

## **Rights for All, Except Rights Workers? Working Conditions within Advocacy NGOs in Southeast Asia**

### **Introduction**

The aim of the proposed research is to study working conditions within advocacy-based nongovernmental organisations (NGOs) in Southeast Asia. These organisations champion civil and political rights in a region with countries with restricted civic space (Civicus, 2017) and operate under difficult conditions, with limited resources and vulnerable stakeholder groups, often amidst threats of state violence. As part of the third sector in society after the market and the state, the NGO sector 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. 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.

However, working conditions in the NGO sector have been observed to be problematic, with low pay and little social security (Berlin et al., 2017). Unpaid work has been evidenced, including long hours with no compensation for overtime, unpaid internships, and the blurred line between working and volunteering for employees (Baines et al., 2017). In some cases, unionising has been discouraged (Cunningham et al., 2016). Recently, in 2018, two staff members of Amnesty International committed suicide, which prompted an internal review of the organisation with regards to its work culture and environment. Findings of the report indicated poor staff wellbeing within the organisation, with long working hours and significant risk of vicarious trauma with little support; the work environment was also described to be “toxic”, with bullying, discrimination, and other abuses of power (Avula et al., 2019). It is evident that advocacy NGOs are not immune to poor working conditions, and in extreme cases these conditions can lead to loss of lives.

Literature on working conditions in advocacy NGOs in Southeast Asia is scarce, yet it can be inferred that job quality within the sector leaves much to be desired. Firstly, it is clear that Southeast Asian advocacy NGOs in particular are starved of funding, due to strong governmental control of funding streams, the reshaping of international aid spending, paradigmatic shifts in philanthropic giving, and the reluctance of local donors to give to advocacy organisations (Sciortino, 2018). Low operational costs affect working conditions directly. Secondly, working conditions in Southeast Asia are poor in average, with low wages (Ford & Gillan, 2017), heavy exploitation and labour rights violations, as well as a high level of informality (Zajak et al., 2017). Thirdly, the nonprofit sector itself is vulnerable to precarious work, even in high-income developed countries.

Besides the scarcity of existing research, the proposed study focuses on advocacy NGOs in Southeast Asia for a number of reasons. Firstly, many regimes in Southeast Asia can be considered authoritarian. Advocacy NGOs and the marginalised communities that they work with are often subjected to state harassment and persecution (Human Rights Watch, 2018) which makes the nature of work of NGO workers hazardous, compounded by a higher risk of second degree trauma from the stakeholders that they work with. These circumstances, combined with precarious employment, subject advocacy NGO workers in Southeast Asia to serious occupational risks that warrant in-depth study. Secondly, as many advocacy NGOs base their work on the principles of human rights, the assumption is that they would be familiar with the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, within which are two articles that focus on decent work. Is this a valid assumption, and if so, to what extent do the organisations apply those principles in their everyday operations? Thirdly, as the source of funding of Southeast Asian advocacy NGOs usually comes from foreign donors, theories that originated from developed countries can be applied and tested in a developing context. This will contribute to the literature on precarious work in the nonprofit sector in general.

### ***Precarious Work in the Nonprofit Sector***

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.

Poor human resource management and precarious work in the nonprofit sector is often linked to artificially low overhead costs that nonprofits are subjected to, due to a phenomenon known as the “nonprofit starvation cycle” (Gregory & Howard, 2009). This is a pattern that nonprofits go through which slowly starve them of operational funding. Funders have unrealistic expectations on overhead costs in nonprofits, nonprofits feel the need to conform and end up neglecting infrastructure or misrepresenting financial figures, which then reinforce the funders’ perception. One of the ways that overhead costs are cut include under-staffing – salaries and benefits are kept low, and more responsibilities are given to existing staff (Berlin et al., 2017). Studies have reported low job quality in the nonprofit sector in many developed countries, including Finland (Selander & Ruuskanen, 2016), Germany (Schubert & Boenigk, 2019; Walk et al., 2013), Canada (Cunningham et al., 2016; Fanelli et al., 2017), the United States (Berlin et al., 2017), etc.

