

► Eradicating forced labour: The ILO approach



► The global challenge of forced labour

According to the latest global estimates, forced labour affects millions globally, with the majority exploited in the private sector and some in state-imposed forced labour. This issue is prevalent in sectors with high levels of informality or weak regulatory frameworks, such as agriculture, construction, domestic work, manufacturing, mining, and services. Children are profoundly impacted, especially in the context of commercial sexual exploitation. Vulnerable groups, notably migrant workers, are at heightened risk due to insufficient legal protections and unfair recruitment practices.

Worldwide, there are:

- **28 million**
people in situations of forced labour.



It means:

- **3.5 people**
for every thousand people in the world.

This includes:

- **6.3 million**
(23%) people in sexual exploitation.



- **3.3 million**
children are trapped in forced labour.



- **3.9 million**
(14%) are in state-imposed forms of forced labour.

- **86%**
are exploited in the private sector.

- **17.3 million**
people in various industries.



The vulnerable group with higher risk is:

- **Migrant workers**
due to:

- Lack of legal protections.
- Inability to exercise rights.
- Unfair recruitment practices.
- Irregular or poorly governed migration.



The most affected sectors are those with:

- **High informality** and ► **Weak regulation**

- agriculture
- construction
- domestic work
- manufacturing
- mining
- services (trade, transport, hospitality)



The International Labour Organization (ILO) is the only United Nations agency endowed with a constitutional mandate to develop and supervise international labour standards. Its unique tripartite governance structure – comprising representatives of governments, employers, and workers – ensures that the Organization's normative guidance, technical instruments, and country-level support are firmly grounded in both international legal frameworks and national-level realities.

This unique governance model enables the ILO not only to identify and monitor systemic risks, but also to support the design and implementation of reforms from within national institutions, thereby addressing complex and deeply embedded forced labour challenges in a sustainable and effective manner.

The ILO's body of forced labour standards constitutes the foundation of the global legal and policy response to forced labour. The Forced Labour Convention, 1930 (No. 29) and the Abolition of Forced Labour Convention, 1957 (No. 105) establish the legal definition of forced labour and its prohibition under international law. These are complemented by the Protocol of 2014 to the Forced Labour Convention (P29) and Recommendation No. 203, which promote a comprehensive, integrated strategy encompassing prevention, protection, enforcement, and access to remedies for victims.

Forced labour and trafficking in persons for forced labour are not only a serious criminal offences, but also the most severe human rights violation in the world of work – one that is frequently rooted in broader decent work deficits, weak governance frameworks, and inadequate social protection systems. Accordingly, ILO adopts a comprehensive and integrated approach that combines legal and policy reform, institutional capacity-building, independent research and monitoring, and inclusive stakeholder engagement. This multidimensional strategy is designed to address the structural drivers of forced labour and trafficking in persons for forced labour, and reduce vulnerability among at-risk populations.

With a century of experience and a global operational presence, the ILO brings unparalleled expertise and a demonstrated track record in combating forced labour across diverse national contexts, economic sectors, and supply chains. ILO's interventions, which are targeted, evidence-based, and context-specific, have consistently proven effective in reducing risk, strengthening protection mechanisms, and expanding access to justice and remedies for survivors of forced labour and human trafficking.



► What ILO can offer in high-risk contexts

Approach

ILO provides unparalleled technical assistance to countries identified as high-risk for forced labour.

ILO interventions to eradicate forced labour follow a human-centric and rights-based approach and reflects the four main pillars of the 2014 Protocol to the Forced Labour Convention, (Protocol 29) of prevention, protection, prosecution and partnerships.

Key challenges at the national level

- Legal and institutional gaps – lack of comprehensive legislation or effective policies to combat forced labour and weak coordination.
- Governance and enforcement gaps – weak labour governance, under-resourced labour inspectorates, high levels of informality and poor oversight and enforcement of laws and supply chain complexity.
- Gaps in information, knowledge and understanding of the dynamics, risks, prevalence, distribution, drivers and root causes of forced labour in specific contexts.
- Socio-economic vulnerabilities such as poverty, unemployment, discrimination and lack of access to social protection or decent work opportunities which heighten risks of forced labour.
- Crises and conflict situations create conditions that heighten the risk of forced labour and human trafficking.

