

Asia Rountable on Social Protection Network

South East Asia Network Report

Introduction

Southeast Asian irony: Growth by dispossession

Southeast Asian economies show notable performance in the recent years. In 2013, for instance, the growth rate of the region's gross domestic product (GDP) is 4.9 per cent compared to the entire world's GDP growth rate of 3.0 per cent. However, despite this significant GDP growth rate, employment in Southeast Asia did not rise in the same rate as the GDP has risen. It has grown only by 1.5 per cent. Moreover, poverty remains prevalent and income gaps become wider. In other words, the economic growth in numbers does not translate to the improvement of the quality of lives of the people at the grassroots level.

For the working people at the grassroots level, economic growth is a fiction. The reality that they confront in their everyday lives is rather full of insecurity. While the World Bank (WB), the Asian Development Bank (ADB), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) highlight the substantial inflows of foreign direct investment (FDI) in Southeast Asia, the grassroots communities suffer from dispossession as a result of various FDI projects that prioritise capitalist over grassroots interests. All over the Southeast Asian region, the working class is robbed off their livelihoods, shelter, and other resources in favour of neoliberal-driven development.

Land grabbing is a classic example. It is a long-standing phenomenon that has been happening in Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Thailand for a long time. In the recent years, it has rapidly expanded to countries in the Mekong region. The purpose of land grabbing varies but none of them are grassroots-oriented. It may be for the expansion of industrial commercial plantations, extraction of minerals and resources, establishment of special economic zones, development of commercial or residential complex for the wealthy, et cetera. But the impacts that the marginalised people experience from land grabbing are basically the same – displacement from their own lands, loss of their sustainable sources of livelihood, and disruption of their cultural institutions and indigenous practices.

The point is that in the era of neoliberal globalisation, marginalisation occurs not only because of the disparities in wealth or the differences in gender, age, and ethnicity. The structural reasons for marginalisation are more alarming — that is, the preservation of capitalist institutions and structures by dispossessing the people. Dispossession as a means of capital accumulation pushes the affected individuals and communities to the margins even more by systematically denying them the rights – economic, social, and cultural – that they are entitled to. This process effectively deprives the grassroots of the opportunities to participate fully in different political, economic, and social processes. Further, amidst this situation, they are neglected and excluded from the provision of social protection that could have somehow alleviated their impoverished conditions.

The marginalised workers in Southeast Asia

Coming up with a comprehensive list of marginalised workers is a tough task. However, the participants of the AROSP meeting tried to identify who the marginalised workers in their respective countries are. In identifying the marginalised workers, one cannot keep away from describing their conditions and narrating the reasons behind their marginalisation.

Predominantly in the informal sector and rapidly expanding in the formal sector

Majority of the marginalised working people are in the informal economy where the conditions of work are more precarious. In the informal economy, income is inadequate and irregular, safety standards for work are non-existent, social protection cannot be easily availed, and threats to security of livelihood are always present. Considering this, workers in the informal economy are essentially vulnerable. With the informal workers comprising about 40 to 80 per cent of the total working population in Southeast Asia, it is not surprising that the incidence of working poverty is high in the informal sector.

Box 1

A brief glimpse of the informal economy in Southeast Asia

In Southeast Asia, informal workers are numerous and widely dispersed both in the urban and rural areas.

In **Cambodia**, the **Philippines**, and **Thailand**, informal drivers fill the urban streets. There are drivers of tuktuk, motorbikes and taxis in Cambodia and Thailand while there are drivers of jeepneys, tricycles, and pedicabs in the Philippines. The most common problem that they face is extortion by the police. Specifically in Cambodia, drivers are the most common target of petty bribery, especially when road accidents happen. In the Philippines, jeepney drivers are always confronted with the problems of high fuel costs and heavy traffic.

Street vendors are also common in the urban centres of Southeast Asia. In the Philippines, they are usually considered underground workers because they are not registered. In **Vietnam**, the street vendors have been more marginalised after the government banned all street vending activities. However, without any alternative livelihood, the vendors continue to sell in the streets and as a consequence, they suffer from police harassment. They cope with such rough situations individually.

