

บทคัดย่อ

This paper shows that factory employment at the Northern Region Industrial Estate (NRIE), Lamphun should, when compared to workers other meagre choices, be regarded as a progressive change in their life providing them with independent income and new experiences. However, it is an improvement that comes with costs, such as high risks of occupational hazards. Though theoretically workers are able to save by avoiding what could be considered as unnecessary consumption and thus by conventional understanding should not be regarded as poor, it misses the point. What is considered as unnecessary consumption actually forms the central motivation to work: The hope to at least symbolically escape the poverty most of them come from. Working in the NRIE presents the workers with opportunities to realize some of their dreams of a modern life and at the same time enabling them to help their families. However to do so requires them to work long hours in a stressful environment with associated health risks. The labour force in Lamphun is thus vulnerable to end up in poverty when or if they get laid off or get sick, as they have neither savings nor skills to fall back on. With little savings and no useful skills learned during factory employment the workers are left with only their families as safety nets.

What role should the state play in order to improve workers' living conditions at the NRIE or probably in many other industrial estates for that matter? Putting this question to some of the workers the typical responses were raising the minimum wage, giving better opportunities for education or to improve the working environment.

Raising the minimum wage certainly would improve the life of the workers, especially by reducing the reliance on overtime work to make ends meet. However there would be no guarantee that the extra money would go to savings. If savings are to be increased other solutions could be more effective.

One suggestion would be to add to the retirement savings that many of the factories offer the workers. These are voluntary savings where a certain percentage of the wage is withheld. This amount is then doubled by the factory and will only be paid to the worker when ending employment. It might be a good idea to make this mandatory and have the state to pay yet another portion to this fund. This fund could then serve as a start capital for the worker to start a business or to pay for an education after ending employment at the NRIE. It would however be important not to link this fund with any development of the minimum wage. The fund should not serve as an excuse to refuse increases of the minimum wage. The government could also encourage more social responsibility

increases of the minimum wage. The government could also encourage more social responsibility among the companies investing in the industrial estates of Thailand. For instance some of the tax incentives provided could be linked to an educational policy, where various educational offers could be given to the workers, such as evening classes, weekend courses etc. By doing so would make it profitable for the factories to invest money and time in their workers. Education can only really be feasible if the workers are allowed enough time off as well. Last but not least, the state must actively promote workers rights and not like today watch passively from the sideline as investors continually violates workers lawful rights. In an environment with suppressed rights no suggestions made here will be effective in solving the problems. The consequences of not ensuring a sustainable future for the workers – the youth of Thailand - will be an economic and social loss for the society as a whole.