

# Working conditions within the NGO sector in Southeast Asia: Context, Challenges, and Opportunities for Change

## Background of Proposed Study

Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play an instrumental role in Southeast Asian societies. The wide range of NGOs work in diverse contexts and causes, from environmental protection to the upholding of human rights and civil freedoms. They step in where there are state and market inadequacies to provide vital services such as education, healthcare and disaster relief. They act as watchdogs to hold institutions accountable, and give voice to the powerless and marginalised. Often, they lead the way in democratic transitions, and in resisting the shrinking of civic spaces under authoritarian regimes.

As part of the third sector in society after the market and the state, it is the NGO sector that holds the moral leadership to “do the right thing”, often in the spirit of values and principles such as those within the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR). As NGOs are not for profit, their bottom lines are to create positive social impact and to better the lives of the constituents that they serve; their vantage point as a non-state actor also positions them as a counterbalance against those in power, who may misuse their power. With the moral imperative to uphold values and to do good in general, it is a reasonable assumption that employment within the sector would be compatible with decent work – referring to “work that is productive and delivers a fair income, security in the workplace and social protection for families, better prospects for personal development and social integration, freedom for people to express their concerns, organize and participate in the decisions that affect their lives and equality of opportunity and treatment for all women and men”, as noted within the website of the International Labour Organization (ILO)<sup>1</sup>.

However, this assumption may not hold true. Working conditions in the NGO sector have at times been observed to be subpar – with low pay and little social security, long hours with no compensation for overtime, and weak support to deal with occupational hazards both mental and physical. In the UK, academics call for the human rights sector to “stop exploiting unpaid interns”<sup>2</sup>, and an article by one Secret Aid Worker in *The Guardian* points out the hypocrisy of international NGOs in their hostility towards their own workers unionising<sup>3</sup>. Elsewhere, an article describing working conditions in the Lebanese NGO sector summarises its outrage in the title: “NGOs in Lebanon: Abusing Their Workers in the Name of Human Rights”<sup>4</sup>. Through interviews with Lebanese NGO workers, it is uncovered that many work under precarious conditions, resulting from 1) the unclear line between working and

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1 Accessible at <http://www.ilo.org/global/topics/decent-work/lang--en/index.htm>

2 Nolan, A. & Freedman, R. (13 January 2015) *The Conversation*. “The human rights sector must stop exploiting unpaid interns” Accessible at <https://theconversation.com/the-human-rights-sector-must-stop-exploiting-unpaid-interns-34994>

3 Secret Aid Worker (22 November 2016) *The Guardian*. “Secret aid worker: Surely NGOs should embrace trade unions, not block them?” Accessible at <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/nov/22/secret-aid-worker-surely-ngos-should-embrace-trade-unions-not-block-them>

4 Kerbaj, C. (10 July 2012) *Al-Akhbar*. “NGOs in Lebanon: Abusing Their Workers in the Name of Human Rights”. Accessible at <https://web.archive.org/web/20160424135401/http://english.al-akhbar.com/node/9604>

volunteering, 2) the triangular employment relationship between the employee, the organisation and the funder, and 3) the self-sacrificial mindset within NGO culture which reinforces violations of workers' rights horizontally (from worker to worker, as opposed to management to worker).

A preliminary search for literature in the Southeast Asian context has yielded very little. However, through working in the NGO sector within the region for the past few years, I have collected some anecdotal observations from fellow NGO workers and activists (names have been changed), as follows:

- Alan has been working in his human rights organisation based on an imaginary contract, since months ago. The original, legitimate contract had come to a natural end and there was no move from the organisation to arrange a new one. This puts him in a precarious situation, since his organisation could kick him out without notice and pay, and he would have no legal recourse.
- Brian reflected that top management within his NGO implied that younger employees should harden up and not demand for work-life balance, since there was no such thing when they fought for the revolution. Attempts to improve working conditions were repeatedly ridiculed, and he got very demoralised in the process.
- Charles was close to a burnout because of the mental demands of his NGO work (he works with high risk populations and is constantly exposed to second degree trauma). On top of that, his work pays him so little that he holds a second job, leaving him no time to rest and recover. There is very little access to mental healthcare within the field, even if it is recognised that workers are vulnerable to psychological and emotional damage. Low pay is also not uncommon.
- Donna drifts from one informal job to another, as a short term contractor for NGOs within her field. There is no income certainty, and no long term career prospects. While she gets reimbursed for work-related travel, often she is not paid for her time working for various events and workshops. Organisations that she works with have also asked her to contribute free work because there is no budget item for her role. Constantly working for free has led her to question the value of her work and herself.
- Ellie lost five colleagues working for NGOs in 2017, and one in the beginning of 2018. She attributes their deaths to overwork and the inability to afford medical care when they were ill, as a result of having no insurance coverage. The lost colleagues were within the age range of 35 to 50.