In the countryside, among the most marginalised are the farmers and other agricultural workers who have been displaced because of land grabbing or other forms of capitalist extraction of resources. This happens particularly in Cambodia, **Indonesia**, Thailand and the Philippines. Cambodian farmers lose not only their livelihood but also what they considered as the right to protect the forests. In Indonesia, seventy per cent of the workers are in the informal sector and majority of them are peasants. Aside from farmers and farm workers in commercial plantations, the fisher folks in Indonesia and the Philippines are among the poorest sectors in the rural areas.

Laos is not an exception from land grabbing. The lands of Laos are vast. However, the use of the country's sizeable lands has been converted from traditional farming into environmentally destructive mining operations that are mainly owned and controlled by Chinese, Vietnamese, and Lao businessmen. This led to the displacement of people who are used to living in upland villages with their farm animals. Relocated to the roadside, these people had a difficult time adapting to living away from what they consider as their home. They are not just dispossessed of their sources for livelihood; they are also dispossessed of their traditional shelters.

On the other hand, even the work in the formal sector is becoming more and more precarious. In Asia, there is an increasing flexibilisation of work through outsourcing, short-term hiring, and contractualisation. Some workers in the formal sector are marginalised within their workplace because of their status as contractual or casual workers. Denied of regular/permanent employment status, workers who have been affected by various forms of flexibilisation become excluded from the rights and benefits that regular/permanent workers are entitled to.

The flexibilisation trend can be illustrated in terms of how the Indonesian labour force is constituted. Seventy per cent of the Indonesian workers are in the informal sector. The remaining 30 per cent are in the formal sector. They are predominantly employed in manufacturing factories that produce garments and electronics, among others. And yet, of all the manufacturing workers, 60 per cent are employed in non-permanent jobs. They are either contractual or outsourced workers who are paid low wages and do not enjoy the right to security of tenure.

The case of Cambodian garment workers reflects the increasing precarity of work in the formal sector. Majority of the garments workers in Cambodia are non-permanent workers and their number continues to increase. Without regular employment status, they can easily be hired and fired. Despite working for suppliers of big global brands with multi-million profits, Cambodian garment workers earn far less than what they need to survive and thus live in deplorable conditions. It is very difficult for them to bargain with the employers or the government for minimum wage increases. In the workers' attempts to demand for higher wages, they face not only defiance from the government and the employers group but also violence and harassment from the military.

Invisible, disadvantaged, and excluded

Marginalised workers are often invisible in the society, especially in the eyes of the government. In rare cases where they are visible, they are rather perceived as eye sore that needs to be eradicated. Their income-generating activities are declared illegal. This kind of treatment to marginalised workers essentially makes them excluded in policies and programmes of the government.

Box 2:

The invisible sex workers of Cambodia

Sex workers have been marginalised thoroughly. They are never recognised as workers; rather, they are considered as criminals. Hence, they do not get the same security and benefits that a regular worker enjoys.

Perceived as criminals, sex workers are often arrested by the police. Once arrested, they are either brought to jails or sent to social centres.

One might have an impression that being admitted to a social centre is an absolutely better option. However, according to sex workers, social centres are almost like jails. The police extort money from arrested sex workers so that they can be released from the social centre.

If marginalised workers happen to be the target beneficiaries of government policies and programmes, such policies and programmes usually have a lot of loopholes that make implementation poor. For instance, the land reform programmes in most Southeast Asian countries that are supposed to uplift the quality of lives of the marginalised farmers failed to materialise fully and effectively as intended. Rather than truly allowing farmers to take ownership and control of land, only the big businesses are able to exploit the use of land and other natural resources. What happened in West Java, Indonesia is even worse. About 7,000 troops were mobilised by the government to displace 1,200 farmers. This was

done per the request of the private company that is interested to develop the land for commercial plantation. Given this, it is very clear that capitalist interests are more visible than the massive peasant population that will be adversely affected by the displacement.

