

Feasibility Study: Digital Options to Improve Migration Journeys to Thailand

September 2020

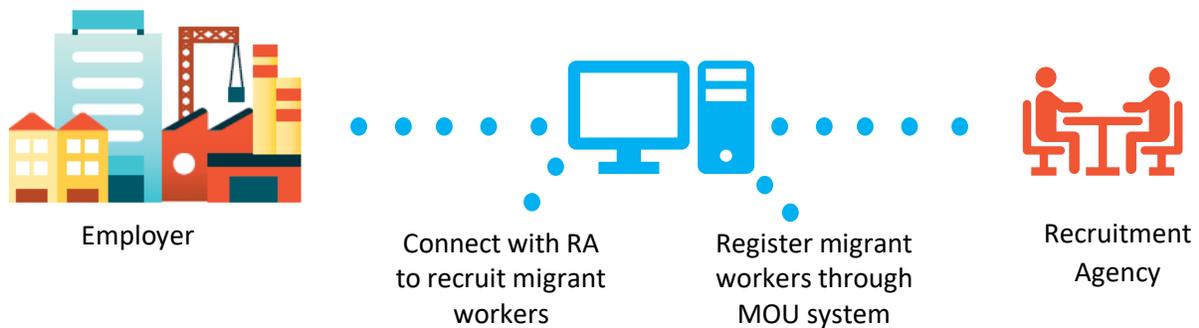


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Introduction and Methodology

The USAID Asia Counter Trafficking in Persons (CTIP) project sought out to explore technology options for connecting Thailand-based employers with recruitment agencies (RAs) in Cambodia and Myanmar that could facilitate a more efficient recruitment process under the MOU systems – the framework agreement between Thailand and Myanmar and Thailand and Cambodia – that allows for regular, legal migration between the countries. Such a platform - which currently doesn't exist - could ultimately reduce costs for migrant workers from these two countries - hundreds of thousands of whom migrate to Thailand for work.

Figure 1: Potential platform to connect Thai employers to recruitment agencies in Cambodia and Myanmar.



In February 2020, USAID Asia CTIP contracted Love Frankie, a research agency based in Bangkok, Thailand to conduct a feasibility study on this potential platform. The study was conducted between February and June 2020 and consisted of qualitative structured interviews with 65 key informants (KIs) selected purposively from six key stakeholder groups: Thailand-based employers, government representatives, CSOs, international organizations¹, Thai employment agencies, and migrant workers. Key informants largely had experience working in or with Thailand's fisheries and domestic work sectors. These two sectors were targeted due to the risks of exploitation in these jobs and the high rates of migrants working in these two sectors not migrating to Thailand through the MoU process.

Key informants were asked a range of questions, slightly tailored for each stakeholder group, that included their general view on the feasibility of the proposed platform model, key features that should be included in the platform, risks to consider, best ways to sustain the proposed model, and other tech solutions/platform models that should be considered as alternative options. A series of questions were

¹ This includes Cambodia Domestic Worker Network/ Association of Domestic Workers (ADW), Cambodian Human Rights and Development Association (ADHOC), Center of Alliance of Labor and Human Rights (CENTRAL), Homenet Thailand/ Foundation for Labor and Employment Promotion, Human Rights and Development Foundation (HRDF), International Labour Organization (ILO), International Organization for Migration (IOM), Legal Support For Children And Women (LSCW), Livelihoods and Food Security Fund (LIFT), Samaritan's Purse, UN-ACT, Verite, Winrock Asia CTIP, and World Vision Myanmar.

also asked around KIs' knowledge of recruitment practices between the two migration corridors and existing digital tools that improve these practices. A desk review of existing responsible recruitment technologies was also conducted.

Key Findings on Feasibility

-  Opinions on the overall feasibility of the suggested platform were mixed, but broadly positive and most key informants were supportive of the platform model.
-  Overall, respondents agreed that the suggested platform model could reduce costs and vulnerabilities for migrants.
-  Respondents also largely agreed the proposed platform could add transparency and streamline the hiring process between Thai employers and recruitment agencies in the country of origin (Cambodia and Myanmar) if it was fully integrated into the MOU process as a one-stop service center for facilitating worker applications and document submission.
-  There was expressed concerns from migrant advocates and international organizations over the need to keep migrants' rights central in this potential platform.
-  For the platform to be viable, more aspiring migrants in Cambodia and Myanmar need to understand the MOU system and choose to migrate through it.

