

Thailand Observes World Day against Child Labour – 2007

Preventing child labour in agriculture and promoting safe work for youth in Thailand

The 12th of June is a special day of observance around the world – a day in which Thais and other people demonstrate their solidarity in bringing an end to the worst forms of child labour. This year, World Day against Child Labour focuses on children working under hazardous conditions in agriculture.

Every day, in virtually every corner of the world, children are labouring in conditions that threaten their health, well-being and morals. According to global estimates of the ILO, the majority of all child labourers work in the agricultural sector. In 2004 there were 218 million children from 5 to 17 years old trapped in child labour, of which 70 per cent were in agriculture¹. Around 90 per cent of economically active children in rural areas in developing countries work in agriculture.

From tending cattle, to harvesting crops, to handling machinery, over 150 million girls and boys help produce much of the food we consume and the fibres and primary agricultural products that we use. Around 132 million of them are children from 5 to 14 years of age.

For more than two decades the international community has united in the fight against child labour. The day is intended to provide an opportunity for individual governments and social partners, civil society, and others including

teachers, youth, women's groups and media to join in the campaign against child labour.

The ILO launched the first World Day against Child Labour in 2002 as a way to highlight the plight of children engaged in these

Progress made in combating child labour in Thailand

Thailand has been successful in reducing child labour over the past 10 years due to positive measures in the social and economic sphere and a reduction in population growth. In addition to ratification of ILO Convention 182 in 2001, Thailand also ratified the Minimum Age Convention (No. 138) in 2004. These ratifications have resulted in changes in legislation designed to prevent children under the age of 15 from entering into the labour force. The Ministry of Labour's Regulation on Protection of Labour in Agricultural Sector 2004 also directed that no children under the age of 15 should work full-time in the agricultural sector. However the legislation provides flexibility for children aged between 13 and 15 to work during school breaks with their parents' permission.

In 2005, the Ministry of Labour found 300,000 children aged 15-17 years were legally employed in registered establishments (60 per cent male and 40 per cent female). 76 per cent of these children were working outside agriculture, while 24 per cent (80,000) worked within the agricultural sector. This number does not reflect the unknown numbers of children under 15 in the workforce, especially those non-registered or falsely registered migrant children. Thailand continues to face challenges in combating some of the worst forms of child labour, child-trafficking, child-workers under 15 years old, child beggars, child domestic workers, child labour in fishery industries, in agriculture and in

¹ *The end of child labour: Within reach.* ILO Global Report under the Follow-up to the ILO Declaration on Fundamental Principles and Rights at Work, Report I (B) International Labour Conference, 95th Session, Geneva, 2006.

service sector such as karaoke bars. Addressing the problem of migrant working children from neighbouring countries labouring within Thailand is currently one of the main tasks for Thailand.

The study conducted by Mahidol University's Institute for Population and Social Research also discovered that some employers in Thailand actually voiced a preference for child-workers as they were deemed more obedient and easier 'to control'.

Children and youth in the agricultural sector

Agricultural products are produced on a large scale in some parts of Thailand resulting in a high demand for physical labour. The ILO in Thailand, through its International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) has supported studies in selected provinces to assess the situation of children in agricultural sector, such as in Tak and Udon Thani.

The research found that large scale agriculture, such as rose plantations in Tak Province covered approximately 5,000 acres of land while vegetable plantations occupied about 30,000 acres. These giant farms and plantations require year-round labour. It was discovered that children, mainly migrants, were heavily involved in a variety of agricultural activities that exposed them to chemicals, such as fertilizers when planting and watering the plants. Some children were also lifting heavy loads, preparing soil, cleaning chemical containers, spraying insecticides and handling other chemicals.

According to the Udon Thani Provincial Labour Office, the number of child labourers (13-18 years) in every sector is decreasing. However, there are also some unregistered children working in sugar plantations alongside their parents but without receiving any payment. These children are considered to be 'supplementary' labour – working as part of the family with their parents who are receiving payment. The practice is called **contract farming** - common in northeastern Thailand – and involves a lump-sum payment to the family.