The prioritisation of capitalist interests over grassroots workers is also observed by the struggling self-employed. In particular, the home-based workers of Laos, the Philippines, and Thailand and the farmers who are not engaged in large-scale commercial farming consider that the greatest burden for them is the high cost of inputs and lack of access to credit. They also have to endure stiff competition and the market is not always guaranteed. On the contrary, they observe that big capitalists, especially those who have strong political connections, are easily granted market monopolies.

Marginalised workers are not only disadvantaged in their work; they are also deprived of the basic services that should have been freely or inexpensively provided by the state. Given the impoverished conditions of the marginalised workers, they find it difficult to enjoy decent housing, quality education, and effective health care. This is what happens in Malaysia and perhaps in other Southeast Asian countries as well. Malaysian informal workers are essentially not covered by basic services. The reason for this is their incapacity to afford such services as most of them have already been privatised. Basic services have become a privilege for a select segment of the society who can afford and a luxury for the marginalised workers who can barely meet the expenses for their families' basic needs.

Unrecognised and unrepresented in decision-making processes

As discussed, marginalised workers are invisible to the society and the state. Hence, it is very uncommon that they are represented in decision-making bodies and processes of the government. In tripartite bodies, marginalised workers are unduly represented as the formal trade unions take the centre stage in representing the workers (normally in a tripartite system) even though the majority of the workers are in the marginalised informal sector.

Without proper representation in decision-making processes, marginalised workers essentially have no voice to express their concerns and assert their demands. In most Southeast Asian countries, there are very limited mechanisms that encourage marginalised workers to discussing their issues and allow them to decide for how they want their issues to be addressed. Because of this, most of the policy responses of the government are imposed to the workers without properly consulting them.

Organising as the workers' response to dispossession and marginalisation

As a response to the dispossession that they experience, the marginalised people, especially the workers, organise themselves into sustainable organisations to collectively assert their rights and bargain for their demands. Being socially excluded and invisible, they acknowledge that it will be difficult to increase bargaining power and gain recognition without coming together and building solidarity. They recognise that it is important to be included in democratic processes so that they themselves can define the future that they want.

Organising to gain visibility and inclusion

In an unequal society, it is difficult for an individual to assert her/his rights and demands when she/he holds no economic or political power. Marginalised workers organise themselves because, as a collective, it would be easier for them to make their issues and demands visible. Otherwise, they will remain in the margins – unnoticed and neglected while denied their rights and all the benefits that come with the exercise of such rights. Being organised also increases the chances of their demands being heard. In addition, marginalised workers form organisations so that they could push for better inclusion in the government’s policies and programmes. As an organised entity, they can put greater pressure to the government to respond to their demands. They take on different strategies to do this such as lobbying, protesting, and building networks.

There are some notable examples in which marginalised workers, through organising, were able to gain visibility and inclusion. Home-based workers in the Philippines take active roles in advocating for the passage of bills that protect the rights of informal workers. Informal workers organisations in Thailand were also instrumental in expanding the coverage of the state’s social protection. In Indonesia, thousands of workers went to the streets to pressure the government to pass the social security law.

Organising to counter discrimination, displacement, and harassment

Marginalised workers also organise to counter the harassment that they endure from the police and local authorities when they peacefully conduct their business. The organisations become the workers’ refuge when they are being harassed or when their rights are violated. Aside from legal or social assistance, workers’ organisations also provide basic rights education to its members so that they become well aware of their entitlements in accordance to the laws.

Cambodia has a lot of experience in this type of organising. The organisation of tuktuk, motorbike and taxi drivers in Cambodia has provided assistance to its members when they got victimised by police officers. Police officers usually extort money from the driver embroiled in a road accident – whether the driver is at fault or not. When the drivers were not yet organised, they had no choice but to give in to what the police want. After being organised, the drivers can get help from the organisation when dealing with the police officers.

The sex workers in Cambodia also benefitted a great deal from being organised. The organisation of sex workers was formed to provide assistance to sex workers especially when they encounter problems and difficulties arising from their work. It offers legal service for members who get arrested by the police or who are harassed by gangsters. It also conducts basic rights training for its members.