Views on feasibility are summarized by stakeholder group below:

Employers

Interviewed employers believe the efficiency of the MOU system would significantly increase through successful implementation of the platform. They perceive contact with recruitment agencies in origin countries positively as a way to limit transactions with informal brokers and other intermediaries that may lead to additional costs.

Employers in the fishing and seafood industries agreed that the platform could complement their current recruitment process. Corporate employers hope to compare the performance and ethical recruitment conduct of agencies, match employment demand with recruitment agencies, and clear the MOU process. Specifically, **having the functionality for sharing documentation and integrating with government agencies' bureaucracies was expressed as a key desired feature to improve efficiency of the recruitment process.** Blockchain technology, meanwhile, could assist employers in documentation verification.

Due to the cost and the scarce knowledge on the procedure, Thai employers find it challenging to recruit workers through the MOU process and when they do, they often rely on assistance from agencies and brokers. The efficiency of the MOU system would significantly increase, given the successful implementation of a platform to guide employers through the system and connect them directly to recruiting agencies.

Government Representatives

Government representatives from Cambodia and Myanmar agreed the system could reduce costs and increase business opportunities for RAs, and, in the end, benefit migrant workers. However, representatives also said that penalties for those who cannot comply with the MOU system must be imposed to sustain trust and buy-in on the platform. Training and advocacy of the platform's benefits are necessary to increase and sustain the platform's uptake.

Government representatives said access and participation from migrants are missing from the envisaged platform. Additional features targeting migrants can be advantageous. But worries about cybersecurity, exploitation, and trafficking were shared by interviewed authorities, primarily if the platform collects migrants' personal information. Migrant access and specific functions for them can be an exciting alternative, minimizing their reliance on informal brokers.

Recruitment Agencies

Perceptions towards the proposed platform from recruitment agencies in Cambodia and Myanmar were broadly positive. By having a connected platform to publicize their services, it could lend the ability to see recruitment demands from employers. In turn, they might reduce their dependence on intermediaries and brokers. Integrating the MOU process and allowing documents to be shared between government agencies within the system are seen as crucial features to reduce administrative workloads - and ultimately - costs.

RAs expressed concerns about sharing business information, such as recruitment costs, to people outside the hiring process, as it can exacerbate competition in the industry, which is already high. Recruitment agencies have to see a clear advantage in advertising their costs.

Thai Employment Agencies

Thai employment agencies foresee several challenges in their role in the proposed platform. The legislative barriers in origin countries, employer's current recruitment practices, and their lack of trust towards recruitment agencies are the main barriers that might hinder the success of the platform. Thai agencies struggle to see what role they might play within this type of platform.

Civil-Society and International Organizations

CSO and NGO representatives largely expressed optimism towards the proposed platform in all three countries. The features could offer transparency in the process and the ability to pinpoint actors who abuse the system. Nevertheless, there are substantial concerns about the lack of migrant workers' participation in the proposed model.

INGO representatives expressed apprehension that a platform would encourage bypassing of existing assessment or screening procedures in place for recruitment agencies. There is concern that both employers and RAs may rely solely on the information provided by the platform. As such, the platform should be used as an additional tool complementing the current screening process.

It is also worth noting that the development of online platforms to solve human trafficking or labor migration challenges triggers skepticism among INGO representatives. Mobile applications and online platforms launched in this space are believed to have relatively minimal impact. A few experts and advocates are hesitant in investing in technologies that will immediately benefit private businesses, rather than migrant workers directly.

The platform should not further complicate the recruitment process. As mentioned by a Thai CSO that assists migrant workers: *“It needs to be clear that the application aims to make the process easier, not more complicated.”*

Migrant Workers

Migrant workers targeted for this study - fishers and domestic workers from Myanmar and Cambodia - do not always enter Thailand through the MOU process to work in these sectors, which poses a major challenge for uptake of the potential platform. Migrants shared that they often place their trust in local agents/brokers instead of using registered recruitment agencies to migrate legally through the MOU process. Some migrants said they'd be nervous about migrating with the help of designated agencies because lack of trust in registered agencies and fear of paying higher costs.

