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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

Philanthropy's role in catalyzing systemic change

International philanthropic organizations played a pivotal role in driving change within Thailand's seafood and fishing industry during the study period, from 2014-2024. Their influence has spanned investigative journalism, strengthening civil society, government advocacy, and private-sector engagement, often **serving as crucial catalysts for change in a complex system** marked by deep-seated labor exploitation and environmental degradation. They deployed a mix of longer-term investments with trusted partners globally and in Thailand, and short-term, targeted investments tied to critical systems-change moments. In other words, **philanthropy's influence on how change occurred was not primarily due to increased funding for the issue, but rather to the strategic and systems-focused deployment of that funding.**



Philanthropic priorities for funding: Local capacity and action

The visibility of the issues in Thailand in the years leading up to the 2014 media storm coincided with a **broader trend in philanthropy to prioritize work on “modern slavery,” forced labor, and human trafficking**. International non-governmental organizations (INGOs) were aware of this interest and were already building their capacity to address these issues, including environmental INGOs that recognized the intersection of human rights and sustainability.

When international philanthropy began to target work in Thailand specifically, they brought in their mental **models about how change should happen** (deeply held beliefs, assumptions, and ways of seeing the world that influence how people perceive problems and what they believe is possible for change). These included supporting local actors in taking ownership of solving the problem. This on-the-ground support (particularly from the Humanity United and Freedom Fund Hotspot) included a mix of freedom to move the work forward in ways Thai civil society organizations

(Thai CSOs) already knew how to do (legal advocacy, support to workers, and the rescue work that many CSOs took on) and expectations about what it would mean to do the work in additional influential ways. Increased collaboration between Thai CSOs and INGOs was prioritized by international funders and local leaders, leading to structures such as the CSO Coalition and to resources and guidance for Thai CSOs to expand beyond project implementation, worker engagement, and worker services to more robust research, increased advocacy with the government, and participation in larger cross-sector dialogues.

Philanthropic priorities for funding: Worker power.

In the years preceding the COVID-19 pandemic, a new philanthropic mental model emerged, marked by increased interest in worker-driven organizing as a pathway to durable systemic change. Western models of organizing were being introduced from global organizations at the same time as the philanthropic funders prioritized strengthening existing Thai organizing practices, in which CSOs partnered with workers to advance change. Thai CSO and INGO stakeholders discussed how pressure to adopt Western models, while their funders prioritized investments in worker voice, was at times disruptive to organizing that had long been present in Thailand in other ways. Western models also bumped up against Thailand's legal constraints on migrant-led organizing and collective bargaining. There is evidence that expectations imposed by international philanthropy have also led to conflicting priorities within organizations, particularly among those seeking to be led by, or responsive to, the needs of migrant workers.

Philanthropic priorities for funding: Market action

Multiple philanthropic organizations adopted a mental model in which market-based solutions were a critical part of addressing a global supply chain problem, while also recognizing that accountability from outside the private sector is necessary, including enabling workers to monitor their own conditions. With this in mind, philanthropic funds flowed to self-regulation efforts such as the Seafood Task Force, supporting projects to strengthen the Task Force itself and interventions in the global supply system (e.g., a vessel monitoring system and supply chain mapping). Philanthropic dollars also supported specific solution sets, including ethical recruitment, supply chain transparency, due diligence, and worker grievance mechanisms.

Philanthropic priorities for funding: Catalyzing systems changes

Philanthropic funds also supported targeted analyses and reports designed to pressure specific points in the system. Two of these pressure points were called out as critically important. The first was the early funding of investigative journalism and the concurrent funding of the EJF report, "Thailand's Seafood Slaves." The second was the funding of the Praxis Labs report in 2019, which combined worker data with an intense focus on private-sector reforms, including, but not limited to, the Seafood Task Force. Multiple interviewees identified this report as a critical moment of pressure that led to reforms in the system, particularly for the STF and its members.

Philanthropic role in the system: Systems Convenor

Key philanthropic actors also played active roles as stakeholders in the system, including Humanity United and the Freedom Fund, whose strategy included functioning as "systems convenors" who worked with and supported stakeholders across the system. A systems convenor is a crucial leader who facilitates collaboration and learning among diverse individuals, organizations, and sectors to address complex problems. Study participants described staff from these organizations as engaging in ways that built credibility and legitimacy, with their approach to systems-change work and stakeholder engagement across the system regularly cited by participants as a driver of change. At the heart of this approach is the trust that they built within Thailand and with global stakeholders – trust not just with grantees, but rather **operating in trusting relationships with actors throughout the systems.**

This combination of funding (1) to the private sector to directly influence reforms; (2) to INGOs and others to put pressure on the system at key points in time; (3) to CSOs to have increased collaboration, greater government and private sector advocacy and partnership roles, and more established models of worker organizing; and (4) utilizing a systems convenor approach all influenced how change happened in Thailand and the global supply chain. The support demonstrably contributed to improvements and changes over time, directing change efforts at multiple key points.