



EIAS-UEA SPECIAL  
BRIEFING SERIES

JULY 2024

# PROTECTING THE INVISIBLE WORKFORCE: THE EU'S SUPPORT IN SAFEGUARDING MIGRANT WORKERS IN SOUTHEAST ASIA

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## **Protecting the Invisible Workforce: The EU's Support in Safeguarding Migrant Workers in Southeast Asia**

*Following the European Union's pledge of financial support for the UN's 'PROTECT' Project, how can the EU deepen its strategic alliance in the Indo-Pacific through initiatives addressing labour migration, human rights, and sustainable economic development? How can these non-security efforts complement its strategic partnerships in the region?*

ASEAN is home to 10.6 million migrants, with the vast majority being intra-ASEAN migrants. Among these, 1.3 million are children, and approximately 50% are women. Labour exploitation, human trafficking, assault, and harassment are just a few of the many problems that migrants confront, particularly those working for low wages. At risk are women migrant workers, who frequently find themselves employed in low-wage and short-term employment in the informal economy with limited access to social services. Due to a lack of resources, migrant workers' children are particularly vulnerable to abuse, exploitation, and trafficking. Comprehensive preventive measures are now needed for migrant communities in Southeast Asia, as these hazards have been worsened post-Covid-19.

On 25 March 2024, the European Union (EU) announced its pledge to invest 13 million EUR into 'PROTECT, Protection of the Rights of Women and Children in Labour Migration'. The United Nations endowed this three-year interagency project with the goal of protecting the rights of migrant workers, with a focus on women and children in Cambodia, Indonesia, Malaysia, and Thailand. Under the

'PROTECT' project, four United Nations agencies — the United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund (UNICEF), United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC), UN Women and the International Labour Organisation (ILO) — work in collaboration with government officials of the aforementioned countries to scale up the rights of these two main stakeholders; women and children. This initiative aims to protect and promote the rights of millions of people. The EU's financial backing of this project is the latest in a long line of efforts advocating for migrant rights in Southeast Asia.

The 'PROTECT' project has been aided by the 2023 ASEAN-EU Dialogue on Safe and Fair Labour Migration, and particularly the launch of its video campaign to raise awareness for prospective migrant workers on how to defend themselves against exploitation when migrating. These videos, produced in eight different languages including Khmer, Bahasa, and Thai, emphasised the gravity of procuring legal documents like passports and employment contracts, and details the eight signs of labour exploitation outlined by the EU and the ILO. 'PROTECT' aims to secure its overarching objectives by adopting a similar 'holistic, multi-stakeholder' strategy that the 'Safe and Fair' Programme previously implemented. The project also seeks to strengthen the national legislation and policy frameworks that protect migrant women and children, partnering with stakeholders in both the private sector and regional and national governments to do so. Furthermore, in order to properly implement these laws and policies, the project intends to improve the efficiency of prevention efforts against exploitation and the quality of services and assistance provided to

victims of trafficking. The 'PROTECT' project envisions building upon one of the successful objectives of the 'Safe and Fair' Programme, notably increasing access to information about safe migration practices and the services available in destination countries to protect migrant women and children from abuse. This will likely be achieved via the project's collaboration with child rights and anti-trafficking advocates, as well as the links established by the 'Safe and Fair' Programme with community-based organisations.

### **Recent EU-backed initiatives to protect ASEAN migrant rights**

As part of the 'EU-UN Spotlight Initiative to Eliminate Violence Against Women and Girls', the 'Safe and Fair' Programme was launched in 2018. This venture, to which the EU contributed 25 million EUR (totalling 98% of the overall budget), aimed to make labour migration safer for female workers in the ASEAN region. A five-year project that was concluded at the end of 2022, this programme saw a number of achievements such as the training of hundreds of ASEAN service providers on gender-based violence and labour rights; the provision of technical support to national authorities to develop gender-sensitive national plans and the implementation of numerous initiatives to support the establishment of Migrant Worker Resource Centres across eight ASEAN countries. Additionally, in a speech marking the launch of the 'PROTECT' project, the United Nations Resident Coordinator highlighted the 'Safe and Fair' Programme specifically as the foundation upon which the 'PROTECT' project will build.

The EU also made considerable financial contributions to the UNICEF

programme 'Protecting Children Affected by Migration in Southeast, South and Central Asia', totalling over 10.9 million EUR by the programme's completion in 2022. Covering eight countries across Asia, including Malaysia and Thailand, the programme offers support to a wider range of stakeholders. Its achievements include the promotion of alternatives to detention for children, the engagement of regional and national decision-makers across health and education sectors, and the elevation of the intersection of migration issues and child protection systems. Notably, in the 2023 final evaluation of the programme, UNICEF acknowledged the importance of seeking out the EU's financial support for future projects concerning the protection of children.