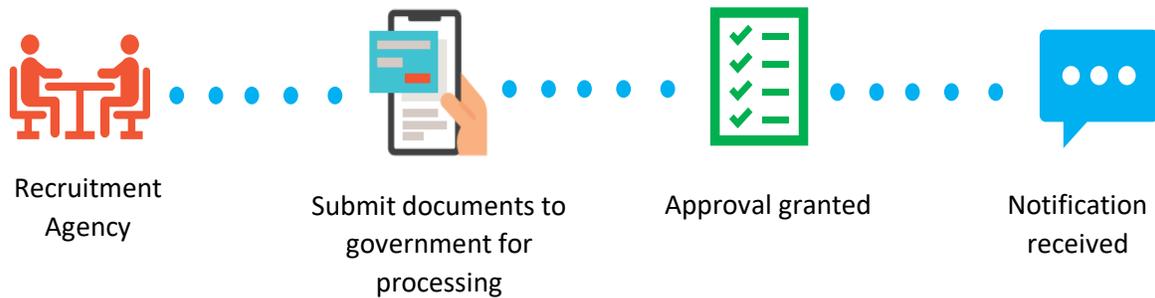
Recruiting agencies and the legal framework in Myanmar and Cambodia have not been very supportive of sending migrants to work as fishers and domestic workers to Thailand. Although now there is a coordinated effort to bring more workers into these job sectors through the MOU system, it remains challenging. This platform may also support regularization of irregular migrants in Thailand and support a shift in behaviors for enforcing policies towards more regular channels to migrate into Thailand to work as fishers and domestic workers.

Key Suggested Features

In addition to the feasibility of the proposed model, key informants were asked what functions and features the platform should have to be successful. The following suggestions were given:

 The function deemed to be most attractive by respondents is **full integration with the MOU system, in hopes of creating a one-stop service application for the MOU process, allowing document sharing and approval of 'steps' in the platform.** Similarly, a “progress tracker” and notification feature that would allow users to see the progress of the MOU application and be notified of the next steps of the process was suggested as a key feature. Of course, buy-in and engagement from government agencies in all countries would be necessary to make this possible.

Figure 2: Potential platform model that integrates into the MOU system.



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 A website or web-based platform was suggested as the most appropriate channel when designing for corporations or larger employers. Suggestions for embedding the platform in other social media platforms poses a concern from a data security perspective, though it is more accessible for users with low digital literacy. Social media platforms could be used as dissemination channels to advocate and advertise the proposed platform. Regardless of the channel used, the platform must ensure user-friendliness by accommodating users with different levels of digital literacy.
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 The platform must have verification or vetting procedures to rule out informal and unethical brokers from the platform. The use of online documentation tracking and immutable blockchain technology could be beneficial in preventing this from happening and can discourage less ethical recruitment agencies from participating in and abusing the platform.
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 A clear guideline and code of conduct for users should be imposed on the platform to minimize malpractice, such as contract substitution. It must also ensure that its features will not enable employers to forego their usual auditing and verification attempts. Careful vetting procedures of recruitment agencies and employers and limiting the access to those who have demonstrated ethical recruitment practices would be needed.
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 There are several existing platforms and programs aimed at improving the recruitment process that could be integrated into the proposed system, such as the CUMULUS Forced Labor Screen by Verite or IRIS certification (International Recruitment Integrity System) by IOM.
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 A main concern is the number of languages needed on the platform and the complexity of the translation process. Local languages of all three countries should be available, allowing users to toggle between languages. For Myanmar, in particular, the platform must have both Unicode and Zawgyi fonts.

