

Flood Relief in Thailand

SUPPORTING FLOOD RELIEF, RECOVERY, AND RESILIENCE MEASURES

In October 2011, Thailand faced its most severe flooding in half a century. An especially long and heavy monsoon season caused flooding from Bangkok's Chao Phraya River and several other neighboring river systems. Decades of inadequate planning and water resources management, as well as pressure from rapid urban growth, compromised the efficacy of both natural and built drainage courses from Bangkok to the Gulf of Thailand.



More than 50 provinces were affected by the flooding emergency, and those immediately north of Bangkok bore the brunt of the crisis, experiencing a substantial share of flood-related fatalities, economic losses, and the resulting humanitarian crisis. Flooding devastated the seasonal rice crop vital to the agricultural region, affected thousands of small- and medium-sized businesses, and submerged at least seven large industrial parks in Ayutthaya and Patumthani that are home to major international and domestic industrial operations. These large-scale factory closures left more than 200,000 industrial workers without regular income for several weeks, and interrupted the supply of computer, automotive, and other components to global supply chains. The combined damage and destruction, reconstruction costs, and economic losses to the agriculture, manufacturing, and service sectors exceeded US\$46 billion.

In response to the crisis, The Asia Foundation undertook a series of immediate relief efforts, and is currently implementing medium and long-term recovery and resilience initiatives in collaboration with local partner organizations.

PROVIDING FLOOD RELIEF AND LEGAL ASSISTANCE TO FACTORY WORKERS AND VILLAGERS

When floodwaters reached Ayutthaya Province, tens of thousands of factory workers lost their

jobs and belongings. Most of these workers were domestic migrants living in rented accommodations who could not afford to heed evacuation warnings. The first responders to assist these workers were from the Worker Flood Relief Center (WFRC), and volunteers from the Thailand Labor Solidarity Committee (TLSC). WFRC and TLSC packed and delivered rice, cooking oil, non-perishable foods, water, and other necessities and delivered supplies by makeshift boats to stranded workers and villagers. In response, The Asia Foundation supported TLSC to establish and operate five additional WFRC centers in Bangkok and neighboring flood-affected provinces, in partnership with 10 other organizations. The centers provided immediate emergency relief and legal counseling to over 6,800 workers who were suspended or lost their jobs as a result of factory closures. The WFRCs supported flood victims to file claims for unpaid salary and other benefits. The Foundation continues to work with TLSC to address legal challenges experienced by workers and make recommendations to the government on medium- and long-term recovery plans for those affected.

SUPPORTING COMMUNITY RESILIENCE TO FLOODING

In early 2012 Prime Minister Yingluck Shinawatra presented a three-phase national strategy for flood reconstruction focusing on



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immediate flood relief, recovery measures, and longer-term solutions to build resilience against natural disasters. The Government has recently begun the third phase of the plan that aims to better equip Thailand's infrastructure and water management systems to strengthen their resilience to future flood emergencies and other climate-related natural disasters.

To complement these initiatives, The Asia Foundation, with support from the Rockefeller Foundation, has initiated a post-flood environmental governance program to enhance community resilience to large-scale floods. The project aims to improve coordination and collaboration among flood-affected people and communities. In this way, they can more effectively voice and advance shared interests to influence future water resources and disaster risk management policies, plans, and protocols from which they have historically been excluded. Since the government's flood management plans will directly and indirectly affect the livelihoods of millions of farmers, fishermen, and factory workers, among others, the project will empower communities and encourage more effective public participation from key community stakeholders. The program is working to ensure that citizens' voices are included in drafting a new Integrated Water Law, strengthening the participation of water user groups in river basin committees, and developing standard operating procedures for storage and transportation of hazardous materials during floods.

ASSESSING DISASTER PREPAREDNESS OF SMALL AND MEDIUM ENTERPRISES

The 2011 floods wiped out over 3 percent of Thailand's GDP and effectively stymied all economic growth during the year. In response the Government of Thailand launched initiatives such as a flood reinsurance scheme and infrastructure upgrades around industrial parks in place to help the large-scale industrial sector prepare, adapt, and respond to natural disasters. However, smaller businesses that comprise the greatest percentage of economic enterprises in the country and contribute 40 percent to the country's annual GDP typically do not benefit from these large government-supported programs. Few small- and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) have adequate access to information or capacity for disaster preparedness planning. To address this gap, the Foundation is conducting a survey to assess disaster preparedness among Thai SMEs. The

survey focuses on the specific challenges that SMEs face, their understanding of disaster risk management, and their knowledge of emergency regulations for businesses. The survey results and recommendations will lay the groundwork for future disaster preparedness programming to support SMEs and business associations.

MONITORING WATER POLLUTION IN FLOODED INDUSTRIAL AREAS

Neighboring villagers to the seven major industrial parks north of Bangkok in Ayutthaya and Pathum Thani provinces that were submerged in the 2011 flooding complained that floodwaters contaminated with crude oil, chemicals, and industrial waste put livelihoods, health, and the environment at risk. In response to their concerns, The Asia Foundation convened several meetings with flood victims, doctors, environmental engineers, nongovernmental organization workers, toxicologists, and public policy specialists in order to analyze the floodwaters for hazardous substances such as cyanide, chromium, arsenic, lead, mercury, and copper.

While the testing fortunately did not reveal any dangerously high level of chemicals, the process revealed that industrial parks do not currently have standard regulations in place for disaster preparedness, emergency management, or clean-up procedures for toxic chemicals. In response, the Foundation supported a team of experts to help draft guidelines for managing hazardous substances in a flood emergency. The team consisted of experts from the Society of Toxicology, the National Human Rights Commission of Thailand, the Thailand Environment Institute, King Prajadhipok's Institute, the Law Reform Committee of Thailand, the Thai Labor Solidarity Centre, Ecological Alert and Recovery Thailand, and Greenpeace Thailand. These draft guidelines will be presented to policymakers for adoption by Thai municipal authorities as an enforceable standard protocol. In addition, the experts recommended that manufacturing businesses also be required by law to disclose the chemicals that they use in production—some of which are combustible when in contact with water or wet surfaces.

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