Organisers of farmers in rural Cambodia shared that the main reasons why farmers organise themselves into sustainable organisations are to collectively fight the businesses who grab their lands and to protect the natural resources that may be destroyed by the different development projects that justify land grabbing.

Challenges in organising

Organising the marginalised workers, whether in the informal or informalised sector, poses multifarious challenges. Below is a discussion of the several factors that contribute to the difficulty of organising marginalised workers.

- ***Geographically mobile marginalised workers.*** Majority of the marginalised workers, especially those in the informal sector, are practically mobile. Because they have no fixed work sites, they move from one location to another. This is particularly apparent in the case street hawkers, informal transport workers, and sex workers. Mapping and coordinating mobile workers are difficult tasks and somehow difficult to sustain.
- ***Floating working population.*** There is also the so-called floating working population comprised of workers who move from place to another and take on different types of odd and often seasonal jobs. This is usually the case among the landless rural poor who can be a plantation worker today, a fisher folk tomorrow, or an informal construction worker the next day. Most unskilled migrant workers also fall under this category. Why is it a challenge to organise these workers? Most organising initiatives that happen are sectoral. An organisation of a farmer is different from an organisation of fisher folks. Such organisations will automatically exclude a plantation worker. Organisations that cater to the floating working population are very rare.

**Box 3:
Floating workers in Vietnam**

The floating working population in Vietnam primarily includes the people in the villages who migrated to the cities. They are previously farmers who voluntarily sold or were forced to sell their lands. Losing their main source of livelihood, they have no choice but to look for employment in the urban areas.

With very few opportunities available in the cities, they end up doing different types of odd jobs in the informal sector. One of the most common jobs that they do is hauling in public markets. When there are no more hauling jobs, they take up whatever jobs are available.

- ***Non-standard/informalised workers in the formal sector.*** In the formal sector, non-standard workers are also mobile in the sense that they move from one job/firm to another once their short-term contracts are finished or terminated. This is very apparent in the case of manufacturing workers in Cambodia and Indonesia and service workers (i.e., in restaurants and supermarkets) in the Philippines. They are not eligible to the benefits that permanent workers enjoy such as security of tenure. Without security of tenure, non-permanent workers, such as the short-term hires, casuals, and contractuels, can be easily hired and fired.

Because of this prevailing nature of employment, trade unions, particularly in Indonesia, choose to organise permanent workers only. Most employers will fire a worker when she/he joins a union and when a worker is non-permanent, termination can easily be done even without valid cause.

- ***Disinterest in organising informal workers.*** The formal trade unions are the ones who are very experienced in organising. However, in some countries in Southeast Asia, trade unions are not interested in organising informal workers. While some trade unions allow the membership of informal workers, the level of their participation is very limited. Particularly in Cambodia, low-income earning and illiterate rubbish collectors cannot voice out their opinions in within the union. Because trade unions do not take the initiative of organising informal workers (except for the Philippines), NGOs are usually the ones who organise the informal workers, especially in Cambodia, Vietnam and Indonesia.

- *Gaps between policies and implementation of the right to freedom of association.* In Southeast Asia, only Cambodia, Indonesia, and the Philippines ratified the internationally recognised workers' rights to organise and to bargain collectively (ILO Conventions 87 and 98). Even in these three countries, there is a huge gap between de jure and de facto right to freedom of association and collective bargaining. Basically, the rights to organise and bargain are recognised in paper only. In terms of implementation, the climate for organising and bargaining remains repressive. This is evident in the violent crackdown in Cambodia in January 2013, the killings of labour leaders in the Philippines, and the union busting in Indonesia, among others.

Bottom line:

Organising for greater bargaining power

The bottom line is that marginalised workers organise in order to develop greater bargaining power. The imbalance between the marginalised and the powerful is so wide, making the working poor at a huge disadvantage when they have to bargain for their rights. Without economic and political power, the only way to accumulate bargaining power is to gather their acts together and boldly assert for what they are rightfully entitled to despite the combined suppression by the state and the capitalists.