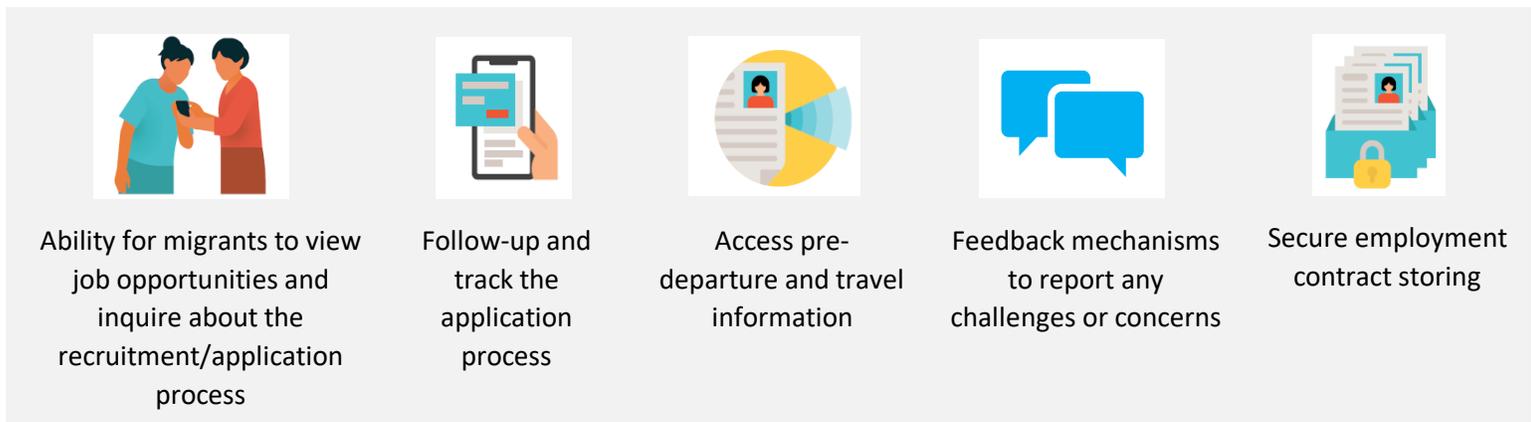
Alternative Platform Options

While the proposed platform received positive feedback from key informants, alternative options were suggested by both experts and migrants alike. Interviewed migrant workers favor a platform that could help them connect with recruitment agencies and employers and allow them to

browse different job opportunities. However, migrants have very limited options to apply for jobs in Thailand under the MoU system² and they usually need to go through a registered recruitment agency to facilitate hiring for Thai employers - so this proposed system could connect the three parties together but to the extent migrants could access job opportunities would have to be further explored.

Currently, detailed information on the MOU process is not widely accessible by prospective migrants. Providing information on the MOU system to prospective migrant workers through the platform could encourage uptake and therefore reduce exploitation or marginalization. Although, as long as there are barriers to access regular migration channels, Cambodian and Myanmar workers may continue migrating irregularly.

Figure 3: Features suggested for an alternative migrant-facing platform:



Contract storing - while less of a critically important feature to migrants interviewed - can provide migrant workers evidence of their employment contracts, which they can refer to if they encounter any problems. The contract can also act as a certification of working history once the contract ends, for workers to use as proof of their skills and employment history.

More recently, it has become common for migrants already in Thailand illegally or semi-legally to secure a job (or change employer) and then ask their employer support to regularize their legal status - often with the help of an agency - either to change the name of employer in their work permit or, if they do not have a valid work permit, to process one. This process is still done as an emergency solution, **but it would be important to conduct further research to understand this process and how it would support the MOU system.**

² Change of employer under the MoU system is permitted since 1 November 2016, and allows migrant workers to change their employer within 15 days after resignation under 5 conditions: 1) a migrant worker is dismissed by the employer or the employer dies, 2) employer abuses or harms the worker, 3) employer does not comply with worker's employment agreement or violates the labor protection law, 4) employer went bankrupt or closed down, or 5) the nature of the business or working environment is not safe, can harm the mental or physical health of the worker, or can put the worker in danger. Seamen/fishers working in the fisheries sector may change employers but remain working in the fishing industry.

Key Risks

There were several expressed concerns about the platform enabling exploitation or marginalization of migrant workers. There is anecdotal evidence from KIs that some recruitment agencies recruit migrant workers exceeding the amount specified by the employment demand, and then registering the workers as employees of the agency, turning around and placing them in risky jobs with another employer. The platform must ensure that recruitment agencies do not and cannot use the platform to hire migrant workers exceeding the amount specified by their government-issued hiring quota.

The platform must also have verification or vetting procedures to rule out informal and unethical brokers from the platform. It must ensure that its features will not enable employers to forego their usual auditing and verification attempts. Criticism also lies in the information-sharing portion of the platform. Sharing business information such as recruitment costs to people outside the hiring process - though adding transparency - is not always desirable for either recruitment agencies or employers, as it can exacerbate competition levels in the industry, which is already high. Furthermore, disclosing trade secrets, confidential information, or false information on the platform could pose legal or reputational risks to platform developers and intellectual property owners.

