



Singapore Undergraduate Policy Competition 2024

Ouroboros: Circles of Sustainable Renewal in Asia

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Domain Area: **Economic Sustainability**

Topic: **Preventing Supply Chain Exploitation**

Guiding Questions:

(a) From the point of view of Singapore, what domestic policies can be implemented to improve labour laws and workers' rights to ensure their well-being?

OR

(b) What regional policy solutions can prevent the exploitation of workers and uphold ethical labour practices in Asia?

General Information

The surge in global trade has intensified demand for products and services worldwide. In the pursuit of maximising profits and meeting higher demands, companies may resort to exploitative labour practices. This not only jeopardises the health and safety of workers, but also undermines their productivity, rendering manufacturing processes unsustainable in the long term.

Low-skilled and migrant workers are particularly vulnerable, especially in sectors that depend on low-cost manual labour.¹ For instance, in Singapore, migrant construction workers are typically transported in the back of lorries as a cost-saving measure, causing on average three lethal accidents per year from 2018 to 2022.² Exacerbating workers' vulnerability is their replaceability by a readily available supply of

¹ Pilar Domingo et al., "Addressing Labour Exploitation and Human Trafficking as 'Sticky' Problems: The Role of Southeast Asia's Political Economy," ODI: Think Change, December 11, 2023, <https://odi.org/en/publications/addressing-labour-exploitation-and-human-trafficking-as-sticky-problems-the-role-of-southeast-asias-political-economy/>.

² Abigail Ng, "Migrant Worker Rights Groups in Singapore Call for Timeline to Ban Transporting Workers in Lorries," CNA, July 24, 2023, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/singapore/migrant-workers-lorries-safety-transport-accidents-3649826>; Qing Ang, "Not Ideal for Workers to Be Transported on Lorries, but There Are Concerns Ban Will Have Knock-on Effects: Govt," *The Straits Times*, August 3, 2023, <https://www.straitstimes.com/singapore/transport/not-ideal-for-workers-to-be-transported-on-lorries-but-ban-will-have-knock-on-effects-govt>.





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prospective workers, making it hard for exploited workers to bargain for better working conditions.³ In countries such as South Korea, migrant workers cannot change jobs without the permission of their employer, making it impossible to escape exploitative conditions without being deported.⁴ Furthermore, labour trafficking remains common in Southeast Asia.⁵ Currently, there are around 10,000 trafficked persons within ASEAN, with most of them originating from other ASEAN countries.⁶ In short, when low-skilled and/or migrant workers are faced with exploitative work conditions, they typically have no recourse to turn to.

Apart from failing to meet human and labour rights standards, exploitative labour practices are also economically unsustainable. For instance, Malaysia's persistent abuses of migrant labour is turning away international corporations that seek to comply with global standards.⁷ Hence, there is a pressing need, both domestically and regionally, to ensure working conditions align with human, migrant and labour rights through sustainable manufacturing practices that benefit all stakeholders.

³ Sallie Yea, "Labour Exploitation in the Asia-Pacific Region: Beyond the Hype - Australian Institute of International Affairs," Australian Institute of International Affairs, May 10, 2022, <https://www.internationalaffairs.org.au/australianoutlook/labour-exploitation-in-the-asia-pacific-region-beyond-the-hype/>.

⁴ Amnesty International, "South Korea: Migrant Workers Treated as 'Disposable Labour,'" June 23, 2021, <https://www.amnesty.org/en/latest/press-release/2009/10/south-korea-migrant-workers-treated-e28098disposable-laboure28099-20091021/>.

⁵ ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking, "Political Economy of Labour Exploitation and Trafficking in Persons in Southeast Asia - ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking," ASEAN-Australia Counter Trafficking, February 6, 2024, <https://www.aseanact.org/resources/apea-briefs/>.

⁶ Melinda Martinus, "Tackling Technology Abuse and Human Trafficking in ASEAN | East Asia Forum," *East Asia Forum* (blog), February 20, 2024, <https://eastasiaforum.org/2024/02/20/tackling-technology-abuse-and-human-trafficking-in-asean/#:~:text=ASEAN%20countries%20simultaneously%20serve%20as,countries%2C%20including%20Timor%2DLeste.>

⁷ CNA, "Malaysia to Review Migrant Labour Deals to Stamp Out Exploitation," CNA, January 17, 2024, <https://www.channelnewsasia.com/asia/malaysia-migrant-workers-exploitation-review-migrant-labour-deals-4053321>.





Scope of Policy Proposal

You should consider the following points and address these in your policy proposal. If you intend to take on a specific perspective (e.g., a certain Ministry, organisation), do state it clearly in your proposal.

- (1) **Feasibility:** Policy solutions should consider potential challenges to execution posed by transnational coordination and jurisdictional issues, if relevant. If legal remedies are proposed, they should be justiciable and fit within the legal traditions and jurisprudence of the respective countries.
- (2) **Policy arena:** Policies may address either one or a combination of labour, criminal and human rights issues; it must be clearly stated in your policy paper.
- (3) **Industry differences:** Policies should consider how different industries may pose different challenges and require different solutions or ways of implementing them.

Points of Interest

- A strong policy proposal would point out how protecting workers' rights can be, especially in the long run, in countries' interests rather than a compromise they have to make.
- Explore the negative or positive goals of the policy proposed. (Negative goals aim to prevent a practice from happening, while positive goals aim to attain a particular desired outcome).
- Consider which stakeholders your policy targets, for instance government agencies, companies, workers, etc.





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