Because marginalised workers are largely in the informal sector, a trade union is not the usual type of organisation they establish. Rather, marginalised workers form associations or cooperatives depending on the organisation's issues and goals.

Bargaining:

What for and with whom?

Marginalised workers have varied demands. The bargaining issues that they identify usually differ across sectors and are based on the specific needs of a particular sector (Table 1).

*Table 1.
Bargaining issues per sector*

Sector	Bargaining issue
Farmers and agricultural workers	Land distribution Land ownership and control Lower price of farm inputs
Street vendors	Affordable and designated space in markets Safe conduct of business free from police harassment
Informal transport workers (i.e., drivers of tuktuk, motorbikes, taxis, jeepneys, tricycles, etc.)	Lower fuel prices Higher fares Routes assigned for public transport
Non-permanent workers in the formal sector (i.e., outsourced, contract, and casual workers)	Security of tenure Regularisation/granting of permanent employment status Freedom of association and collective bargaining
Migrant workers	All the rights similar to those that can be enjoyed by non-migrants
Informal workers in general	Recognition and inclusion in labour policies Right to social protection

Because they are largely in the informal sector, marginalised workers at the grassroots level bargain with the local government and other local authorities such as the police. In the case of the informalised workers in the formal sector, bargaining still happens with the employers. At the national level, marginalised workers' organisations bargain with the parliament as well as with other national government agencies depending on the issue.

Some marginalised workers bargain for more comprehensive and encompassing benefits that go beyond sectors and should be available for all. This include better access to basic services, decent and affordable housing, quality yet inexpensive education for their children, better wages, and lower cost of living. In the recent years, because of the increasing risks and vulnerabilities that marginalised workers face, they started to become more concerned about getting social protection. Marginalised workers have been thoroughly excluded from different social protection programmes because they have been mostly designed exclusively for regular workers in the formal sector. Regardless of which sector they come from, marginalised people think that everyone should be covered.

Social protection is one of the most critical issues that marginalised workers bargain for without looking at cross-sectoral differences.

Social protection for the marginalised: A brief overview

The concept of social protection has evolved significantly in the past years, particularly in the developing countries. The adverse impacts of the global financial crisis (GFC) of 2008 and the recent climate crisis somehow exposed that there is a serious absence of safety nets for marginalised people in times of crisis. Factory closures during the GFC led to massive job losses and those affected are not guaranteed to get new jobs. Worse, they have no unemployment insurance that would help them get by while looking for new employment. On the other hand, the climate crisis distressed the marginalised workers in both rural and urban areas – leaving the marginalised informal workers helpless in the middle of their damaged homes and livelihoods. This revealed that crop insurance for the farmers is ineffective, housing for the urban informal workers/settlers are inexistent, and income insecurity aggravates as the marginalised workers have to stop working as they recover from disasters.

Amidst these conditions, there is the already prevailing poverty and inequality in Southeast Asian societies that make the marginalised peoples' suffering more pronounced. Basic services are, if not deficient, costly and privatised. Education is a luxury for the working poor. Quality health care services can only be enjoyed by the wealthy. Housing for the poor remains unaffordable for them. Above all, employment is scarce and the few jobs available are becoming more and more precarious. Yet again, taking into account the unforeseeable crises that severely hit the ill-prepared working poor, the difficulty to cope and bounce back is unimaginable. The difficulty could have been eased if there is an effective social protection programme in place.

These realities prompted the marginalised to critically question the existing social protection programmes. The broad civil society in Asia, including the labour movement, call for a more comprehensive social protection compared to the narrow concept of social security. Eventually, social protection has become a buzzword in the development world.

Originally campaigned for by social activists and grassroots workers, 'social protection' turned into a development concept shared and advocated by international neoliberal institutions such as the WB and ADB. Although international recognition of the importance of providing social protection is very crucial, it becomes, at the same time, prone to the neoliberal institutions' proclivity of prescribing how social protection ought to be defined, developed, and implemented for the marginalised sectors of the society. This is problematic in two ways.

