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Insights from: 10 YEAR RETROSPECTIVE: ADDRESSING FORCED LABOR & HUMAN TRAFFICKING IN THE THAI SEAFOOD AND FISHING INDUSTRIES

In 2025, Humanity United and the Freedom Fund commissioned a study by PolicySolve to understand how, why, and under what conditions change happened over a ten-year period related to forced labor and human trafficking in the Thai seafood industry. Using a rigorous, causal-mapping methodology and engaging over 60 stakeholders and 130 reports, a story emerged about what enabled (and sometimes disabled) changes in Thailand and globally to protect workers on vessels and in processing. This paper contains key findings. The full report is available at:

www.pollicysolve.com/resources/retrospective

The conditions needed to support durable systemic change

This decade-long systems change story is quite unique yet contains insights that can help us to understand how change does and does not happen in other systems as well. After accounting for over 350 distinct moments as change happened, ranging from government actions to on the ground impact to the work of global and Thai-based businesses, the analysis found seven conditions to be consistent throughout the decade, conditions which largely enabled change and sometimes prevented changes going further:

Condition for Change 1: A common understanding of the systemic nature of the problem emerged and was reinforced through media and international government actions. This included the definition of the problem and the drivers of it, such as the complexity and opaqueness of the supply chain that enables the problem and the lack of legal frameworks to require business models to change.

Condition for Change 2: Stakeholders generally agreed on a shared solution set, though their motivations to act on them varied, as did their beliefs about the viability of different solutions and even their ideas of how to implement the solutions. They included the need for legal and regulatory overhaul and enforcement, strengthening monitoring and surveillance mechanisms, ethical recruitment practices, and worker voice.



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Many systemic problems can reach consensus on the harms being caused, often through data that makes them visible. To have a shared understanding of the drivers of the problem and a core set of solutions is far more unusual. Despite the many differences across stakeholders, this common understanding created a foundation that allowed dialogues (and ultimately cross-sector collaborations) to be common and move relatively rapidly into testing solutions. One of the reasons the common definitions emerged was a global storm of media coverage, with media stories explicitly describing the problem as the result of the global supply chain. Instead of what could easily have been a “bad actor” story, the New York Times, The Guardian, and the Associated Press all told a systemic-change story from a fisherman in forced labor on a vessel in Thai or international waters all the way to the Western consumer purchasing low-priced seafood, with processing facilities in the middle made visible as well.

Condition for Change 3: The many sectors and stakeholders held self-interested, distinct, and relatively stable motivations to act on the problem. The only exception was the changes in the motivations of the Thai government, which shifted over time as political leadership changed.

Condition for Change 4: INGOs and Thai CSOs had the capacity to support and demand change. Their contributions can be seen from the beginning of the 10 years, in how they helped to build visibility and respond to workers in need, all the way to the end as they protected the gains. Their capacity grew and changed over time, but was present throughout.

Condition for Change 5: Cross-sector collaboration was the norm. The collaborations between Thai businesses, INGOs, Thai CSOs, government agencies, international retailers, and philanthropy often aimed to drive systemic changes, enhancing traceability, improving labor practices, and ensuring accountability across the industry. While not without their challenges, such collaborations were frequent and persistent throughout the period.

Condition for Change 6: Market dynamics underlie both the problem and the solutions. Market dynamics were both a barrier to change (e.g., the global demand for cheap seafood, the drive for competitive pricing) and an enabler for change (e.g., the self-regulation in response to reputational and legal risks). Ultimately, the global businesses made many changes, as did their Thai counterparts, but they also continued to push the costs of changes onto the suppliers, increasing the local production costs, while simultaneously sourcing their seafood based on the cheapest price.

Condition for Change 7: Key historical, cultural, and political dynamics in Thailand remained constant, including xenophobia and anti-migrant sentiment, legal barriers to worker collective action, government corruption from national to local levels, and government instability. The combination of these factors affected the progress and direction of change along the way. They are also part of why the legal frameworks have not been fully implemented and are at risk of rollbacks in Thailand.

Market dynamics play a complicated role in this story. They are the most significant driver of forced labor and human trafficking in the supply chain (and the xenophobia and anti-migrant sentiment in Thailand further makes this possible). Market dynamics were also an early lever, used by international governments to place pressure on businesses and the Thai government. Market self-regulation by global corporations and Thai businesses was a necessary, but insufficient part of the process of change, often stepping out ahead of explicit regulations in order to prevent government action. And even as there are risks of backsliding by government leaders, private sector businesses are one of the ways the systemic changes remain durable, with the market risks and costs of returning to previous practices not desirable enough to offset the benefits.

Many systems have some level of these conditions present. For this system, the combination of these fundamental conditions and the processes by which change happened led to significant, durable changes that have improved outcomes for workers on vessels and in factories. While the problem of forced labor and human trafficking in the seafood industry in Thailand has not been solved, the progress is undeniable and powerful. Systemic change can be nurtured to improve equity and transform the actions of many different actors, from those historically without power to those holding the greatest power over how change happens.