing the price of the public transport or the price of essential products etc.
- Introduce innovative measures to control the COVID-19 pandemic, such as wide-scale and free testing of the population in outbreak areas and the free provision of vaccines, both for Thai citizens and migrant workers.



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