

# BRIDGES TO BETTER MIGRATION

## How cross-border advocates work together



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**THE PROJECT'S OBJECTIVE:** Creating a Mekong-wide network of civil agencies and frontline organizations in the countries where child migrants originate and in Thailand to carry out government agreements and changes that will result in better managed movements of people and greater protection of child migrants.

## Fostering cross-border networks

**THE INITIAL CHALLENGE:** Thailand has made considerable progress over the past two decades in reducing the number of Thai working children, partly because of the strong economic growth of the Thai economy and the impressive expansion of education coverage. But the progress is also a direct result of specific laws and policies on child labour. The problem is not yet resolved, however. Pockets of Thai children are still working in the worst forms of child labour, often combining full-time education with part-time work. As a direct result of the economic development, Thailand has become a magnet attracting a large number of migrants from neighbouring countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar). Overall, the



migration flows are positive, contributing to economic development in both origin and destination countries. But there is also a darker side. Children, for instance, are also migrating to Thailand in the search of work. Sometimes they arrive in a documented manner with their parents, but often it is without proper documentation, or they are alone, without protection from family members and friends. Cases of trafficking, forced labour and labour abuses of migrants and migrant children are not uncommon in media stories and research studies.

Addressing human trafficking is a national-level priority, and all agencies are collaborating at the policy and practical levels. Various agreements have resulted in mechanisms to protect foreign migrants, especially those who are victims of trafficking. Government-to-government collaboration in the Mekong sub-region has been achieved in terms of tackling trafficking and to regularize migration, particularly through the signing of various memoranda of understanding. However, there remained a need for more ground-to-ground collaboration to enhance and accelerate the government efforts, particularly in the area of protecting migrant children.

**THE RESPONSE:** The International Labour Organization's International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour and its Project to Support National Action to Combat Child Labour and Its Worst Forms in Thailand (the ILO-IPEC project) took on a people-to-people approach between organizations working in Thailand and in neighbouring countries (Cambodia, Lao PDR, Myanmar (border areas) and Viet Nam) to discuss and better manage the situation of children who end up in exploitative employment.

The project linked civil counterparts in the neighbouring countries who would be administering government policy to exchange information and develop collaboration for promoting the protection of children of migrant workers and migrant child workers on both sides of a border. Core advocates were brought together in seminars to discuss the challenges and design joint advocacy activities. The concept was to create a mechanism involving individuals from both civil and government agencies who have had direct experience with the realities of the situation and who are committed to making things better.

The ILO-IPEC project focused on building capacity and increasing awareness and cooperation among the different state and civil society groups, both at the national and sub-regional levels, so that they become aware of the problem and participate in the action to prevent and protect migrant children from abuses and exploitation.

**THE PROCESS:** A national seminar with participants from the Thai Government, NGOs and the media looked at the situation of migrant children in Thailand and ways to coordinate with agencies and organizations in Cambodia and Lao PDR. Through the seminar, the Thai Coordinating Committee on Migrant Children (Thai-Cord) was re-established as a network of organizations working on migrant children's issues.

The Thai-Cord then set up a consultative and planning meeting with counterparts in Cambodia and Lao PDR to re-establish the Mekong Network for the Protection of Cross-Border Children (Mekong-Cord). Before the regional group met, the Thai-Cord members met to design objectives, expected outcomes and processes for the Mekong meeting. They looked at existing interventions, what support was needed at the policy and practical levels and what joint activities would best complement the cooperation the respective governments had established at the diplomatic level.

Members included people from the social welfare, justice, foreign affairs, immigration and security ministries in each country, youth - and child-focused NGOs as well as youth leaders from the Mekong Youth Net (who were coached by the Development and Education Programme for Daughters and Communities (DEPDC), a core member of the Thai-Cord).

### ***Making cross-border agreements***

The governments of the Mekong sub-region countries initiated government-to-government cooperation on preventing human trafficking and illegal migration. They signed memoranda of understanding agreements, which were in place at the start of the ILO-IPEC project, as was a collaborative framework that the governments of Thailand, Cambodia, Lao PDR and Myanmar had agreed upon in 2003. Also in place was an MOU agreement between Thailand and Viet Nam on combating human trafficking, which had been signed in 2006. Thus the work of the Thai-Cord and the Mekong-Cord members would support the MOU agreements through activities that civil groups conducted at the local level.

