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Research report

Forum: The Third General Assembly

Issue: Discussing child labour in supply chains in
Southeast Asia

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Introduction

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When engaged in child labour, children are more likely to be involved in the production of goods and services for the domestic economy. Child labour in Southeast Asia represents a significant complex challenge. This issue affects various sectors, including agriculture, manufacturing, and services, where children often work under hazardous conditions that compromise their health and development.

Despite efforts to address the problem, child labour persists due to factors such as poverty, limited access to quality education, and entrenched cultural norms. Children in Southeast Asia face extreme health and development risks, and their involvement in labour impedes their future opportunities, perpetuating cycles of poverty and consequently cycles of child labour.

This research report aims to dive into both the historical and political context of this issue while discussing various perspectives on the issue to the best of its ability. Delegates may use this information to gain a general understanding of the issue, as a starting point for their own research. Delegates are encouraged to contribute to more effective strategies and interventions for this complex issue.

Definitions of key terms

Child labour
The employment of children in an industry or business, especially when illegal or considered exploitative.

Supply chains
The entire system of producing and delivering a product or service, from the very beginning stage of sourcing the raw materials to the final delivery of the product or service to end-users.

Southeast Asia
A southeastern region of Asia, consisting of Brunei, Cambodia, East Timor, Indonesia, Laos, Malaysia, Myanmar, Philippines, Singapore, Thailand and Vietnam.

Urban
In, relating to, or characteristic of a town or city.

Rural
In, relating to, or characteristic of the countryside rather than the town.

General overview

According to the 2019 Alliance 8.7 report on "Ending child labour, forced labour and human trafficking in global supply chains", the presence of child labour in supply chains is estimated at 26% in Southeastern Asia.

Child labour in supply chains in Southeast Asia involves multiple sectors including, but not limited to, agriculture, services, manufacturing, and mining. The majority of child labourers work in the agricultural sector. According to the International Labour Organization, nearly 60% of child labourers worldwide – approximately 98 million children – are employed in this sector. Many of these children work on family farms, cultivating crops. Child labour is also prevalent in the informal sector, encompassing domestic work and tourism-related services. In countries such as Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Indonesia, children are often employed in factories, particularly in the production of textiles, garments, footwear, and electronics.

Hazardous child labour is the most prevalent form of child labour worldwide. Children involved in this type of work face significant health risks due to exposure to chemicals, heavy machinery, and long working hours. Their developing minds and bodies make them especially vulnerable to workplace hazards, leading to more severe consequences. These children are at higher risk of injuries, or even death from working hazards. Additionally, the psychological damage they endure may not develop or show up until adulthood. The children's physical, cognitive and behavioural development should be taken into consideration when addressing the issue.

Not only does child labour cause physical and developmental harm, it also keeps millions of children out of school. In Southeast Asia, 37.2% of children in child labour aged 5 to 14 years do not attend school. This limits future opportunities and perpetuates cycles of poverty. Even child labourers who do get to attend school (part-time) often struggle to balance their education with their work. They are more likely to get behind and drop out before graduating, consequently limiting their future opportunities.

Examining the root causes of child labour in supply chains reveals that children living in poverty are particularly vulnerable to this issue. Child labour often occurs when families face financial struggles, whether due to poverty or sudden illness, causing them to rely on their children's labour for a household income.

Another significant root cause is the lack of access to education. While in most countries in Southeast Asia, education is accessible in urban areas or cities, rural areas and provinces lag behind. For instance, in Cambodia, many children from rural areas must travel long distances to reach the nearest school, discouraging attendance and increasing the likelihood of them entering the workforce instead. According to UNICEF, only 81.9% of children in Laos complete their primary education. Those who do complete their education often leave with insufficient knowledge and skills due to a lack of resources and untrained teachers. This further pushes

children into the workforce. For families living in poverty, the opportunity cost of sending a child to school instead of work can be prohibitive. In countries such as Indonesia, children often work in agriculture or factories to supplement household income, as the immediate financial benefit outweighs the long-term advantages of education. However, the lack of education perpetuates the cycle of poverty and child labour, as it limits future employment opportunities. Moreover, children who endure child labour are more likely to have their own children enter the workforce, perpetuating the issue across generations.

Cultural factors in Southeast Asia significantly influence child labour rates, shaping how child labour is perceived and addressed. Predominantly in rural areas, children are often expected to work on family farms to support their household income, which is viewed as a part of their upbringing and preparation for future responsibilities. Gender roles greatly affect the types of labour children engage in, with boys often performing physically demanding jobs while girls are more likely to work in domestic settings or textile industries. This practice is culturally accepted and seen as necessary for family survival.

Rural-urban migration and urbanization also contribute to child labour. For example, In Vietnam, many families migrate from rural areas to urban areas seeking better opportunities, resulting in children working in informal sectors such as street vending. According to the Vietnam National child Labour Survey 7% of children aged 5-17 are engaged in economic activities, with a substantial number working in urban informal sectors.

