

Joint Civil Society Organizations (CSOs) and Multistakeholders Statement:

Transforming the Fisheries Industry and Cross-Sectors through a Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) in the Asia Pacific Region

Highlighting and Following Up the 7th UN Responsible Business and Human Rights - Asia Pacific Forum 2025

Bangkok, 22 September 2025

Multistakeholder Leadership in Mainstreaming Human Rights-Based Approach (HRBA) in the Asia Pacific Region

In 2013, Bangkok became the place where the Asian and Pacific Ministerial Declaration on Population and Development was adopted. The Declaration mandated **a rights-based, gender-sensitive, and non-discriminatory approach** to population and development strategies pursued by signatory countries.¹ Previously in 2011, the United Nations Human Rights Council unanimously endorsed the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights (UNGPs).² UNGP prescribed key steps for stakeholders to implement human rights principles for business operations. This includes not only conducting human rights due diligence in labor relations, but also in terms of the effects of the business operations on the adjacent communities. **Both the Declaration and the Guiding Principles mandated cross-sector collaboration to enforce a human-rights-based approach (HRBA) in transforming business operations and development strategies.**

Today, Bangkok once again becomes the place where stakeholders discussed and reaffirmed their commitment to human rights. The 2025 UN Responsible Business and Human Rights Forum (7th UNRBHRF) convenes at a pivotal moment for Asia and the Pacific. The region faces an unprecedented convergence of challenges and crises, underscoring the importance of businesses upholding their responsibility to respect human rights. The 2025 UNRBHR Forum adopts the theme, "Anchoring Progress and Strengthening Regional Leadership on Human Rights through Crisis." The theme emphasizes the need for principled and coordinated actions to sustain and boost progress in the region, especially during uncertain times.³ **The UNRBHR Forum positioned stakeholders in the Asia-Pacific region as drivers of solutions that inspire global action.**

¹ See: UN Compendium. Chapter 4 - The Sixth Asian and Pacific Population Conference Bangkok, Thailand, 16 to 20 September 2013 [[Here](#)].

² See: UN Digital Library - Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights : Implementing the United Nations "Protect, Respect and Remedy" Framework [[Here](#)] and UNDP Asia Pacific Website [[Here](#)].

³ UNRBHR Forum. 2025. Anchoring Progress and Strengthening Regional Leadership on Human Rights through Crisis. [[Here](#)]

Challenges in the Asia-Pacific Fisheries Industry

A home to about 60 per cent of the world's population, the Asia Pacific region also stands as the world's economic powerhouse. Most of the economic growth in the Asia-Pacific region can be attributed to its migrant workers. As of 2020, there were 66.6 million migrants in the region, with labor migration as a significant driver of the movement.⁴ Climate crisis, environmental degradation, and the lack of job opportunities in the origin countries served to push many into becoming migrant workers. In many destination countries, the aging population made migrant workers the bulk of the labor force in sectors such as industrial fishing and carework. In return, remittances helped to improve the origin countries, contributing to over one-fifth of the GDP in several Asia-Pacific countries.⁵

Situated in the largest body of water in the world, fishery becomes a significant part of the economy of the region. Despite difficulty in calculating the contribution to the total GDP of the region, the Asia-Pacific region is regarded as the highest fisheries-producing region with around 1,7 billion tonnes of fisheries products in 2023.⁶ However, transparency in the sector remains a problem that ought to be addressed. Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing, which includes the illegal capture of protected marine species, the use of destructive fishing equipment, and illegal transshipments at sea, remains a challenge to be collectively tackled in the industry.

Beyond environmental concerns, work in the fisheries industry remains a dirty, difficult, and dangerous job. Long hours, isolation at sea, and high risk of accidents, especially in the Asian distant water fishing fleets⁷, are the day-to-day conditions experienced by migrant fishers. Apart from the nature of the job itself, forced labor is still commonly practiced in the fishery industry. Migrant fishers, particularly from Southeast Asia countries, are especially at risk of exploitation due to their legal status and limited social security. From recruitment to repatriation, many migrant fishers experienced manipulation, abuse of vulnerability, debt bondage, and physical violence.⁸ This highlights the lack of human rights due diligence in the Asia Pacific fisheries industry and the need to transform the sector.