It is unclear how prevalent these cases are, and if they happen to a given subsector of NGOs. The severity of the situations varies, ranging from job insecurity to the loss of lives. The conditions described are reminiscent of work in the informal sector or informal employment in general, bringing to mind sweatshop labourers and not workers within a sector which prizes justice (whether social or environmental). More research on the topic is imperative, to provide visibility to the issue and a clearer picture of realities on the ground, in order to support advocacy efforts to improve the working conditions of rights workers.

## **Research Objectives**

The objectives of the proposed study are:

- To establish a baseline set of quantitative and qualitative data on working conditions within the NGO sector in Southeast Asia, and uncover the specific subsectors whose workers are most vulnerable to precarious work;
- To provide a systemic view of the challenges that create subpar working conditions; and
- To provide concrete recommendations for funders, NGOs, NGO employees, and contract workers to advance decent work in the NGO sector.

## **Scope of Study**

For the purposes of this study, we will examine non-governmental organisations (NGOs) only, defined by Chong (2011, p.23) as “non-government and non-profit organisations that are established for a specific or set of specific purposes. They do not belong to any government or state apparatus although short-medium term collaborations are not unusual if there are shared goals and objectives.” NGOs may be further differentiated as:

- INGOs (international non-government organisations): INGOs are not limited by geography. They typically establish their headquarters in the country of their formation while having subsidiary offices and operations in several others. Most INGOs are from Europe, the United States, and Scandinavian countries, with subsidiary offices in developing regions.
- NANGOs (national non-government organisations): NANGOs are formed and operate in a particular country. They usually have representatives in most provinces or districts of a country.
- Local/district-based NGOs: These NGOs have operations that are restricted to a particular locality or district in a country.

The above definitions, which were used by Chong (2011) as a base to explore the scope for civil society engagement in ASEAN, will also be useful for our context. NGOs are a subset of civil society organisations (CSOs). Other segments of CSOs, including community-based organisations, faith-based organisations, foundations, and professional associations, are beyond the scope of the proposed study.

## **Research Framework**

The Articles 23 and 24 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights encapsulate some of the aspirations on fair and humane working conditions. These include the rights to just and favourable conditions of work, to proper remuneration and social protection of the worker and her family, to equal pay for equal work without discrimination, to form and join trade unions, and to rest and leisure with reasonable limitation on working hours and access to periodic paid holidays. These constitute the normative framework of decent work (and a litmus test against informal and precarious work) that the proposed study is based on.

A systems thinking approach a la Meadows and Wright (2008) is used to frame the research questions and to search for answers. Working conditions in the NGO sector are a product of a system, with

*elements* (such as funders, directors, managers, employees, and external service providers, etc.) *interconnected* to achieve a *purpose* (in this case, social change). The relationships that hold the elements together, for instance labour relations between employees and funders, will provide some clues as to why the system acts the way it does. Elements of the system also have varying goals (e.g. directors want a glowing report of annual activities, while workers want to keep their jobs) that may or may not work together to achieve the grand vision of long term social transformation. The systems thinking lens not only provides a way to deconstruct the problem, but also helps to spot predictable patterns of problematic behaviour and remedial opportunities. Archetypes of problematic behaviour that result from systemic structures have been identified by systems thinkers, who have also provided suggestions for corresponding solutions for structural change. For instance, Meadows and Wright (*ibid*) provides eight common system traps (and opportunities) and twelve leverage points for systemic change. These will provide a good starting point to frame the problem, based on information gathered from the ground, as per methods outlined in the following section.

## Research Methodology

The proposed research methodology has three stages of data collection, as follows.

The first stage involves an online questionnaire which will be disseminated among NGO workers within Southeast Asia. The main questions that the survey intends to answer are: What is the current situation of the working conditions of NGO workers in Southeast Asia, specifically on social security, work-life balance, and rights at work (including unionising)? What are the observable patterns across countries, NGO subsectors (e.g. INGOS, NANGOs, local NGOs), or fields/causes?

The second stage is composed of interviews to different actors within the NGO ecosystem, including funders, directors, managers, employees, and contract workers. Convenience sampling will be conducted through the researcher's network of regional contacts within the NGO sector. The main questions that this stage seeks to answer are: What are the consequences of precarious working conditions? What are the best and worst practices within the sector? What are the organisational causes to shaping working conditions (such as funding design/fundraising structure, human resource management, project management, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms, etc.)? What are the causes beyond the organisation?

The third stage builds on the earlier stages, with focus group discussions themed according to initial findings from the first and second stage. The groups will be asked to discuss and comment on challenges and recommendations on improving working conditions within the sector.

## Expected outcomes

The expected outcomes to this research project are an overview of working conditions of right workers within Southeast Asia, a rich and systemic description of challenges that lead to subpar working conditions, and a set of recommendations for achieving decent work within the NGO sector.

## Contact

This research proposal was written to highlight the importance of investigating the above issue, and to outline the research framework for carrying out the study. Currently, I am reaching out to interested parties for funding to support the research. For any questions or comments, please contact me directly at [june.tan@protonmail.com](mailto:june.tan@protonmail.com) (Dr. Jun-E Tan).

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## References

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