

COVID-19 Lessons

Thailand

Background of the Fisheries

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed existing blindspots and weaknesses in seafood supply chains while creating entirely new challenges. Seafood workers bore the brunt of these shifts and nowhere was this more apparent than Thailand, a country already associated with human rights challenges in the seafood industry.

Thailand is one of the top seafood producing countries in the world and the number one exporter of shrimp. [Ethical Trade Initiative \(ETI\) estimated](#) the Thai fishing vessels and freshwater aquaculture and seafood processing sheds have 650,000 workers, with at least 71,000 migrant workers in that total (but likely many more irregular or undocumented workers).

Wild capture fisheries in the Gulf of Thailand are considered mismanaged and continue to receive low sustainability ratings (despite some recent improvements). But Thailand's shrimp industry in particular has been [implicated in multiple reports](#) of forced labor and human trafficking. Government and industry collaboration on environmental and social sustainability continues to be a major problem in Thai seafood industries.

COVID-19's Impact

While Thailand was the second country after China to first report a positive coronavirus infection, it only recorded about 4,000 cases leading into December 2020. However, a major outbreak in the coastal province Samut Sakhon just before the end of the year disrupted that progress and made international news. The initial infection was traced to a Thai female prawn seller in one of the world's largest seafood markets, Mahachai market. Within less than two weeks, at least 1,500 cases were linked to this outbreak.

But what began as another story of outbreak quickly evolved into an international human rights concern as the response from local government and implicated seafood companies was abhorrent. The blame for the infections fell on migrant workers from Myanmar who constitute a majority of the seafood workforce in the region. Employers reacted by requiring a negative COVID-19 test to all employees before allowing them to return to work. However many workers did not have access to a test, and found themselves stranded without pay. "I can't find a new job, I can't travel and there are costs I need to pay for my family to survive," one seafood worker in Samut Sakhon told Reuters in January 2021.

These allegations came after Top Glove, a major producer of PPE gear also based in Thailand, was accused of providing inadequate accommodations and medical protection measures for its employees. Those facilities were subsequently hit hard with a COVID-19 outbreak.

Thailand was associated with human rights abuses in their seafood industries before COVID-19, and the pandemic only served to exacerbate those issues and strain inadequate worker protection measures. The Top Glove situation was telling because it showed that as the PPE industry boomed, that company was not properly positioned to consider its workers needs in the face of increased demand and production. Policies and initiatives to protect workforces must be solidly in place before a pandemic or unexpected market shift.

Lessons Learned

Lesson	Considerations
<p>Government and industry must be on the same page.</p>	<p>After the outbreak in Samut Sakhon, seafood companies required employees to present a negative COVID-19 test result before returning to work. However this mandate was not feasible because testing facilities deemed non-symptomatic seafood workers low risk and thus not qualified for a free COVID-19 test. Many workers could not afford to pay for a test, resulting in mass unemployment. If Thai seafood companies and local public health officials had coordinated on testing capacity, perhaps this situation could have been avoided.</p>
<p>Cramped living conditions create unseen vulnerabilities.</p>	<p>Unacceptable living conditions and unsanitary working environments are always an important social responsibility issue, but in a pandemic they become deadly and completely inhumane. Businesses have an obligation to plan for pandemic stressors on employee living quarters and provide amenities.</p>
<p>Language barriers are dangerous during a pandemic.</p>	<p>Discrimination towards migrant workers (predominantly from Myanmar) continues to be a major concern in the Thai seafood industry. One way to potentially curb some of this sentiment would be to prioritize internal and public health communications clearly and in all relevant languages.</p>
<p>Displaced workers need special consideration.</p>	<p>Migrant workers becoming displaced on foreign countries is another perennial social responsibility issue that was exacerbated because of COVID-19. When industries shut down or employers changed health standards many migrant workers lost their jobs and had no means to return home due to travel bans. Governments and industry must collaborate on solutions for these special circumstances.</p>

Resources

Thailand/Asia Specific Resources:

- [Migrant workers suffer as coronavirus cases surge in Thailand](#) - Reuters
- [Thailand's seafood sector](#) - Ethical Trading Initiative (ETI)
- [Impacts of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Small-Scale Producers and Workers: Perspectives from Thailand's seafood supply chain](#) - Oxfam
- [COVID-19, instability and migrant fish workers in Asia](#) - Marschke et al. 2020

Best Practices for Workers:

- [Protecting Seafood Processing Workers from COVID-19](#) - Center for Disease Control (CDC)
- [Checklist for Seafood Processing Worksites](#) - CDC
- [Steps to Reducing Worker Exposure to COVID-19](#) - OSHA
- [Recommendations for factories to protect workers from COVID-19](#) - ETI
- [ETI Base Code](#) - ETI
- [Responsible management of workforce reduction in Thailand in the COVID-19 environment](#) - Issara Institute

General COVID-19 Resources:

- [The COVID-19 Pandemic and the Blue Economy: New Challenges and Prospects for Recovery and Resilience](#) - UNCTAD
- [COVID-19's impact on the seafood industry](#) - Stockholm Resilience Center
- [Emerging COVID-19 impacts, responses, and lessons for building resilience in the seafood system](#) - WorldFish