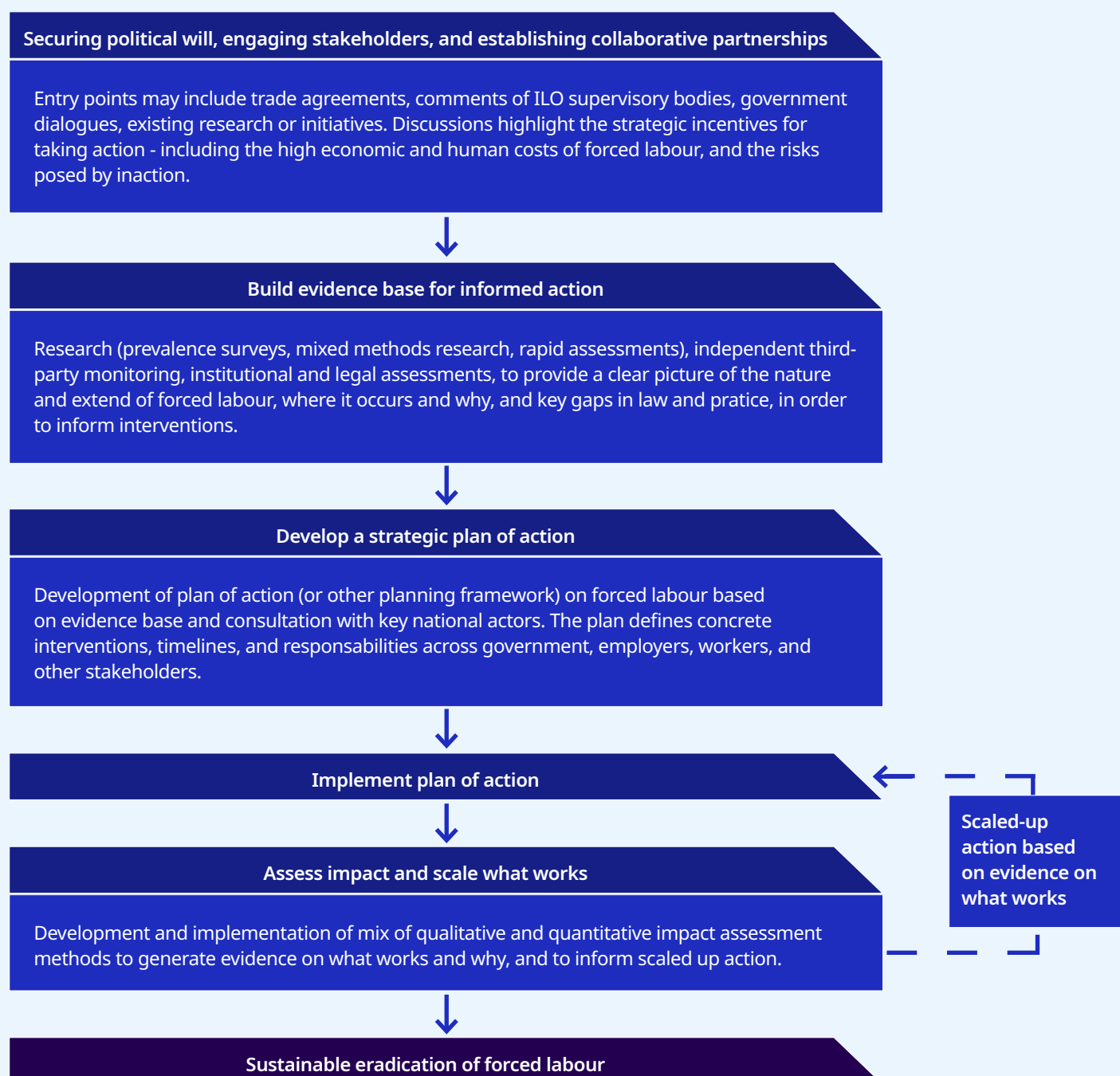


ILO country-level support to efforts against forced labour

ILO country-level support follows a phased, evidence-based approach tailored to national circumstances (Figure 1). While specific activities vary, the overall process typically begins by securing political will, building cooperative partnerships, and engaging stakeholders through strategic entry points such as trade agreements, supervisory body comments, and existing initiatives. This is followed by support to building the evidence needed for informed action, and, on this basis, development of plans of action or other planning frameworks to address forced labour. The ILO provides support both in designing these plans, including in convening social