Through the Mekong-Cord, the Thai and Lao PDR counterparts agreed on the following issues:

- Lao children are to be safely repatriated, in accordance with bilateral MOUs, regardless of whether they are trafficking victims or not. They are not to be placed in shelters for a lengthy period of time. The participants agreed that they should develop a pilot project to protect cross-border children to showcase the child-friendly procedures. Mekong-Cord will put this plan into action.
- Migrant workers' rights are to be promoted and protected throughout the migration process, including a safe return home.
- Career development and skills training will be provided to empower vulnerable groups. To match people's interests, needs assessments will be conducted in selected communities from where foreign migrants originate.
- The participants agreed that the Mekong-Cord is a good platform for cooperation. Each country will select a focal point. The major objectives for the Mekong-Cord is to share information, advocate for policies that better protect cross-border children, capacity building of personnel through study visits and exchange programmes and joint projects to improve the protection of children and youth who to seek to cross the border for work.

Through the Mekong-Cord, the Thai and Cambodian counterparts agreed on the following issues:

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- Develop a management system for the Rhong Klau market where a large number of Cambodian child labourers and street children earn a living. The public and civil agencies discussed joining forces and dividing the management work among them, including registering the working children in the market and tracing their families, in collaboration with their employers.
- Jointly develop immediate and long-term protection and prevention systems to withdraw and prevent children from re-entering child labour or other forms of exploitation. This includes educational services, vocational skills training programmes and family-support programmes.
- Distribute information and education materials for child labourers and local entrepreneurs to open people's awareness on child labour and human trafficking as well as inform people about work safety.
- Push for bilateral cooperation between the two countries on income-generating and skills development programmes for disadvantaged families to reduce the incidence of child labour and child begging.
- Reinforce and expand child-friendly measures for responding to the needs of child returnees from Thailand.

### ***Improving the local interventions***

The counterparts from Thailand and Lao PDR then worked together to improve localized interventions, such as recovery and reintegration programmes for victims of trafficking. The interventions were largely products of individual members of the Mekong-Cord. The focal civil society groups both supported the MOU agreements that their governments had made and monitored the overall progress. Member organizations, including the Foundation for Child Development and the Center for the Protection of Children's Rights Foundation, worked together to conduct a series of trainings for the Lao counterparts. The intent was to collaborate on issues beyond victim-focused work and promote the protection of children who cross the borders.



Thai-Cord members also met separately with counterparts from Cambodia and Lao PDR and then together with counterparts from Cambodia and Myanmar (minority groups working in the border area). In their meetings, they discussed concerns related to carrying out the local and cross-border agreements and possible resolutions. Both sides agreed that intensifying punitive measures on procurers and profiteers of young migrants in both countries was more desirable.

Two workshops to develop a joint campaign between Thai and Lao counterparts were arranged (in early 2010) to train youth leaders from both countries to produce short films, music videos and educational and goodwill commercials on social issues, which was part of the awareness raising emphasis. The products of this training were presented at the Mekong-Cord consultation, and the Lao focal organization arranged to have them broadcast on Lao television as well as distributed among youth groups. The Mekong-Cord will replicate a similar process for youth leaders from other countries, including Cambodia, Myanmar (border areas) and Viet Nam. Simultaneously, members of the Mekong Youth Net have been implementing mini projects in several provinces of Cambodia, Lao PDR and Viet Nam. The Mekong-Cord focal points in each country will facilitate the youth groups to meet for dialogues with policy makers at both the provincial and national levels.

For sharing information across agencies and borders, the project initiated a bi-annual newsletter called "Discovering the Stories of Migrant Children" that features tales of migrant children's experiences and updates on various situations involving child migrants. For example, the fourth newsletter introduced the framework and processes for making Thailand's Operational Guidelines on the Protection of Migrant Children as well as reflections from partner agencies that have used the guidelines. There was a report on the adoption of the Mekong-Cord by network partners that highlighted the objectives, the sharing of information, policy advocacy on the protection of cross-border children, capacity building of personnel through study visits and exchange programmes and joint pilot projects to improve the protection of cross-border children. Case studies from China (Yunnan), Myanmar and Viet Nam were included.



The newsletter is available on Thai-Cord members' websites: [www.dordek.org](http://www.dordek.org) and [www.iamchild.org](http://www.iamchild.org).

### ***Mekong-Cord plan of action***

The Thai-Cord organized a consultative meeting among the Mekong-Cord focal organizations to develop a sub-regional plan of action on how to address the migration aspects of child labour that would support the ambitions of the MOUs in the coming years. At the Mekong-Cord consultation

in April 2010, members agreed on three primary strategies. The first strategy centres on continued information sharing. This will include newsletters (in English and local languages) and a website. The Mekong youth groups will produce radio spots and online dramas in their own languages. There will be internship and exchange programmes for staff and youth leaders in similar organizations. To maintain the network dynamics, regular sub-regional meetings will be organized for members to exchange ideas and plan common activities.