First, the marginalised workers themselves are not given the opportunities to frame their own understanding of social protection and to decide on what social protection ought to be based on their circumstances. This can be attributed to the lack of voice and representation of marginalised workers in decision-making processes about issues that directly concern them.

Second, and relatedly, there is a tendency that the kind of social protection conceptualised by the IFIs and other international organisations are not responsive to the needs of the marginalised workers. Rather, the way that IFIs and international organisations define and programme social protection reinforces the neoliberal development that serves the interest of the few and exploits the resources of the marginalised. And yet, their definitions are imposed to different countries, especially the developing ones, without proper consultations with the marginalised people.

In this regard, AROSP provides a platform for marginalised workers to critically think and develop their own definition of social protection. Gathering the marginalised workers' insights about social protection

is very important in framing and asserting their overall demands, especially when they are doing their advocacy work at the local, national, and sub-regional levels.

Social protection: The perspective of the marginalised

Several international organisations and governments at the national level have arrived at their respective definitions of social protection. However, there has been little attention given to the kind of social protection that marginalised workers really want. Everything has been imposed. No one in the governing bodies internationally and nationally asked, “What is social protection for the marginalised people?”

When AROSP raised the question, serious responses from the marginalised workers were gathered. Box 4 outlines in brief the marginalised workers’ perspective about social protection.

Box 3:
Social protection as defined by the marginalised workers

Social protection is a set of measures that:

- protect the marginalised people from various social, economic, political, and environmental risks and vulnerabilities, including without limitation, the impacts of realised risks;
- does not only alleviate poverty but more importantly, improve the marginalised peoples’ quality of lives towards greater sustainability; and
- uphold the rights of the marginalised people to secure them a life of dignity.

It is easier to understand what social protection is in the marginalised’s perspective by analysing the limited definitions of social protection and how they are expanded by the marginalised working people. Table 2 shows a comparison between the existing mainstream views on social protection and the views of marginalised workers on the same issue matter.

Limited definition	Marginalised perspective
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social protection is narrowly aimed at the reduction of life cycle-based risks and vulnerabilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social protection should be aimed at the protection of the people, especially the marginalised, from economic, political, and environmental risks and vulnerabilities.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social protection programmes includes relief from the impacts of risks, vulnerabilities, and crisis. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social protection programmes should aid in the full recovery of the marginalised people from the impacts of risks, vulnerabilities, and crisis.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social protection is a set of measures that alleviate poverty and reduce vulnerabilities. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social protection measures should be designed within a framework that targets the roots of poverty. They should not just lead to poverty alleviation or reduction of vulnerabilities. They should lead to the improvement of the quality of lives of the marginalised and greater sustainability of their livelihoods.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social protection is a human right and the implementation of social protection policies and programmes should be 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Social protection is a human right and social protection implementation should be rights-based. Social protection should also respect

implemented using a **rights-based approach**.

and uphold the other normative rights and traditional/cultural ownership of the marginalised people. Contrary to the prevailing operationalization of social protection today, it should not serve as a compensation for taking away what the marginalised workers rightfully owns.

To further understand social protection in the eyes of the marginalised workers, the basic features and prerequisites of social protection are discussed in detail as follows:

- **Social protection is a human right.** Social protection is not a privilege of a select segment of population who can afford. Instead, it is a fundamental right of all people without distinction on the basis of gender, age, ethnicity, citizenship, and employment.

However, social protection should not be regarded as a stand-alone right. As a fundamental right, it should also be designed in such a way that does not discriminate, disrespect, and dispossess other human rights that the marginalised workers have.