partners, identifying concrete interventions, setting timelines, and specifying stakeholder responsibilities, and in the implementation of specific interventions within them (see below). Finally, support is provided to impact assessments involving a mix of methods to generate evidence on what works and why, and to inform scaled-up action.

Process at the national level



▶ Areas of ILO support

Within this comprehensive approach, the ILO delivers a tailored package of technical assistance.

▶ 1 Strengthen law, policy and governance

Robust legislation, strong governance, and effective enforcement are essential to eliminating forced labour. The ILO provides targeted technical assistance and capacity-building support to help governments close legal loopholes, strengthen institutions, and tackle the drivers and root causes of exploitation. This support is grounded in practical, country-specific approaches based on international standards and proven methodologies.

Key areas of support

- ▶ **Legislative and institutional assessments** to identify gaps and guide legal and governance reforms.
- ▶ **Targeted law and policy reform** addressing gaps in coverage and decent work deficits, for example:
 - labour and labour migration legislation;
 - criminal codes and public procurement laws;
 - recruitment regulation and supply chain due diligence;
 - legal protections and remedies for victims.
- ▶ **Structural reforms** targeting systemic drivers and root causes, such as:
 - discrimination, informality, insufficient wages, lack of skills, and gaps in social protection;
 - rural underdevelopment and exclusion from decent work.
- ▶ **Capacity building and institutional reform of government agencies**, such as labour inspectorates, prosecutors, dispute resolution bodies, and wage protection systems.
- ▶ **Ratification and implementation of ILO Conventions and Protocols**, based on identified legal gaps.
- ▶ **Development of National Action Plans** to support timebound, coordinated responses and address cross-cutting decent work deficits.

▶ 2 Action-oriented research

The ILO brings recognized expertise in high-risk settings to deliver independent, reliable information through research or third-party monitoring to guide policy advice, enforcement efforts and track results. This approach has been applied to cases of state-imposed forced labour, economic units within supply chains, or other private sector forced labour, in coordination with local governments.

Key areas of support

- ▶ **Risk assessments** to identify at risk groups, sectors, and locations.
- ▶ **National and sectorial forced labour surveys**, mixed methods studies, rapid assessments.
- ▶ **Institutional and legal assessments** and gap analyses.
- ▶ **Policy-oriented situation analyses (POSA)** combining data with policy and institutional analyses.
- ▶ **Independent third-party monitoring**, including in high-risk sectors or state-imposed labour contexts. Depending on the context, independent ILO monitoring can be integrated with capacity-building initiatives for national labour inspectorates.
- ▶ **Capacity building**, including face-to-face training and an online course on forced labour research, to strengthen national stakeholders' ability to design, implement, and use research for evidence-based policymaking.
- ▶ **Monitoring and evaluation methods** to assess impact, cost-effectiveness, and replicability of interventions.

3 Strengthen private sector action and due diligence

ILO supports responsible business conduct through practical tools, capacity building and partnerships to implement effective due diligence and promote decent work across supply chains.

Key areas of support

- ▶ **Capacity building for employers and business associations** on due diligence responsibilities;
- ▶ **Development and implementation of practical due diligence tools**, with a focus on:
 - identifying forced labour risks in recruitment and workplaces;
 - remediation of employment and recruitment-related abuses.
- ▶ **Promotion of social dialogue**, including:
 - participatory grievance mechanisms at enterprise or sectoral levels;
 - support for dispute prevention and resolution mechanisms.
- ▶ **Special attention to SMEs and informal enterprises**, often most at-risk of irregular labour practices.
- ▶ **Sectoral and supply chain pilots** to model and scale good practices.