The second strategy is advocacy for new policies and programmes on the protection of children in migration, regardless of their legal status, and the mobilizing of local and provincial agencies to apply measures and support programmes to protect children on the move.

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The third strategy of the action plan is the promotion of youth participation in addressing cross-border issues that are related to youth in the Mekong sub-region. Mekong Youth Net leaders will develop pilot projects to generate information on child rights, migration, trafficking and other relevant topics. The national focal points of the Mekong-Cord will facilitate the links between youth leaders to national policy makers. Likewise, the network members will complement the Mekong Youth Forum that the ILO created as a platform for youth to meet with policy makers in the sub-region.

### **ONGOING CHALLENGES:**

- Coordination among focal points in different countries took a while to achieve due to necessary official approval for participation in activities, which remains an issue.
- Making time for collective planning is hampered by regular responsibilities.
- A functional secretariat for the Mekong-Cord is needed to coordinate network members and mobilize resources for core activities.

## OUTCOMES:

- A national seminar took place in January 2009 with 71 participants and again in April 2010 with 75 participants to discuss the situation of migrant children in Thailand. The Handbook for Practitioners for the Protection of Migrant Children in Thailand was distributed.
- The Department of Juvenile Observation (DJO) and Protection, Ministry of Justice, appointed a Working Group on the Review and Development of Protective System and Measures for Children and Youth who are in conflict with the law and do not understand the Thai language. Geographically, the working group is mandated by the DJO to monitor detention homes in Bangkok and its vicinity where children in conflict with law are detained.
- A consultation between members of Thai-Cord and Lao PDR counterparts took place in June 2009 with 29 participants (7 from Lao PDR).
- A consultation between members of Thai-Cord and Cambodia counterparts took place in July 2009 with 51 participants (22 from Cambodia).
- A series of training workshops was conducted for youth leaders in Lao PDR and Thailand to learn how to produce and use creative media to promote social concerns, with a focus on migrant youth.
- A sub-regional consultation with Mekong country counterparts took place in April 2010.
- Five “Discovering the Stories of Migrant Children” newsletters were published and distributed that featured relevant stories and updates on policies, legislation and regulations.

The resource handbook Operational Guidelines on the Protection of Migrant Children in Thailand was distributed to the Bureau of Anti-Trafficking in Women and Children, within Thailand’s Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. International organizations also requested copies for wider use.

Many of the adults involved in the ILO-IPEC project recognized the value of including youth. “In order to prevent cross-border trafficking effectively, we will need to work with people, especially youth groups in the source areas. The Mekong Youth Net has witnessed the roles that youth in the Mekong sub-region can play in combating human trafficking and other worst forms of child labour. These young persons have become very resourceful in their respective areas, particularly in remote areas where there is no agency addressing child rights and child labour,” says Sompop Chantraka, Founder of the DECD and the MYN.

And the youth have talked of what they see as an amazing experience. “My friends and I are so delighted and enthusiastic to learn about creative media. We had so much fun producing a music video to illustrate the brokerage element in unsafe migration. We are planning to use that video to raise awareness at the village level in our province. We will also show short films to the villagers on related topics that our friends produced. These materials will keep them interested and not bored,” says Pae, a youth member of the MYN.



## LESSONS LEARNED:

- Consultations at the local, national and sub-regional levels can encourage heightened involvement from a variety of individuals and agencies.
- Commitments of member organizations in designating capable staff to take part in the developing of tools and in

subsequent workshops in consultation with the network partners proved to be meaningful. This approach helped expand networks of practitioners at all levels.

- Creating a channel of communication, such as through the newsletters, websites and annual reports, was conducive in solidifying a network of practitioners and promoting information sharing.
- Using professional media production teams to provide training for youth groups was fruitful and cost-effective.

Srisak Thaiarry, chairperson of the Thai-Cord, says that despite the good beginning, there is still a lot of work to be done. “The government-to-government collaboration in the Mekong sub-region has been formalized, especially in tackling human trafficking and regularizing migration. There is nevertheless a long way to go before relevant agreements will be realized. A challenge will lie in viable people-to-people cooperation across the borders to enhance and accelerate the government efforts as well as to promote people’s participation in child, youth and labour protection. Members of the Mekong-Cord share this aim and join hands to move this forward together,” she explains.