- **Social protection should be for all.** As a fundamental right of every person, social protection should not be something that requires eligibility. Inclusiveness is a key element in ensuring that social protection captures everyone irrespective of job type or employment status. At present, social protection can only be accessed by a few. In the case of the workers, most social protection programmes are limitedly available for formal sector workers. Those who are the more vulnerable – the workers in the informal sector – are either excluded in the coverage or having difficulty in accessing social protection because of their informal status.
- **Social protection should reduce poverty and eliminate vulnerabilities.** Social protection is often regarded as the support system that aids people when they face problems during their life cycle. However, social protection should go beyond that. Rather than being a band-aid solution and safety net during problematic times, social protection must be designed to eliminate poverty and vulnerabilities in the long run. It must be geared towards the attainment of the vision that no one will fall below the poverty line and no one will require a safety net because income has become sustainable and basic services inexpensively available.

For the members of the AROSP-SEA network, social protection is more than just the traditional social insurance. It should not be a stand-alone programme but a comprehensive programme that transforms the lives of the marginalised people into sustainable ones.

- **The provision of social protection is the state's responsibility.** In general and in principle, the state has the responsibility to protect its people. However, in the developing countries of Southeast Asia, the private sector is tasked to deliver social protection at the expense of the people. Not only do the private insurance companies proliferate; even the provision of basic social services such as electricity and water is handed over to the private, capitalist companies. This should be reversed. The state should be accountable for providing social protection for all its citizens in an efficient, corruption-free way.
- **The people should be at the centre of social protection programmes and policies.** Although the main responsibility of providing social protection lies on the shoulders of the

state, the role of the people, especially the marginalised, should also be emphasised. At present, social protection policies and programmes are designed and implemented in a top-down manner. The marginalised are treated as mere beneficiaries of the programme who do not have a say and substantial influence on how social protection should be developed and implemented.

Rather than treating marginalised workers as mere objects of social protection, they should be considered as active partners in the delivery of social protection programmes. For the marginalised workers, this is where the most important element of social protection comes in – peoples' democratic participation! The marginalised people from the grassroots should be given the right to actively participate in the formulation, implementation, and monitoring of plans, policies, and programmes on social protection.

Critique of the neoliberal definition of social protection

As mentioned earlier, the prevailing definitions of social protection do not take into account the perspective of the marginalised working class. Most of them are defined within the framework of neoliberalism.

On the basis of its Social Risk Management framework, the WB contends that social protection is about "managing risks better" and "protecting the critically poor." On the other hand, the ADB defines social protection as "the set of policies and programs designed to reduce poverty and vulnerability by promoting efficient labour markets, diminishing people's exposure to risks, and enhancing their capacity to protect themselves against hazards and interruption/loss of income."

Other neoliberal definitions of social protection abound but there is one common denominator among them all – the narrow focus on risks and vulnerabilities.

The neoliberal perspective of narrowly looking at risks and vulnerabilities is problematic in several ways.

First, neoliberals perceive risks and vulnerabilities differently from how marginalised working people perceive the same concepts. Take for example the case of land grabbing. Grabbing land from an indigenous farming community and converting such land into an industrial plantation that absorbs indigenous farmers into the plantation workforce may be viewed by neoliberals as something that reduces vulnerability by providing wage employment. But for the marginalised farmers who were robbed off their lands, losing control of the main resource that sustained their lives for a long time makes them feel more vulnerable.

Second, the neoliberal-prescribed social protection fails to examine the causes of risks and vulnerabilities, hence, not addressing them significantly in the long run. Certainly, there are vulnerabilities associated with a person's life cycle such as birth, old age, and death. Yet, in today's highly globalised world, there are far more risks and vulnerabilities that are not at all related to an individual's life cycle. Marginalised workers have been exposed to greater risks and vulnerabilities than ever — unemployment, unforeseen loss of jobs, lack of income and livelihood security, and unsafe working conditions, among many others. Most of such risks and vulnerabilities are, in fact, a result of the adverse impacts and failures of the neoliberal development.

In the case of the workers, neoliberal development model has eroded labour rights and labour standards. Various flexibilisation schemes have been implemented by capitalist corporations in the

excuse of making production more efficient. Permanent workers are transformed into contractual workers. Non-permanent workers are considered the first in line for layoffs. If short-term contracts end or if they become laid off due to labour flexibility schemes, workers then turn into informal employment because of limited job opportunities. At the end of the day, informal work does not guarantee income security.

