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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

Thai Civil Society Organizations and International NGOs: Essential Architects of Change

The transformation of Thailand's seafood and fishing industries over the past decade cannot be understood without recognizing the central role of Thai civil society organizations (Thai CSOs) and international non-governmental organizations (INGOs). From the beginning, these local and global civil society organizations served as eyes on the ground, supporting migrant workers, documenting abuses, and developing legal strategies that laid the foundation for systemic change. By 2024, they had evolved from fragmented service providers into a cohesive network of strategic actors capable of sustaining pressure across political transitions, supporting workers as they negotiated directly with vessel owners and factory management, partnering with the private sector, and maintaining accountability even as external attention waned.

For funders seeking to support sustainable change in global supply chains, this brief offers critical lessons on the role of civil society organizations as essential agents of reform and explains why protecting their capacity remains necessary to prevent backsliding.



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From Service Providers to Strategic Drivers

Before 2014, Thailand had an underdeveloped legal framework related to labor in fisheries and seafood processing. There was also a lack of global and market pressure for change. **Thai CSOs and INGOs operated within existing spaces, primarily as watchdogs, evidence generators, and direct service providers (legal support, organizing, and services for workers experiencing harm).**

This context shifted dramatically beginning in 2014, when a media storm combined with increasing international pressure and a military government in Thailand willing to act. Thai CSOs and INGOs experienced an infusion of new resources and visibility, along with a new legal framework and inspection regime, a growing commitment to act in the

global and local private sectors, and invitations to participate in these change processes. **These changes enabled Thai CSOs and INGOs operating in Thailand to shift toward influencing complex, dynamic systems and to assume new roles.** The field of organizations went from isolated actors to collaborative strategists.

The 2016 formation of the Civil Society Organisation Coalition for Ethical and Sustainable Seafood (The Coalition) enabled coordinated advocacy that individual organizations could not achieve alone. Thai CSOs were also invited to the table as indispensable partners in government policy development and private sector reform initiatives. Their local knowledge and community relationships made them essential to international retailers, government agencies, and INGOs seeking authentic engagement with affected workers.

INGOs also brought critical capabilities, including investigative and research capacity, international advocacy platforms, legal capacity, and technical expertise. Many also worked on the ground in Thailand, with local offices and relationships with Thai CSOs and the Thai government.

Critical Moments Dependent on Civil Society Action

Thai CSOs and INGOs played critical roles in many different discrete moments of change in the fishing and seafood system, such as:

When the Guardian, Associated Press, and New York Times published exposés in 2013 and 2014 that catalyzed international attention, **they relied on evidence and access provided by Thai CSOs and INGOs** who had been tracking abuses for years. Without this foundation, the media storm that prompted government and private-sector action would not have occurred.

The **Kantang trafficking case exemplifies the impact of civil society through legal strategies.** They supported workers through years of proceedings, culminating in the precedent-setting 2019 Supreme Court convictions of a former president of the Trang Fisheries Association and five others. This demonstrated that accountability was possible, maintaining pressure on enforcement and compliance even as international attention shifted.

Cross-sector initiatives also depended on civil society participation. The Seafood Task Force, formed in 2014, brought together global retailers, Thai suppliers, and civil society in unprecedented partnership. CSOs and INGOs served as essential partners in developing vessel codes of conduct, traceability systems, worker grievance mechanisms, and audit frameworks. **Civil society's participation ensured that private-sector initiatives reflected workers' realities rather than producing compliance paperwork disconnected from actual conditions.**

Sustaining Progress During Backsliding

As external pressure declined from 2019 to 2024, civil society organizations proved essential to preventing the complete erosion of gains through three complementary strategies.

First, their legal strategies maintained accountability when political will weakened. They continued to pursue prosecutions of employers and brokers, achieving convictions that demonstrated that the legal framework remained operational even when government enforcement became inconsistent. They provided legal support to workers seeking remedies, ensuring formal protections translated into actual recourse.

Second, worker organizing built power independent of government or corporate goodwill. Despite legal restrictions on traditional unions, CSOs developed alternative models that enabled collective action. The 2023-2024 period demonstrates this capacity at scale: CSOs negotiated binding agreements with 52 vessel owners affecting 1,200 fishers and achieved collective bargaining in 12 seafood processing factories. These agreements provided direct worker voice in workplace conditions, creating accountability mechanisms that functioned when external monitoring proved inadequate.

Third, joint advocacy maintained pressure on government rollbacks. When the democratic government proposed 2024 legislative revisions that would weaken monitoring requirements and IUU penalties, civil society mobilized a coordinated opposition.

Why Civil Society Capacity Must Be Protected

The evidence demonstrates that systemic reforms, including both government regulations and private sector actions, remain fragile without civil society monitoring and enforcement. Civil society organizations served as essential watchdogs in Thailand and globally, maintaining accountability amid political transitions and shifting market conditions. Their presence and capacity to participate substantively in cross-sector strategies were necessary at every stage. Unlike government agencies subject to political pressures or private-sector actors responding to market incentives, civil society organizations maintained a focus on worker outcomes regardless of external attention. Their connection to affected workers, legal expertise, and collaborative capacity enabled them to sustain pressure when other actors proved unable or unwilling to act.