4 Protection and empowerment of workers

ILO strengthens systems to protect survivors of forced labour and empower workers to resist exploitation, with a focus on at-risk groups including migrants, women, and those in informal sectors.

Key areas of support

- ▶ **Capacity building for trade unions** to organize and represent at-risk workers.
- ▶ **Awareness-raising and informed decision-making** tools for workers, including migrants at pre-departure and return stages.
- ▶ **Strategic communication and awareness-raising campaigns** targeted to workers, employers, and local authorities.
- ▶ **Access to justice and legal redress**, including:
 - strengthening national and local complaint and enforcement mechanisms;
 - institutional capacity building for frontline actors (police, prosecutors, legal aid providers, judiciary);
 - ILO-run temporary complaint-handling mechanisms in contexts with weak national systems.
- ▶ **Victim protection and rehabilitation services**, including technical assistance to strengthen emergency and long-term assistance.
- ▶ **Livelihoods and reintegration programmes** that support skills development, access to finance, and alternatives to exploitation.

5 Partnerships, coordination and advocacy

ILO leverages its unique convening power to generate political will and foster strong, sustained partnerships across government agencies, the private sector, workers' organizations, civil society, and international actors. This collaborative approach ensures consensus-based solutions and enables practical coordination and knowledge-sharing.

Key areas of support

- ▶ **Government-government dialogue** between, for example:
 - trading partners on enforcement;
 - labour-sending and receiving countries.
- ▶ **Cross-border and inter-agency collaboration**, labour, justice, immigration, and social affairs ministries.
- ▶ **Dialogue between suppliers, buyers, workers and employers' organizations** to promote responsible supply chain practices and raise standards.
- ▶ **Peer learning and institutional exchanges**, including study tours, exchanges and South-South cooperation.
- ▶ **Support for tripartite and tripartite-plus social dialogue**, including with civil society organizations.
- ▶ **Engagement in global multi-stakeholder initiatives**, such as the [ILO Global Business Network on Forced Labour](#), the [Alliance 8.7](#), and the [ILO Fair Recruitment Initiative](#).

▶ Recent examples of ILO impact

▶ Dismantling state-imposed forced labour

Uzbekistan

The effort to eliminate child labour and forced labour in Uzbekistan was triggered by a complaint made the Employers Group in the ILO supervisory system, which was made possible by the ratification by Uzbekistan of the ILO Conventions on child and forced labour. As part of its follow up to the supervisory bodies concerns, the ILO launched a third-party monitoring programme in 2013 to monitor child labour and subsequently extended to include forced labour. This involved comprehensive surveys and assessments to gather data on labour practices as well as support for improved grievance handling. Based on the findings, the ILO implemented a broad range of interventions to eradicate child labour and forced labour, and advocated for critical changes in the law to dismantle the system that coerced people to work and compelled child labour.

ILO's supervisory bodies examined Uzbekistan's application of the conventions throughout the process. They provided a trusted forum for the international community to engage in a dialogue with the Uzbek government around state-sponsored labour rights violations and urge it to take action.

Turkmenistan

ILO initiated a similar cooperation programme with the Government of Turkmenistan in 2023, following recommendations from the ILO supervisory bodies regarding concerns over the implementation forced labour and child labour conventions. In addition to third-party monitoring, ILO support includes the establishment of a direct complaint mechanism to help victims access justice and a broad range of technical assistance regarding legislation, institutional capacity, and systems to ensure the prevention of child labour and forced labour. The ILO's work in Turkmenistan has been groundbreaking, representing the first instance of independent research ever conducted in the country. Findings from this monitoring have directly informed and continue to guide the ongoing cooperation between the ILO and Turkmenistan.

▶ Tackling the root causes of forced labour

Qatar

Over the last decade, reports of labour exploitation of migrants in Qatar have been widespread. In 2014, international trade unions submitted a complaint to the ILO against the State of Qatar, alleging that the country was not addressing violations of labour rights.

Results

- ▶ ILO's monitoring effectively assessed the implementation of government policies, tracked shifts in labour practices, and provided critical insights that informed policy reforms, ensuring sustained progress in eliminating child labour and forced labour.
- ▶ By 2022, the ILO concluded that systemic use of child labour and forced labour had been effectively eliminated (though isolated cases persist). This success was acknowledged by the Cotton Campaign, which lifted its boycott on Uzbek cotton in 2022.