According to the research findings by Khon Kaen University, contract farming is usually

regulated by a large company. The company provides seeds to the farmers along with chemical products including growth hormones, insecticides, pesticides and other equipment. Farmers plant the seeds on their land but must then follow the company's directions for the use of its chemicals/hormones etc., in order to produce a high yield of seeds that is in turn given back to the company. In this case, the whole family of farmers including children work together and are all exposed to the same hazardous substances. These can be extremely harmful to children under the age of 18 as they have a weaker immune system than adults and can become seriously ill.

Children and Youth in Fishing Sector

Samut Sakhon Province, south-west of Bangkok, is home to a large fishing fleet and seafood processing industry. The Ministry of Labour reports that more than 125,000 workers in Samut Sakhon are migrants from neighboring countries, primarily Burman and other ethnic groups from Myanmar (Burma). This number excludes unregistered workers between 15 and 18 years old working in the fishing industry, agriculture.

Recent research by the Asian Research Center for Migration found that 4,700 Thai youth aged 15–18 years were working legally. However, there were an estimated 20,000 children both Thai and other nationalities working in the province.

Working conditions in the fishing industry are quite hazardous for children. Lifting heavy loads, the lack of proper equipment and long and irregular hours of work are common problems for them.

A study on the situation of child labour in Songkhla and Pattani provinces found children working in various types of activities ranging from sorting fish, local fishing, aquatic animal processing, and sea food manufacturing. Most of the child labourers in these two provinces are Thai (79 per cent). However 6.7 per cent of them were below the age of 15. These children received some form of payment through their parents or families.

What must be done to prevent child labour in agriculture?

- 1. Effective implementation and enforcement of labour laws/regulations:** The Labour Protection Act 1998, Child Protection Act 2003, Ministerial Regulation concerning Labour Protection on Agricultural Sector 2005 and other related legislations must be applied to prevent and protect children under the minimum legal age. Prohibition of youth under 18 to be engaged in hazardous work in agriculture must be enforced.
- 2. Safe farming and hazard-free working environments for youth engaged in agricultural activities:** Youth participation in family farm activities can help youngsters learn valuable skills and contribute to income-generation for the household. However this must be accomplished through safe and hazard-free work, without affecting their health, safety, development and well-being.
- 3. Schooling and alternative occupational training:** Promote training on hazard-free farming to improve the quality of life for the children and their families.
- 4. School enrollment of migrant children:** In accordance with the Ministry of Education's policy on provision of education for the disadvantaged children, migrant children must be allowed to go to school.
- 5. Public awareness on hazardous work for children:** Create awareness and take measures to prevent child labour under the age of 15 particularly among migrant workers.

The ILO's response:

The ILO-IPEC supports national action to combat child labour and the worst forms of child labour in Thailand. Building on the success and experience Thailand has already developed over the past decade, the ILO supports a

sustainable response under the guidance of the **inter-ministerial National Committee on the Worst Forms of Child Labour** (C.182 Committee), chaired by the Ministry of Labour.

Since 2003, the ILO has been working with Thailand and four other countries in the Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS) to prevent human trafficking for labour exploitation, as there is a growing phenomenon of cross-border migration for employment.

This technical assistance has included participation in and support of Thailand's efforts within the Coordinated Mekong Ministerial Initiative against Trafficking (COMMIT) in the Greater Mekong Sub-region. An emphasis is placed on raising awareness among cross-border migrants on the dangers of trafficking and the link to unprepared, undocumented migration into Thailand. Work continues within Thailand to support inter-provincial coordinated efforts to help build the capacity of local officials to counter trafficking of children and young women.

During the next three years, the ILO will continue to support policy improvement through the National Plan of Action on the Worst Forms of Child Labour. The ILO will also support work at provincial level in selected six provinces (Chiang Rai, Tak, Udon Thani, Samut Sakhon, Pattani, and Songkhla). Within the framework of the provincial development strategies and programmes on education, poverty eradication, and human resource development, it will focus on longer term prevention through approaches that include awareness raising, education, vocational training, family livelihoods, and others.

For further information please contact:

Ms. Suvajee Good
Chief Technical Officer
International Programme on the Elimination of
Child Labour (IPEC), International Labour
Organization, United Nations Building,
Rajdamnernnok Ave. Bangkok 10200
Tel: 02 288 1767
Fax: 02 288 1019
E-mail: suvajee@ilo.org