

“Education for Migrant Children, turning a crisis to opportunity unlocking child labor in Thailand”

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It has been 9 years since Thailand’s national education policy of July 5 2005 allowed migrant children, dependents of migrant workers in Thailand. However, it appears that only a few of them have access to education opportunity. What happens to the rest of them? What changes would occur if there were access to education? How would it solve the problem of child labor? And to what extent?

National’s social protection is one of the important policies of Thailand. The minimum standard is to allow migrant population to have an access to national education.

The challenges and problems encountered migrant children are different from that facing Thai children. Some of the key challenges are prejudice, misunderstanding implementation strategy, lack of human resources and inadequacy of learning resources due to the non-readiness of governmental institutions in local level.

In the case of Samutsakorn, it is still fortunate that the number of migrant children enrolling in national education system is up to 1,932; in this number it is 1214 Burmeses, 49 Laos, 9 Cambodians and stateless children from Northern Thailand including some tribal populations for 633, which leave approximately over 800 – 900 children in informal learning centers, alternative education provided by non-governmental organization. There are also learning centers initiated by Mon and Burmese ethnic groups themselves, with the students expected to be around 200. To be concluded, the number of migrant children who have access to either national education or informal learning centers are estimated to be at least 3,000.

The provincial chief executive who is responsible for the issue of migration in the province has made an effort to specify the actual number of migrant children aged under 15 years old since there is no organization who has really worked on it yet. Thus, there is no accurate number available for policy planning to be developed on. With all this being said, it is necessary for a thorough survey to be conducted and researched from every corners, households and factories.

The challenge lies upon outreaching methodology and entering working places. It requires connection in order to build a sense of trust, and of course, a network of migrant workers or sometimes often being referred to as 'migrant translators'⁵

Migrant translators, varying from Burmese, Mon, Karen, Tawai, Arakan and Tai, are also very important for the means of communication among themselves. Since not everyone is capable of communicating in Burmese, we rely on local – dialect translators to communicate with those we need to get in contact with depending on the local dialect they speak.

Therefore, it is very important for researchers and data collectors to be concerned about this point. Other than that, the level of language efficiency is also to be taken into account. Some Burmese graduates with distinctive academic background might be using different level of spoken languages from workers. Therefore, migrant translators must be able to use 'local languages' in order to thoroughly communicate. This is why it is not easy for outsiders to get into the community and collect accurate data. Not to mention the challenge of being mere strangers trying to build connection and a sense of trust in order to achieve mutual communication yet.

From the survey conducted by the Labor Protection Network, the assumption is that some migrants' accommodation are in the same area as their working places. Thus, the strategy of Mapping Survey and Rapid Survey can be used, but might not be entirely appropriate. It takes an involvement with FGDs and migrant volunteers of that particular community to depict population density, location and approximated number of migrant children in the community. Migrant populations appear to live in small alleys, houses, townhouses, rented apartments which are expected to be more than 100 big communities and 150 sub-communities.

The number gained from interviews combined with national statistics, as often referred to as migrant and migrant dependent registration year 2004, there are 2,800 out of 90,000 migrant children nationwide registered. To include the statistic of pregnancy among migrant women which is up to 3,000 – 4,000 for each year, the accumulated number should be around 27,000 – 36,000 by now.

Taking a close look to migrant way of living, 1to2-year-old newborn migrants tend to be sent back to their country of origin, Myanmar. When the children grow up to be around 4 to 6 years old, migrant parents will take them back to Thailand again. Factors such as readiness and income are taken into account when it comes to this matter.

The number of migrant children on constant move is expected to be half of those remaining in Thailand which is around 13,500 – 18,000, leaving approximately 6,700 – 9,000 remaining migrant children and parents to be reached. This number has been stated in various gatherings of migrant working groups both local and national level. A scholar from Dhurakij Pundit University has come up with the similar number of 12,000 – 15,000 remaining migrant children through his research supported by International Labor Organization in 2013.

In that number, we can divide children under the age of 15 into three groups. The first is those under 4 years old, second is those between 4 – 9 and third in the range of 10 – 15. The second and third are eligible age for school which currently we only have 1/3 of them enrolling in either formal or informal schools. What about the other 4 to 5 thousands of them? This is the challenge of Samusakorn to outreach this missing number of children in order to respond to the national education policy.

The policy from the previous provincial governor of Samutakorn, Chunlapat Saengchundr, who had retired in September 2013. The governor implemented a policy in response to the situation of migrant children and human trafficking after the United States has reported the use of child labor in shrimp-processing factories and directly pointed out to Samutsakorn.

The governor emphasized that “every migrant children at proper ages must be able to access education in order to protect themselves from child labor exploitation. If we do not seriously implement such policy, it will affect the seafood-processing export in national level.”