Results

- ▶ Introduction of a national ban on the involvement of children in cotton harvesting.
- ▶ Doubling of per-kilo wages for cotton pickers to promote voluntary participation.
- ▶ Increase in the government purchasing price of cotton to reduce farmers' economic vulnerability.
- ▶ Legislative reforms aimed at closing legal loopholes and strengthening the prohibition of forced labour.

Results

Following the changes to the Kafala system and the introduction of the new legislation in 2020:

- ▶ Workers can now change jobs freely, after a notice period of up to two months.

After a period of negotiations, the State of Qatar and the ILO agreed on a programme to support major labour reforms. As part of the Kafala system, the legal framework defining the relationship between migrant workers and their employers, workers in Qatar previously required permission from their employers to change jobs. One pillar of the ILO's programme of support to the Qatar government involved the reform of its legal framework to ensure that workers can exit the country and change jobs freely.

- ▶ Migrant workers, including domestic workers, also no longer require an employer-approved exit permit to leave the country, with some exceptions for a limited number of workers.
- ▶ Over 660,000 applications to change jobs have been approved in the four years following the introduction of the new legislation.

▶ Preventing human trafficking of women and girls

India, Nepal, and Bangladesh

Delivered by the ILO, the Work in Freedom (WIF) programme has sought to prevent the trafficking of women and girls from South Asia into exploitative jobs, as domestic workers or in garment manufacturing, and to support women's economic empowerment by helping them migrate safely to decent work. The programme took a unique approach, working across the "whole trafficking chain" in countries of origin on recruitment and in countries of destination. It operated in Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Jordan, Lebanon and some Gulf countries.

Results

- ▶ The project reached over 770,000 women and girls in local communities.
- ▶ Helped 113,000 migrant women join local support groups in their destinations to prevent and respond to cases of forced labour.
- ▶ Worked with governments on over 27 laws and policies to help better protect vulnerable migrant workers (for example, legislation on domestic work or regulation of recruitment industry).
- ▶ Published more than 30 studies and research papers providing new evidence to policymakers.

▶ Addressing vestiges of slavery

Niger

The ILO implemented an integrated approach to addressing the complex issues of slavery and economic vulnerability, providing vocational training to 400 female descendants of slavery.

ILO effectively strengthened awareness-raising and livelihoods programmes for the empowerment and socio-economic reinsertion of women victims of the slavery-like practice of *wahaya*. Women participated in literacy, vocational and entrepreneurship training programmes, including financial education and equipment to start their own income-generating activities and overcome stigma and discrimination.

The initiative also raised awareness among justice actors, and, as per the beneficiaries' testimonies, some women received legal support to bring their cases to court and claim for the respect of their inheritance rights, upon the death of their husband.

Results

- ▶ 71 per cent of livelihood participants in Niger reported positive changes due to the training, including improved income, education for children, living conditions, social relations and increased self-confidence.
- ▶ 78 per cent of the women have sustained income generating activities after the training, and 74% declared they have used the competencies acquired in the programme.
- ▶ 52 per cent of them have increased their income after the training, whilst 23% of them have started their own businesses.

▶ Eliminating forced labour and human trafficking in supply chains

Thailand

Countries in South-East Asia are among the worlds' top producers and exporters of fish and seafood products, and migrant workers contribute significantly to the fishing and seafood processing sectors. An ILO project addressed the characteristics of working in the fishing and seafood processing sectors, as well as the barriers

Results

- ▶ Regular compliance audit of 55 seafood processing enterprises employing more than 60,000 workers.
- ▶ Increased representation of migrant and women workers in worker voice mechanisms at enterprise level.

and risks present in the migration system, which can lead to unsafe migration, decent work deficits, abuse, and trafficking for forced labour.

Among other interventions, ILO supported due diligence in Thai seafood processing factories in collaboration with the Thai Tuna Industry Association (TTIA) and Thai Frozen Foods Association (TFFA). ILO supported the development and implementation of guidelines to increase compliance with international labour standards with a focus on the eradication of forced labour.