⁴ UN-ESCAP. 2023. Asia-Pacific Population and Development Report 2023. [\[Here\]](#)

⁵ UN-ESCAP. 2024. Asia-Pacific Migration Report 2024. [\[Here\]](#)

⁶ Data processed from: FAO, Global production by production source Quantity (1950 - 2023). [\[Here\]](#). The data combined the statistical production output taken from Eastern Asia, Australia and New Zealand, Polynesia, South-Eastern Asia, and South Asia.

⁷ See: [Trapped At Sea](#) (EJF, 2025); [Seabound 3](#) (GPSEA and SBMI, 2024); [Navigating the Currents](#) (BEBESEA, 2024); [Omission of Modern Slavery](#) (GPSEA, SBMI and HWRG, 2022); and [CSOs Briefing Paper on ILO C188 Ratification and Implementation](#) (2021).

⁸ See: Yea, Sallie. 2024. Migrant fishers from Southeast Asia are increasingly subject to forced labour and human trafficking. Melbourne Asia Review. [\[Here\]](#)

Women in Fisheries: A Gendered Perspective

Women play a vital yet often overlooked role in the Asia-Pacific fisheries sector, contributing significantly to both economic output and community resilience. Women fishers, particularly in coastal and small-scale fishing communities, are engaged in activities such as harvesting, processing, and marketing fisheries products. In countries like the Philippines, Indonesia, and Thailand, women constitute a substantial portion of the workforce in post-harvest activities, including fish drying, smoking, and vending. However, their contributions are frequently undervalued, and they face unique challenges, including limited access to resources, training, and decision-making roles within the industry. Gender disparities in wages and working conditions further exacerbate their vulnerability, with women often earning less than their male counterparts for similar tasks.

A gender analysis of the fisheries sector reveals systemic inequities that compound the challenges faced by women migrant fishers. Many women are drawn into the industry due to economic necessity, yet they encounter heightened risks of exploitation, including gender-based violence and discrimination, particularly in isolated environments like fishing vessels or processing plants. The lack of gender-sensitive policies and protections, such as access to safe reporting mechanisms or legal recourse, leaves women disproportionately exposed to abuse. Moreover, cultural norms and patriarchal structures in some Asia-Pacific countries restrict women's mobility and agency, limiting their ability to advocate for better conditions or access social protections. Addressing these issues requires integrating gender-responsive frameworks into fisheries governance, ensuring equitable access to resources, and promoting women's leadership in the sector.

Transforming the fisheries industry to be more inclusive demands targeted interventions to address gender-specific challenges. This includes implementing policies that recognize and protect women's contributions, such as providing access to training, financial resources, and social security systems tailored to their needs. Strengthening labor inspections and monitoring mechanisms with a gender lens can help mitigate exploitation and ensure safer working environments.

Additionally, fostering women's representation in industry decision-making bodies and cooperatives can empower them to influence policies and practices, promoting a more equitable and sustainable fisheries sector in the Asia Pacific region.

Rights-Based Advocacy on Migrant Fishers and Social-Environmental Rights Protection in Southeast Asia

Despite these challenging circumstances, specifically within Southeast Asia, there are existing rights-based frameworks and commitments to safeguard the rights of migrant fishers and to ensure sustainable development in the region. In 2023, ASEAN Leaders adopted the ASEAN Declaration on the Placement and Protection of Migrant Fishers which includes undertakings to *“improve the entire migration process of migrant fishers through improvement in ethical and fair recruitment and placement; pre-employment, pre-departure and post-arrival orientations; and access to employment contract or proper documentation in the language they understand;”* and *“improve the protection of migrant fishers and their families left behind by ensuring their access to communications, access to information on migration policies, job risks and their rights, and right to any modes of transfer of wages and employment benefits to their families”*.

More recently, under the chairship of Malaysia for the year 2025, ASEAN’s key deliverables under the theme of “Inclusivity and Sustainability” include a pledge *“to bridge development gaps, empower people in vulnerable situations and expand equitable access to economic opportunities, education, social protection, and environmental sustainability.”*⁹ Furthermore, under the newly adopted ASEAN Community Vision 2045, the Economic Community Pillar Strategic Plan has also specifically included a strategic measure to enhance regional cooperation to combat IUU,¹⁰ under its broader goal to achieve a sustainable community through engendering and mainstreaming climate-responsive elements and policies in all dimensions.