Migrant workers cannot be simplified into a single bracket of rights protection; rather, it encompasses a range of distinct issues. For instance, human trafficking is part of a broader phenomenon of violence against women and children. The Bandar Seri Begawan Plan of Action outlined the ASEAN-EU cooperation for 2013-2017, introducing several novel aspects on anti-trafficking compared to its predecessor. It increased counter-trafficking efforts through the ASEAN-EU Comprehensive Border Management Programme, EU awareness-raising initiatives, and the dissemination of best practices and EU support to ASEAN institutions and governments in policies and programs that benefit women, children, and at-risk groups. The European Union has been cooperating with ASEAN member states and funding counter-human trafficking efforts in Southeast Asia for over fifteen years.

Apart from these, the EU has also taken steps for Southeast Asian countries to adhere to high human

rights standards. For instance, from 12 August 2020, the EU partially suspended Cambodia's trade privileges under the Everything But Arms (EBA) scheme due to human rights concerns. This suspension was based on Cambodia's failure to comply with the principles of ILO conventions on core human and labour rights. The European Union's involvement in assisting ASEAN countries at-risk migrants in Southeast Asia should therefore not be viewed as an isolated endeavour. Rather, it is part of a broader strategic movement that aligns with the EU's integral principles in the Indo-Pacific region.

### **How do EU migrant protection pursuits fit with its Indo-Pacific Strategy?**

The financial backing of the 'PROTECT' Project holds significant implications for the EU's wider Indo-Pacific strategy, as it allows the opportunity to forge stronger connections with emerging Indo-Pacific economies. Thailand, in particular, is an excellent example of this. In 2019, the EU's Foreign Affairs Council recommended Brussels to pursue a closer relationship with Thailand on both its economic relations and on the issue of engaging with and promoting human rights. To this end, following the reopening of negotiations in 2019, the EU and Thailand formally signed a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement in 2022. It should be noted that within this agreement, under article 25, both parties affirmed the gravity of this fight against human trafficking – a cause relevant to the 'PROTECT' project. The EU and Thailand have also been in negotiations since 2019 to secure a free trade agreement (FTA), an agreement likely to strengthen trade

ties between the two parties. This would be especially beneficial to the EU, given that as of 2021 the EU is Thailand's fourth largest trading partner, and its third largest importer – with the total of 2021 imports from the EU to Thailand amounting to 13.3 billion EUR. With this in mind, it is imperative to note that during the launch of the 'PROTECT' project in March 2024, the then-UN Resident Coordinator in Thailand Gita Sabharwal was in attendance and specifically highlighted the "deepening partnership" between the EU and the Thai government.

### **What to expect in the future?**

The European Union has two potential approaches to increase its support in migrant protection. The first one consists of ASEAN-focused strategies, leveraging platforms such as the ASEAN Forum on Migrant Labour (AFML). This engagement utilises regional collaboration to collectively tackle concerns related to migrant workers. On the other hand, the EU could opt to participate in one-on-one cooperations with specific countries in Southeast Asia. Engaging with national endeavours such as the Philippines' Department of Migrant Workers (DMW), which provides assistance to Overseas Filipino Workers (OFWs) and their families, could provide a customised strategy to tackle unique local requirements. While both approaches offer engagement platforms, aligning with the EU's commitment to ASEAN as the centre of its Indo-Pacific Strategy, the ASEAN-centric approach through AFML better aligns here.

Apart from these proposed actions, 'the ILO's TRIANGLE' can be an area of collaboration for the EU. This ASEAN-based initiative is a cornerstone of the United Nations



World Tourism Organisation's (UNWTO) worldwide campaign for equitable migration. The 'Partnership Agreement for Collaborative Programme on Labour and Decent Work' that the ILO and the Ministry of Manpower (Singapore) recently signed demonstrates their dedication to these objectives. The necessity to safeguard economic and security interests has prompted the European Union to increase its engagement in the Indo-Pacific region, which presents an opportunity to enhance its global status. There is room for cooperation between the EU and ASEAN because of the similarities in which both organisations approach the Indo-Pacific region.

Finally, amid changing geopolitical forces, the EU has potential to reinforce its partnership with Southeast Asia. When it comes to development and governance, the European Union and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) are similar and successful in their respective ventures. Through utilising these shared characteristics, the European Union can continue to support equitable migration, stability, and compliance with international law in Southeast Asia.

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