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Executive Summary

This country study examines actions against child labour implemented, planned or proposed in Thailand, particularly focusing on work which has, or could, effectively "make a difference" in the battle against child labour. It focuses on the last 15 years, and particularly on the last decade, a period in which Thailand made considerable advances in the battle against child labour.

Progress has come chiefly from the rapid, massive expansion in lower secondary schooling, which has meant upward of 80 percent of children finishing Grade Six at about age 12 continue their schooling, compared to 40 percent in 1990. Significant advances have also been made in:

- (i) Strengthening legal provisions against child labour and introducing policies and plans to deal with the issue;
- (ii) In raising awareness among senior and working level officials, and among the general public (particularly in the area of child prostitution);
- (iii) In significantly raising the number of labour inspections;
- (iv) Developing and strengthening NGOs; and
- (v) Developing and piloting strategies to directly address child labour through a variety of approaches.

This study has identified the following "best practices" which have contributed to this success, in addition to recommendations for "best practices" which should be strengthened or developed in the light of experiences thus far.

1. Existing Practices

(a) Core Commitment

The development of a committed core of individuals, linked by regular contacts, across a range of organisations, particularly government agencies, NGOs, international agencies and the media, is essential to the development of sustainable action against child labour. This was achieved in Thailand through the holding of meetings and seminars, frequently with international backing, which exposed relevant, interested people to an understanding of the issue and its importance; through the development and implementation of projects through which government and non-government workers have been exposed to child labour issues and methods of addressing them; and, and through the development of national policies and plans by a process of wide consultation and discussion. Special effort must be made to continue to encourage involvement, even in cases when officials are transferred out of areas of immediate relevance to child labour, and to encourage a widening of the circle of actors involved in joint action against child labour.

(b) Research-backing

All actions taken at the policy and practical level should be supported, and usually preceded, by high-quality research, essential for policy development, lobbying and advocacy process and for designing and implementing effective action. This is particularly important in efforts to encourage legal change, as was demonstrated by the successful work to achieve the first Cabinet child labour statement, including the increase in the minimum age of employment to 13 years.

(c) International Input

International financial, technical and organisational support was essential to the development of (a) and (b) above and (e) below, as within relatively rigid bureaucratic structures and with NGOs beginning with limited resources and support, this outside assistance is essential. In Thailand it has provided a "jump start" to child labour issues over the past few years which has culminated in this year's (1997) passage of "The Child Labour Problem: Prevention and Solution Plan, 1997-2001," and the passing by the House of Representatives and Senate of a new labour law raising the minimum age of employment to 15 years.

(d) Enlistment of Political Support

Statements of high-level political support, preferably at the prime ministerial, ministerial and department-head level, are essential to promoting child labour action. These, however, usually must be initiated at the bureaucratic level, which requires strong support from research and a core of committed individuals.

(e) Capacity-building

Government and non-government organisations have been strengthened and supported, particularly through technical assistance in the form of training, handbook development, etc., in areas such as problem analysis, project design development, implementation, monitoring and evaluation, which has been essential to the development of all other forms of sustainable action against child labour in Thailand. In developing the core of technical expertise and material in this process, international organisations have been crucial, but much still remains to be done in this vital area.

(f) Step-by-Step Approach

Rather than setting large, complex goals for action against child labour, a step-by-step approach, focusing on addressing one issue at a time, has proven effective in Thailand, as evidenced by the gradual increase in the minimum age of employment and the passage of new legislation against the commercial sex industry last year. Once a significant change has been achieved, any problems such as contradictory legislation or regulation or incompatible bureaucrat practices can then be modified accordingly.

(g) Gradual Enlistment

Action against child labour can begin with those actors who are available for and interested in the work, as in Thailand efforts initially began with the National Youth Bureau and a few committed individuals, and then new institutional and individual actors can be enlisted as they become interested or obviously essential to programmes and projects.

2. Developing and Recommended Practices

(a) Macro-economic Reform

Macro-economic reform, to reduce income inequalities, particularly between rural and urban areas, will be an essential step to effectively and sustainably preventing child labour in Thailand. This will require increased attention to the development of environmentally-sustainable, financially-rewarding rural production, in addition to improved decentralisation of industrial production and services.

(b) Education Reform

Education needs to be reformed to become student-centred, meeting the diverse needs of students of different ages and backgrounds, particularly the poor and disadvantaged, and acknowledging the value of accumulated local knowledge and experience, and of the worth of "learning by doing". It should encourage, not stifle, students' creativity and inventiveness, and focus on promoting problem-solving abilities.

(c) Community Enlistment

All levels of community organisations, including village, tambon and municipal levels, need to be enlisted in effective actions against child labour. The village volunteer model, more efficiently and effectively implemented, provides a possible model for achieving interest and involvement at this level. Enlistment of the media, already sympathetic towards and interested in child labour issues, also needs to be further pursued.

(d) National and Local Planning

Thailand last year adopted a national plan for tackling child labour. This is an important first step, but serious efforts need to be directed to ensuring its operationalisation and further development. With IPEC support, provincial plans are also being developed, vital for Thailand where there are very significant regional differences in the nature of child labour problems and their potential solutions. In both contexts, while planning in Thailand has traditionally involved rigid frameworks and top-down direction, a more consultative, cooperative model offers opportunities for significant advances by encouraging integration of efforts without threatening individual areas of control or clashing with other institutional structures.

(e) Monitoring of Effectiveness

Effective monitoring of actions against child labour is essential, but is currently seriously lacking in Thailand. A useful starting point may be the new legislation on child labour. The model of the anti-commercial sex industry legislation, which is now being monitored by two NGOs with the support of a government agency (the NCWA), is probably most appropriate in the Thai context, as it is not possible or considered appropriate for one government agency to monitor the work of another. All projects should also be monitored by effective research to determine their actual effectiveness in addressing child labour issues, particularly for use in guiding the direction of further efforts.

(f) Resource Mobilisation

There is a natural tendency for workers in the child labour field to look at their limited financial and other resources and feel more inputs are essential to making a real difference. Since, however, these are frequently unavailable, close attention needs to be paid to ensuring best possible use is made of existing resources. Concurrently, it is important for Thailand to realise that the current strong international support and funding will not continue forever, and provision for work against child labour must be included within regular government budgets, while NGOs need to work towards developing indigenous or independent funding sources.

(g) Family Support and Development

Some work has already been done in Thailand to promote and strengthen the institution of the family, particularly focusing on addressing the issue of children in the commercial sex industry. Family problems such as marriage break-ups, minor wives or abuse of children and inappropriate parental attitudes are at the root of many child labour problems, and the attitudes of parents who expect their children to support them from a young age, even when the children's income is not needed for basic subsistence, need to be modified.

(h) Counselling and Support

Strengthening of counselling and other support services for family development and mental health at the grassroots level is essential for effective action against child labour. Work on this area is at a very early stage, with research begun to initially document what in-service and pre-service training is now available to and utilised by social workers and other relevant individuals. This is designed to be an initial stage in eventually developing and improving instructions for prospective counsellors and social workers at universities and other relevant institutions, with a special emphasis on the importance of internships or other forms of practical training. Such curricula and promotion efforts should focus on the importance of "whole family," rather than individual counselling, reflecting the Thai cultural context.

(i) Children-help-children

More attention needs to be paid to developing mechanisms by which children who through their experiences and education have achieved understanding of child labour issues can pass this on to other children, both those younger than themselves and their peer group. This may be achieved by mechanisms such as drama groups, production of newsletters, pamphlets etc., and should particularly focus on educating children about their rights.