The commitments prescribed by the above-mentioned instruments reflect an acknowledged obligation from ASEAN member states leaders to integrate a rights-based approach in their development goals, particularly on the protection of individual rights as well as environmental rights. Within the upcoming ASEAN Summit in October 2025, ASEAN leaders will likely adopt two new declarations, namely the ASEAN Declaration on the Right to Development and the ASEAN Declaration on the Right to a Safe, Clean, Healthy, and Sustainable Environment. It is therefore crucial for ASEAN Leaders to further reaffirm their commitment to protect the rights of migrant fishers within such frameworks.

These commitments must not remain on paper; the transformation of the fisheries industry, as well as the advancement of fishers’ rights and social-environmental rights protection, depends on their progressive implementation and actions by all stakeholders.

⁹ See: Chairman’s Statement of the 46th ASEAN Summit, Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, 26 May 2025. [[Here](#)].

¹⁰ See: ASEAN. 2025. ASEAN Economic Community Strategic Plan 2026-2030. [[Here](#)].

Recommendations

To uphold a human-rights-based multistakeholder approach to transform the fisheries industry in the Asia Pacific region and beyond, we, as an alliance of civil society organizations, labor unions, and business stakeholders, recommend the following actions:

1. Governments and business stakeholders need to **reaffirm their commitments and actions** to implement the United Nations Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights in each business policy, including human rights due diligence in each supply chain from industrial fishing to small-scale fisheries.
2. Governments need to ratify and implement the **ILO Work in Fishing Convention (C-188)** to set the minimum occupational safety and health (OSH) standards, requirements, due diligence process, and procedures for fishers' employment.
3. Governments need to ratify and implement the **ILO Private Employment Agencies Convention (C-181)** to set the minimal requirements based on the principles of ethical recruitment for private recruitment agencies.
4. Governments must recognize **the importance of and commit to ensuring freedom of association** for all according to ILO labor standards, including concrete action to ensure migrant workers' rights against retaliation for protected activities.
5. Multistakeholder **joint action plans and meaningful social dialogues** to ensure fair and ethical recruitment, provision of medical insurance, social security, and protection for both domestic and migrant fishers, and monitoring and evaluation of the programs.
6. Governments and business stakeholders **must ensure access to justice**, including access to effective remedies and the provision of legal aid.
7. ASEAN Leaders to **mainstream the protection of migrant fishers** in all relevant migration policies, mechanisms, and processes across all ASEAN member states, including by a meaningful implementation of the ASEAN Declaration on the Placement and Protection of Migrant Fishers.
8. ASEAN Leaders to be **more transparent in their regional efforts to implement the sustainable development commitments** and ensure inclusive and participatory approaches from affected stakeholders in their monitoring procedures.
9. ASEAN Intergovernmental Commission on Human Rights (AICHR) **to strengthen its complaint mechanism** and ensure stronger standard-setting on migrant fishers' rights protection.
10. The Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs) in the Asia-Pacific region are to develop, adopt, and implement effectively the **Conservation and Management Measures (CMMs) on Fishing Crew Labor Standards** (such as the CMM designed and adopted recently in 2024 by the Western and Central Pacific Fisheries Commission (WCPFC)) and States parties to these RFMOs must effectively implement these provisions.

11. Policymakers should **integrate gender-sensitive approaches** into fisheries governance to address the specific challenges faced by women fishers. This includes providing women with equal access to training, financial resources, and technology to enhance their productivity and economic empowerment. Establishing safe reporting mechanisms for gender-based violence and discrimination, particularly for women migrant fishers, is critical to ensuring their safety and dignity in the workplace.
12. **Companies in the fisheries supply chain should adopt comprehensive human rights due diligence processes** to identify and mitigate risks of exploitation, particularly for migrant workers. This includes transparent recruitment practices, clear contracts in workers' native languages, and mechanisms to monitor and address abuses throughout the supply chain. Public reporting on labor practices can further enhance accountability.
13. Labor unions and civil society organizations in the Asia-Pacific region to **strengthen collaboration and stand in solidarity** with the **fishers' movement** globally.