To conclude, child labour in supply chains in Southeast Asia is a complex issue influenced by economic, educational, and cultural factors. Predominantly affecting the agricultural sector, child labour is also prevalent in services, manufacturing, and mining. Children engaged in child labour face significant health and developmental risks, not to mention the effect it has on their education. Addressing the root causes of child labour in supply chains is crucial for breaking the cycle of child labour and ensuring better futures for these children.

Major parties involved

Indonesia

As previously mentioned, approximately 1.5 million children in Indonesia are engaged in child labour, according to the ILO. Many families in Indonesia face financial difficulties, driving children to work in agriculture, manufacturing, and informal sectors to supplement household income.

Cambodia

In Cambodia approximately 45% of children aged 5-17 years old are engaged in economic activity, many of them engaged in hazardous work. These children are often driven into labour because of limited access to education and economic instability.

Myanmar

Myanmar's ongoing conflicts and economic instability exacerbate poverty, making it necessary for children to contribute to a household income. Over one million children are engaged in child labour in Myanmar due to poverty as a result of these crises.

Vietnam

Financial troubles and limited access to education in rural areas form the main cause of the high rates of child labour in Vietnam. Many children are found working in garment factories or agriculture settings to contribute to a family income. A sizeable number of children work in urban informal sectors.

Bangladesh

Though Bangladesh is not geographically a part of Southeast Asia, it plays a vital role in discussions on child labour in supply chains, due to its cultural and economic ties to Southeast Asia. The garment and textile industries often have interconnected supply chains spanning Bangladesh, Vietnam, and Indonesia, with Bangladesh being a key player in the global garment industry. This creates an opportunity for collaborative efforts to solve the issue of child labour, benefiting from the similar challenges faced by Bangladesh and Southeast Asian countries.

ASEAN

The ASEAN, Association of Southeast Asian Nations, is an intergovernmental organization of ten Southeast Asian countries, aiming to improve economic, cultural, and political collaboration.

Timeline of Key Events

1973   The Minimum Age Convention is created by the International Labour Organization, setting the minimum age for employment, but with a few exceptions.

1989   The UN creates the Convention on the Rights of the Child, aiming to protect children's rights.

1992   The International Program on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) is founded.

1999   The Worst Forms of Child Labour Convention is adopted by the International Labour Organization, which requires ending the worst forms of child labour.

2002   The International Labor Organization founded the World Day against Child Labour on the 12th of June.

2006   The International Labor Organization launches the International
     Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) projects in
   Southeast Asia, focusing on reducing child labour in supply chains,
especially in agriculture and manufacturing.

2008   Vietnam ratifies the Minimum Age Convention.

2013   The collapse of the Rana Plaza building in Bangladesh, which contained
    multiple garment factories, shines light on the global use of child labour
  and working conditions in supply chains.

2018   The ASEAN Declaration on the Protection of children from All Forms of
    Online Exploitation and Abuse is adopted, emphasizing on child labour in
  digital and informal sector.

Previous attempts to solve the issue.

Though child labour rates are still relatively high in Southeast Asian countries, there have been previous attempts to solve the issue of child labour in supply chains in this region.
As previously mentioned in the timeline of events, the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Programme on the Elimination of Child Labour (IPEC) have developed several conventions and projects to combat child labour. Moreover, there have been various national action plans, such as the Philippine Program Against Child Labour (PPACL) adopted by the Philippines.
The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) too has initiated declarations and conventions against child labour.
Aside from (inter)national attempts, there have also been corporate initiatives by companies to combat child labour in supply chains, specifically in their supply chains. Multinational companies, such as H&M, have implemented ethical sourcing policies and transparency measures. The Fair Labor Association (FLA) collaborates with companies, schools and organizations to improve working conditions.
There have been many more initiatives both on an international, national, and regional level to combat child labour in supply chains globally and in Southeast Asia. However, to eliminate child labour indefinitely, more attempts are needed.

Possible solutions

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Blockchain technology

In 2009, Satoshi Nakamoto, known as the man who invented Bitcoin, developed blockchain technology. The blockchain technology is a digital logbook that acts as an attempt to end child labour, amongst other issues, as it enables a more transparent supply chain. Supply chain partners can share trusted data, such as the age of employees, through blockchain. By using digital IDs and gaining access to the operations of other supply chain partners, workers can ensure that only people who are legally allowed to work are employed. However, the implementation of blockchain technology is a long, complicated process. Companies often struggle to find the right expertise, as blockchain technology is quite expensive. Besides, the blockchain applications that we currently have, are adjusted to incompatible platforms and private networks, which makes it difficult to implement this technology into existing supply chains. Furthermore, this technology comes with data security risks. In order to be able to benefit from this technology in the future, we need to face these challenges first.

Enhanced legal frameworks and Enforcement.

Strengthening laws against child labour and increasing punishments for violations of these laws can prevent the exploitation of child labour by companies.

Educational initiatives

Expanding access to quality education, especially in rural areas, through teacher training programs, economic support programs and infrastructure development, in order to reduce dependency on child labour. Additionally, vocational training programs for teenagers can offer alternative career paths, once again reducing dependency on child labour. Moreover, by developing e-learning platforms to provide education for children, countries can allow for better access to education in rural areas.

Further reading

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Mapping Child Labour Risks in Global Supply Chains | UNICEF
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