Other theoretical lenses have also been used to understand precarity in the nonprofit sector. Cunningham et al. (2016) studied the impact of austerity policies on nonprofits in Scotland and Canada after the 2008 financial crisis, drawing from Labour Process Theory, which views employment relations as a power struggle between employees and the management. In the climate of cutbacks and shrinking funding, it is found that control shifts from workers to management, increasing precarity without much resistance from the workers. In the theory’s application in other workplaces, there are usually three parties in the labour process – the workers, the service users, and management. Cunningham et al. points out that nonprofits have one more party: the funders, who through their provision of resources also set the scene of the organisation of work.

In the proposed research, a systems thinking approach, following 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, such as employment 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 units of analysis are therefore individual roles within the system.

### **Advocacy NGOs in Southeast Asia**

Southeast Asia includes eleven countries, with great diversity in terms of culture, religion, and political systems. Most are postcolonial young nations governed by strong states. 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.

Broadly speaking, it is possible to classify NGOs into two types: “operational” and “advocacy” NGOs (van Tuijl, 1999). The former focus on social, economic, and cultural rights, such as the provision of health, education, clean water, or disaster relief; and the latter lobby for civil and political rights, and work on issues such as human rights and environmental justice. While operational NGOs focus on developmental issues and have a friendlier relationship with governments, advocacy NGOs are often adversarial towards the state. As a result, advocacy NGOs in the region often face difficulties in funding and rely almost exclusively on foreign donors (Parks, 2008).

Given the vast scope of Southeast Asia, this study proposes to focus on four middle-income Southeast Asian countries: Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. According to the United Nations (2018), the first two are considered upper-middle income and the last two, lower-middle income. Through previous work

experience, the researcher is familiar with the contexts of the chosen countries and have networks within civil society to ensure access to the field. The similarities and differences within these developing countries of a similar income bracket will provide opportunities for meaningful comparisons. Future studies can replicate the research framework to other countries within Southeast Asia and beyond.

## Research Objectives

As most of the literature found on working conditions in a nonprofit setting is focused on the developed world, more research on developing countries is imperative. There is urgent need 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.

The objectives of the proposed study are:

- To establish a baseline set of qualitative data on working conditions within advocacy NGOs in Southeast Asia, represented by Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines.
- To provide a systemic view of the challenges that create subpar working conditions in the region; and
- To provide concrete recommendations for funders, NGOs, NGO employees, and contract workers to advance decent work in the NGO sector.

## Research Methodology

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

The first stage is composed of interviews to different actors within the NGO ecosystem (including funders, directors, managers, employees, and contract workers) in Malaysia, Thailand, Indonesia, and the Philippines. Convenience and snowball sampling will be conducted through the researcher's network of regional contacts within the NGO sector, ensuring diversity in terms of causes, types of organisation, sources of funding, etc. The main questions that this stage seeks to answer are: What is the current situation of the working conditions, specifically on social security, work-life balance, and rights at work (including unionising)? What are the observable patterns across countries, NGO subsectors, or fields/causes? 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 second stage builds on the earlier stage, with focus group discussions themed according to initial findings. The groups will be asked to discuss and comment on challenges and recommendations on improving working conditions within the sector.

## Fieldwork and Milestones

Two separate month-long field trips will be made to Southeast Asia for the two stages of data collection. Each trip entails one week spent in each of the four target countries. For the first stage of fieldwork, I estimate 12 interviewees per country (i.e. 2 interviews per day, 6 days a week), totalling 48 respondents, supplemented by teleconferencing interviews who I am unable to meet face-to-face. The interviews will be distributed among respondents from the different roles of the NGO ecosystem, namely funders, directors, managers, employees, and contract workers. For the second stage of fieldwork, I estimate 3 focus group discussions per country (with a target of 5 respondents per group, totalling to 60 participants in total). As I will be facilitating the discussions, there will be a rapporteur hired to take notes for each discussion.

The milestones and time scales are as follows:

- Completion of literature review and desk research of the background (6 months)
- First stage of data collection (in-depth interviews), including planning, execution, and analysis of data (6 months)

- Second stage of data collection (focus group discussions), including planning, execution, and analysis of data (6 months)
- Writing up and dissemination of research (6 months)

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