How to deal with the dispossessed workers and other marginalised groups? Social protection! There are cash transfers for the core poor, social insurance for those who can give contribution, severance payment for the laid off, guaranteed employment (without labour standards) for a limited number of days in some countries, subsidised health care (but still with huge out-of-pocket expenses), et cetera.

This leads to the third point that, especially in developing countries, social protection only serves as a contingency for those who are affected by the structural adjustment programmes imposed by the international financial institutions rather than a genuine programme that ultimately aims to eradicate poverty. It is just a band-aid solution to the aggravating vulnerabilities and poverty that the marginalised workers suffer. It is in this way that neoliberal social protection is operationalised merely as a compensation for what has been robbed from marginalised workers. It does not critically tackle the deep-rooted reasons that push workers into the margins. While the WB and ADB promote social protection as a key development issue, they fail to look at how their own neoliberal policies created the various risks and vulnerabilities faced by marginalised workers globally.

When marginalised workers demand for something as basic as access to livelihood or healthcare, it looks like they are asking for quite a lot. However, it must be highlighted that in the context of increasing dispossession, the marginalised workers' demand for social protection is not just about asking for things that they do not have; rather, it is about demanding the state to protect them from forces that dispossess them of what they rightfully have – whether they are lands, resources, shelter, or, simply, basic rights.

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Fourth, social protection further reinforces the neoliberal development paradigm. It has been used to justify the different forms of dispossession resulting from capitalist accumulation. But equally problematically, social protection has become a tool for further capitalist accumulation as it has been subjected to financialisation and marketisation.

How does social protection become instrumental in neoliberal capital accumulation? Social security funds are basically workers' money pooled together and managed by the state. These funds get invested in multi-national corporations or local private companies regardless of the nature of such institutions. Workers do not have a say on how they want the funds to be invested or used. If the state's fund manager decides to invest the funds in a company that does not respect labour standards or environmental rights, then indirectly, workers are used to build up such company's assets and tolerate exploitation. Amidst this setup, when workers need to access social security benefits, they have to go through lengthy and complicated bureaucratic processes before getting their hands on the benefits that they are entitled to.

On the issue of marketisation of social protection, AROSP-SEA partners emphasised the crucial role that the state has to play in the provision of social protection to its citizens, especially to the marginalised. However, in the past three decades, the responsibility of providing social security and even the basic social services shifted from the state to the market. The usual main excuse for this

phenomenon is the state's inefficiency in the delivery of social security. However, as the private insurance companies saturate the "market", has there been an efficient delivery of social security for the people in terms of greater inclusion of the marginalised? The answer is an obvious "no" as the "market" limitedly refers to those who can afford and not necessarily those who are in the most vulnerable conditions.

The idea of collective responsibility on social security was also eroded as private social insurance companies proliferate, making social security an individual responsibility. The same individualistic and market-oriented phenomenon is also very apparent in the case of basic social services that have become privatised one by one. Electricity, water, health care, housing, and education were just a few among the list of basic social services that were handed over from the state to private companies. These happen to be the most basic and most essential in living a decent and dignified life. Yet, access to these has become more and more difficult.

Given all these prevailing neoliberal dominance in the social protection discourse and policy framing, the biggest challenge now for the marginalised workers is how to develop their strategies in making the struggle for social protection also a struggle against the deeply entrenched neoliberal development paradigm. For the AROSP-SEA partners, another challenge is how to bring the grassroots- and marginalised-centred discourse in the ASEAN. With the impending ASEAN economic integration (another neoliberal brainchild) in 2015, how are we going to effectively advocate for social protection especially for those who will be affected by the different liberalisation programmes that come along with the integration? The concrete answers to these challenges may not be available at this point. However, the AROSP-SEA partners recognise the need to deepen and sharpen the grassroots-oriented discourse on social protection and come up with possible interventions to advocate for marginalised workers' issues ASEAN-wide.