Sustainability

The sustainability of the platform depends upon a few factors. **The future ownership should go to a party that is transparent, unbiased, and not profit-seeking.** The supervision or monitoring of activity as well as needed updates on the platform could be the responsibility of participating government agencies, though there needs to be further discussions about whether this is possible. Frequent and rapid platform updates will be needed to address the challenges or needs of the user and any regulatory changes. For the platform to be financially stable, a payment or long-term funding model must be created. The more its functionality can offer convenience to users, the more willing they will be to pay for the service.

Perceptions around existing technologies are not entirely pleasant. The uptake of platforms is reported to have limited impact. While digital literacy of the users seemed to be less of an issue, most migrants can use smartphones somewhat comfortably (said one INGO representative), yet migrants might not recognize the platform's advantages.

Experts stressed the necessity for including migrants in the design phase. Without doing so, the development of a migrant-facing service is unlikely to thrive.

Existing Technologies

Several INGOs and CSOs have developed tech tools aiming to promote safe migration for migrant workers. Within Thailand, Cambodia, Lao PDR, and Myanmar, digital migration tools are largely developed as migrant-facing services that provide information, support, and assistance.

Migrant-facing platforms in the region can be divided into four categories (see table of examples on next page):

- 1) Information sharing platform

- 2) Grievance mechanisms
- 3) Document storing
- 4) Communication platforms

Platforms designed to assist businesses in adopting responsible recruitment practices are less common than those assisting migrants. From interviews with experts, the awareness of this type of platform is low. CUMULUS and IRIS, both business-focused platforms, stood out as known tools for safer migration. According to Verite's website, CUMULUS Forced Labor Screen is the only database aimed at uncovering previously unavailable information on risks for forced labor and human trafficking. The member-based database offers information on member's labor supply chains, recruitment agency risk profiles, and employers with the highest risk factors, among other indicators. Members can use the data in their due diligence efforts and can screen and prioritize employers and recruitment agencies.

IOM's IRIS certification is an opt-in ethical recruitment verification tool for recruitment agencies. IRIS database compiles a list of recruitment agencies passing the verification standard, which employers can access.

Table 1: A sample of existing digital tools to promote safe migration or responsible recruitment.

Name	Entity	Tech channels	Country	Type of platform	Features
The ASEAN Trade Union Council (ATUC) Information System for Migrant Workers 2.0	ASEAN Trade Union Council (ATUC)	Website	ASEAN countries	Grievance mechanism	A multilingual digital platform for migrant workers to send an inquiry to report complaints to the ATUC affiliate. ³
eMin	Mekong Club and Diginex	Mobile application	Global including Thailand as a destination country	Document storing platform	Blockchain-integrated technology used by both employers and migrants to share essential documents. Recruitment agencies, suppliers, and manufacturers in the country of destination can access the information. ⁴
FED Myanmar	Foundation for Education and Development (Thailand)	Mobile application	Thailand/Myanmar	Information sharing platform	Provides pre-departure information, labor rights information, policy updates, required documents, and how to obtain it. ⁵
Golden Dreams	Issara Institute Thailand	Mobile application, social media channels, and hotline	Myanmar, Thailand, Cambodia	Information sharing platform	Provides information about rights, policies, and laws related to migrant workers. This includes a list of employers, recruitment agencies, and CSOs with a rating and review function for migrant workers. It also allows polling for migrant workers to voice their

³ ASEAN Trade Union Council, 2020. *Migrants Watch*: available at: <https://www.migrantswatch.org/about/> [Accessed March 2020].

⁴ eMin Project, available at: <https://www.eminproject.com/> [Accessed March 2020].

⁵ Foundation for Education and Development, 2019. *Foundation for Education and Development*. Available at: https://drive.google.com/file/d/12MFBIsVit6pCmPkGAnHljpZW_wnarSbU/view [Accessed April 2020].