Signatories

The organizations that sign and endorse the Joint Statement are:

- Asian Forum for Human Rights and Development (FORUM-ASIA)
- Advocates for Public Interest Law (APIL)
- Berikan Protein Initiative
- Emancipate Indonesia
- Environmental Rights Foundation (ERF Taiwan)
- Environmental Justice Foundation
- Environmental Jurists Association (EJA Taiwan)
- Federasi Serikat Buruh Makanan Minuman Pariwisata Restoran Hotel dan Tembakau / Federation of Food, Beverage, Tourism, Restaurant, Hotel and Tobacco Worker Unions (FSB-KAMIPARHO)
- Federasi Serikat Buruh Persatuan Indonesia / Federation of United Labor Unions (FSBPI)
- Federasi Serikat Pekerja Maritim Indonesia / Indonesia Maritime Labor Union Federation (F-SPMI)
- Federasi Serikat Pekerja Metal Indonesia / Indonesia Metal Labor Union Federation (FSPMI)
- Forum Masyarakat Bahari Indonesia / Indonesian Maritime Society Forum
- Fung Au (Vietnam Rise)
- Greenpeace East Asia - Taipei Office (GPEA Taipei Office)
- Greenpeace Southeast Asia (GPSEA)
- Human Rights and Development Foundation (HRDF)
- Human Rights Working Group (HRWG)
- Indonesia Ocean Justice Initiative (IOJI)
- International NGO Forum on Indonesian Development (INFID)
- International Pole & Line Foundation (IPNLF)
- Jangkar Karat Indonesia
- Jaringan Buruh Migran / Network of Migrant Workers (JBM)
- Jaringan Nasional Advokasi untuk Pekerja Rumah Tangga / National Network of Advocacy for Domestic Workers (JALA PRT)
- Jaringan Rakyat Miskin Kota / Network of Urban Poor (JRMK)
- Kesatuan Nelayan Tradisional Indonesia / Traditional Fisher Union of Indonesia (KNTI)
- Koalisi Rakyat untuk Keadilan Perikanan Indonesia / People's Coalition for Fisheries Justice Indonesia (KIARA)
- Koalisi untuk Advokasi Laut Aceh / Coalition for Aceh Maritime Advocacy (Jaringan KuALA)
- Konfederasi Serikat Pekerja Indonesia / Confederacy of Indonesian Trade Unions (KSPI)
- Konfederasi Serikat Pekerja Nasional / National Labor Union Confederation (KSPN)
- Penabulu Foundation
- Konfederasi Serikat Pekerja Seluruh Indonesia - Pembaharuan / All-Indonesia Labor Union Confederation - Renewal (KSPSI-Pembaharuan)

- Korean Transnational Corporations Watch (KTNC Watch)
- Malaysians Against Death Penalty and Torture (MADPET)
- Migrant CARE
- Migrant Forum in Asia (MFA)
- Oxfam International
- Persaudaraan Perempuan Nelayan Indonesia / Sisterhood of Indonesian Fisherwomen (PPNI)
- PT Andamaris Investasi Utama
- Resister / Perkumpulan Daya Pulih
- Serikat Awak Kapal Transportasi Indonesia / Indonesian Transportation Vessel Labor Union (SAKTI)
- Serikat Buruh Migran dan Informal Indonesia / Indonesian Migrant and Informal Workers Union (SEBUMI)
- Serikat Buruh Migran Indonesia / The Union Of Indonesian Migrant Workers (SBMI)
- Serikat Nelayan Indonesia / Indonesian Fisher Union (SNI)
- Serve the People Association Taiwan (SPA)
- Sumatera Environmental Initiative (SEI)
- Solidaritas Perempuan (SP)
- Tambuyog Development Center
- Taiwan Association for Human Rights (TAHR)
- Taiwan Transnational Corporations Watch (TTNC Watch)
- The PRAKARSA
- Urban Poor Consortium
- Workers Hub For Change (WH4C)
- Yayasan Asa Izkaya / Aza Izkaya Foundation
- Yayasan Kedungombo Berdaya / Empowered Kedungombo Foundation

Notes and encouragements: In order to enhance solidarity on the need for the joint multistakeholder awareness and for coordinated actions for the implementation, therefore, the signatory and endorsement on the joint statement could also be made and added after its finalization and dissemination to the relevant multistakeholders in the Asia Pacific region and beyond from 23rd September 2025 onward. A list for the additional signatory/endorsement will be arranged in a specific list (with the date of confirmation) and added regularly as necessary to this document.