The government itself has a policy relating to the protection of child labor and human trafficking. It takes an actual implementation of all parties involved to really solve the problem. Business owners understand direct effect after the boycott of shrimp products from the US. It takes every party's involvement to boost up their confidence in our exporting products. The same old solutions must be

changed into active strategy and work as partners in order to solve and create mutual accountability of all stakeholders.

The roles of NGOs such as the Labour Protection Network (LPN) are very crucial in serving as focal point between working groups and migrant populations in order to provide protection and receive reporting cases of any forms of exploitations during their stays in Thailand. LPN has initiated Labour Center in order to provide legal assistances for those seeking for help. LPN has team of specialists who are trained to provide assistance and coordinate with governmental officers who work on law enforcement. The center is also supported by Thai Frozen Food Association (TFFA).

For the strategy, LPN emphasizes on protection and outreaching the target groups of vulnerable migrant children who have difficulty accessing education in order to enable children aged of schooling to enter schools with any means necessary.

Education as a response to combat child labor is thus a key concept allowing actual implementation from local to national government units together with business and NGO partners to drive towards solving the common problem.

The above concept is thus the reason why it is important to provide education for the remaining 4 to 5 thousand migrant children by 2014. If 2,000 of them access national education, it will create positive impact upon migrant-related policy particularly in Samutsakorn which will eventually lead to 'Good Practice' in provincial level and the image in national level in the long run.

It has been three years since the government has come to work together with other stakeholders to combat this common problem facing us all. Since the Ministry of Labour of the United States has reported 2012 Findings on the Worst Forms of Child Labor which is published to include all the policies developed to combat the use of child labor in 144 countries, the United States has ranked Thailand as one of the ten countries with 'significant advancement' in order to eliminate worst forms of child labor which is the best improvement of assessment. Thailand has made a progress from 'moderate advancement' in last year; whether this mean that we really commit ourselves in solving the problem according to the United States' report is still in question.

The situation of child labor and human trafficking in Thailand caught an attention from the international community from South East Asia to Europe region. I frequently received question from international presses or researchers whether Thailand still relies on child labor exploitation or whether human trafficking still exist? Then they would ask to interview some of those people in actual working place. How do you think I should answer such questions and requests?

Some of my answers are:

1) It is not difficult to find legalized child labor since a group of eligible workers aged between 15 – 18 can still be founded. Most of them have legal documents, passport and work permits.

2) Children aged under 15 years old mostly work in places called “Long”. We can only make an initial assumption that there are still some of them, but we cannot be so certain where they are. However, their working conditions seem to be changing. There is no use of intensive work force found in “Long” as previously seen in the past 6-7 years. After the campaign to work with business owners with seminar after seminar talking about negative impact it may cause to the nation’s economy, most of them have better understanding and agree to use only labors aged above 18 years old. With the MOU made with Myanmar government, the use of legal child labor is assured to some certain levels since only 18-year old and above migrants are eligible to apply for passport through direct agency even though we are aware that we cannot really tell actual ages of those child workers.

3) I cannot entirely say that there is no use of illegal child labors in Samutsakorn anymore and I believe most of us are still aware of it but it is surely getting less. We cannot tell where they hide themselves either.

4) What I want to say is the situation has changed tremendously from the past. There are some positive signs showing that we are on the right path. The network of business owners such as Thai Fishery Producers Coalition (TFPC), Thai Frozen Food Association are working together with the government to come up with solution towards solving this problem with NGOs. Many of the problems have been discussed. The question is how do we sustain the problem-solving and the effectiveness of solution being used.

The Ministry of Labor together with the Department of Labor Protection and Welfare and the International Labor Organization has organized “Good Labour Practices : GLP) for fishery and seafood – processing industries” to be guideline for solution against the practice of illegal work force in order to encourage business owners to have good practices in accordance with international standard.

The representative of Ministry of Labor stated that government and public stakeholders still need to corroborate in order to prevent and eliminate the use of child labor including the use of work exploitation and human trafficking. The practices need to be complied to national policy and international standard in order to be accepted by the international community and improve the image of Thailand which will, in turn, affect exporting economy especially fishery industry which has long been condemned for the use of child labor, work force and human trafficking.

Therefore, accessible education, integration with Thai children, protection of child labor in all levels, Good Labor Practices : GLP for fishery and seafood – processing industries, legal assistance, Labor Center and networking with all stakeholders involved altogether can serve as solutions and indicators to solve the use of child labors.

Samutsakorn Model 2014 must be executed, at the same time when the latest provincial governor, Police Lieutenant Atit Boonyasophat will be serving his term as an important policy maker representing the province.

Who knows? Next year, Samutsakorn and Thailand might make it to the top five of the world who combatted the use of child labor effectively.