					<p>opinions and learn opinions of other Myanmar workers, and news updates from Myanmar.⁶</p> <p><i>It is to note that Issara Institute is developing this platform to be used in Cambodia, based on interviews with agency associations in Cambodia.</i></p>
IM@Sea (Independent Monitoring at Sea)	ILRF and IOM	Program with a tech component	Thailand/Myanmar	Grievance mechanism	The platform addresses some of the vulnerabilities of migrant workers in the Thai fishing fleet by enabling worker connectivity while at sea, improving forced labor risk assessments, and developing a worker-driven grievance mechanism. ⁷
LaborLink	Good World Solutions /ELEVATE	Web, Mobile application	Global including Cambodia	Communication platform	An anonymous two-way communication channel between factory workers and supply chain leaders. ⁸
Mel Shwet Pyaung ('Miss Migration')	LIFT and IOM Myanmar	Chat Bot/Online Application	Global/Myanmar	Information sharing platform	Assist users in finding out more about safe migration online by pointing them to reliable sources of information. ⁹
MWRN	The Migrant Workers Rights	Mobile application	Thailand/Myanmar	Information sharing platform	Provides necessary information for migrating to Thailand, including Thai labor laws and workers' benefits.

⁶ Issara Institute, *TECH & INNOVATION: Empowered worker voice*. Available at: <https://www.issarainstitute.org/issara-labs> [Accessed March 2020].

⁷ International Labor Rights Forum, 2018. *Taking Stock: Labor Exploitation, Illegal Fishing, Brand Responsibility in the Seafood Industry*. Available at: <https://laborrights.org/sites/default/files/publications/Taking%20Stock%20final.pdf> [Accessed March 2020].

⁸ Technology Exchange Lab, n.d. *Laborlink by Good world Solutions*. Available at: <https://www.techxlab.org/solutions/good-world-solutions-labor-link> [Accessed March 2020].

⁹ IOM, 2018. *Media+Technology Enables Myanmar Migrants to Access Crucial Information*. Available at: <https://www.iom.int/news/mediatechnology-enables-myanmar-migrants-access-crucial-information> [Accessed March 2020].

	Network (MWRN)				
Smart Domestic Workers	HomeNet Thailand Foundation	Mobile application	Thailand	Information sharing platform	Provides information regarding informational support regarding labor rights and legal representation to migrant workers while also providing support (lists) of hotline agencies. Targeting at domestic workers. ¹⁰
Mayday	USAID Thailand CTIP/Winrock International	LINE application	Thailand	Information sharing platform	Provides information about rights, policies, and laws related to migrant workers in the 3 origin country languages of Laos, Khmer and Burmese. This includes information on MOU process, work permit and other recruitment processes.

¹⁰ HomeNet Foundation, 2017. *My Fair and Happy Home*. Available at: <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=390122488055823> [Accessed March 2020].

Conclusion

Experts engaged in the study have diverse, but overall positive perceptions towards the feasibility of a platform connecting Thai employers with recruitment agencies in Cambodia and Myanmar. A technology to guide employers through the recruitment process of Cambodian and Myanmar migrants would be advantageous for them. The platform can add transparency and streamline the process that may result in less costs borne by migrant workers.

Functionality for sharing documents directly with government agencies to process applications for the MOU system is the most desired function and blockchain technology could assist in securing documentation.

Risks and skepticisms are ever present, however, as some informants expressed their experience with tech tools to solve major issues such as human trafficking or ethical recruitment to fall short, with little evidence to show successful models. A platform working within current migration and employment policies would need to adapt to any change, which would require continuous updates to the system, posing a threat to the proposed model. Uptake of the platform will be scarce if MOU system is not used by more prospective migrants and employers. There is also hesitation among RAs to share their fees and recruitment costs on a platform accessed by the public.

As the proposed platform seeks to engage with Thai employers and recruitment agencies, expert interviews expressed concerns that migrant workers would be living at the mercy of employers and recruitment agencies. Alternative options such as a tripartite platform allowing access from Thai employers, recruitment agencies from origin countries, and migrants could be considered to offer an excellent solution to all related parties.





Research presented in this paper was conducted by Love Frankie, a social change creative agency based in Bangkok, Thailand. [More information on the agency can be found on their website.](#)

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A five-year (2016-2021) program, **USAID Asia CTIP** is a regional activity that focuses on transnational and regional challenges to combat human trafficking. The program aims to reduce the trafficking of persons in Asia through a coordinated and consolidated action by governments, civil society and business that will foster cross-border cooperation, develop opportunities for private-sector leadership and improve the quality of data associated with human trafficking. [For more information about the project visit us online.](#)