- ▶ The industry associations committed to the recommendation of the “employer pays” principle for all recruitment fees and related costs, and to implement fair recruitment practices. The associations also committed to banning pregnancy screening during employment and implement gender responsive measures.
- ▶ TTIA also shared their experiences in implementing the SGLP with their counterpart Indonesian industry associations to support adaptation and implementation in Indonesia.

▶ Addressing the vulnerabilities of workers within supply chains in the construction sector

Bangladesh - Qatar migration corridor

In 2018, the ILO and QDVC, a shareholding company between Qatari Diar and VINCI Construction Grands Projets, implemented a fair recruitment pilot to address the vulnerabilities faced by workers within supply chains in the construction sector. The pilot focused on the Bangladesh-Qatar migration corridor and assessed the recruitment practices of STS, a service provider that places workers in QDVC worksites, and Bonanza, an STS’s long-time recruitment agency partner in Bangladesh.

The pilot began with an independent audit of STS and Bonanza, which mapped the entire recruitment process and highlighted gaps in existing policies and procedures. Based on the audit findings, a capacity-building programme was implemented to address these gaps. In this phase, the service agreement between STS and Bonanza was revised to reflect fair recruitment principles; Bonanza strengthened its recruitment process by identifying potential risks at each stage and implementing strategies to mitigate them; a pre-departure programme was introduced to prevent deception during recruitment; and STS adopted a formal grievance policy and developed procedures to ensure it is easily accessible to all workers.

Results

The pilot concluded with an impact assessment, which showed the following results:

- ▶ A significant decline in recruitment fees and related costs paid by workers.
- ▶ A substantial reduction in worker debt.
- ▶ Fewer instances of deceptive contract practices.

▶ Forced labour in the fishing sector

South Africa

The ILO provided institutional capacity building support to the South African Maritime Safety Authority, the Department of Labour, the Department of Fisheries and social partners to strengthen detection of forced labour and decent work deficits on board national and foreign flagged fishing vessels.

Results

- ▶ Soon after a training session, inspectors identified decent work deficits and indicators of forced labour on a foreign-flagged vessel. Several fishers were repatriated to Indonesia and the Philippines, one of whom might have died from his injuries had he not been able to leave the vessel and seek medical assistance.
- ▶ SOPs for referral of forced labour cases were adopted and cooperation on labour inspection between the Department of Labour and South African Maritime safety Authority was strengthened.

► Skills and livelihoods for rehabilitation

Nepal

The ILO provided vocational training to 1,115 adult former bonded labourers in Nepal to assist them upskilling in various vocations as well as setting up and running their own businesses.

Results

- 44 per cent of livelihood participants were recorded as having increased their income after the training.
- 80 per cent of livelihood participants reported having their own business as a source of income.

► Preventing and combatting forced labour among migrant workers

South-East Asia

The ILO provides assistance to migrant workers through 18 Migrant Worker Resource Centres (MRCs) in key destination and origin countries including Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar, Thailand and Viet Nam, and MRC-like services in Indonesia and The Philippines in partnership with the governments, trade unions, and civil society organizations. The MRCs aim to prevent forced labour by providing information and support services to migrant workers throughout the migration cycle, particularly those in the fishing and seafood processing sectors, including pre-departure information, paralegal assistance, and support to access grievance mechanisms. The project also supported a large-scale public information campaign targeting Myanmar migrant workers through the Yay Kyi Yar Facebook page.

Results

- 60,207 migrant workers and their family members (42 per cent women) were provided individualized and responsive services to support safe migration for decent work in South-East Asia and beyond.
- 7,079 potential migrant workers in Myanmar, Cambodia, and Indonesia were provided with the pre-departure information and orientation, covering subjects such as document preparations, laws and relevant regulations, workers' rights and responsibilities, culture and traditions, and support services at the destination countries.
- The Yay Kyi Yar Facebook Myanmar language campaign hosted 201 original videos and infographics, and reached more than 68 million people, with 1.5 million followers (42 per cent women) across 10 countries.





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