

Social Protection and Informal Workers: Looking Ahead to Thailand's Social Governance

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Abstract

The term "social protection" is ambiguous and misleading to both academics and practitioners due to the International Labor Organization's (ILO) and World Bank's proposals over the last two decades. The aim of this article is to compare international journal articles to those published in Thailand and to provide ways to improve and enhance social protection for informal workers in Thailand. Due to the fact that the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and Universal Social Protection have been on the global agenda since 2015, the article involves a meta-synthesis technique using SAGE and Wiley Blackwell databases, with a time period of 2016 to 2020, and evaluation using Critical Appraisal Skills Programme checklists. The findings indicate that the direction of the study uncovered various groups, welfare scheme characteristics, and formalization strategies, but these are all related to job and income insecurities. Looking back to Thailand, the suggestions to the Ministry of Labor and the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security are complicated tasks aimed at improving existing welfare and addressing current issues. As a result, the public sector must review circumstances since previous approaches did not work in all scenarios and expand new instruments such as social assistance, social insurance, and labor market regulation.

Keywords: informal workers, informal economy, social protection, social policy, Thailand

1. Backgrounds

The article uses the meta-synthesis method to assess the current state of knowledge about informal workers and social protection in Thailand and to reconsider the direction of social protection in the country, as the researchers discovered a knowledge gap in numerous studies that contradicted technocrats' and international organizations' policy advocacy, particularly the International Labor Organization (ILO), the World Bank, and UN Specialized agencies. Not only are thorough assessments of Thailand's research databases important for enhancing and extending the nation's social protection system, but also worldwide research.

Prior to conducting the meta-synthesis, the article must describe the social protection system in Thailand, since this is essential to the study's objective. According to exhaustive examinations of publications from major Thai databases, including ThaiJo, the Thai National Research Council, Thammasat University, Chulalongkorn University, and the National Labor Research Center. These 41 articles were discovered between 2002 and 2020, and the primary conclusion is that the knowledge

stage has progressed faster than public policy and management in both the Ministry of Labor and the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security.

The following is a summary of the literature reviews conducted in Thailand's databases:

To begin, while social protection is widely recognized in scholarly communities in Thailand, it is divided into four categories: social insurance, labor protection, social assistance, and social services. With a focus on the poor and vulnerable, the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security's mission emphasizes the social safety net, with specific targets for children, pregnant women, the elderly, and disabled people. One might argue that social protection prioritizes stalwarts above grassroots and socioeconomic disparities (Chandoevrit et al., 2006a, 2006b; Matanboon, 2008; Sukharomana et al., 2015).

Second, Thailand has had extensive social protection in place since the 1997 Asian Financial Crisis, which was the catalyst for social risks at the time and lacked preventive measures. Social protection is aligned with the sufficiency economy in order to strengthen social immunity (Office of the National Economic and Social Development Council, 2002), and the government received technical assistance from the World Bank and the ILO in order to design and improve social protection that meets all targets (Soothorndhada, Vorasiriamorn & Ondam, 2002a; 2002b; 2002c).

Third, the term "social protection" is often used interchangeably with "social safety net," despite the fact that the social safety net is a component of social protection (Chandueyvit et al., 2006a, 2006b). Following that, social protection became a new and ambiguous term without a clear definition or meaning. Although this is not the ILO's international development policy, social protection is constrained and repurposed to support the United Nations' Sustainable Development Goals to eliminate poverty and hunger (Gomaratut, Sajjanand & Dechawaongse, 2018).

Finally, as discovered in a Chulalongkorn University Master's thesis in International Development Program, the guidance of social risk management is frequently used in social protection, as an attempt to comprehend Robert Holzmann's suggestion to expand on the subject of the research, which has targets such as children, migrant workers, refugees, people living with HIV, and sex workers (Bacaron, 2009; Chhon, 2014; Hata, 2012; Kaewkuekoonkit, 2011; Maore, 2011; Nirathron & Theerakosonphong, 2018; Utthasit, 2018; Siraphaiboon, 2018).

Following that, meta-synthesis methods will be used to categorize the findings, illustrate various issues with informal workers and social protection, and compare them to Thailand's current state of knowledge in order to offer suggestions in the paper's concluding section.

2. Methods

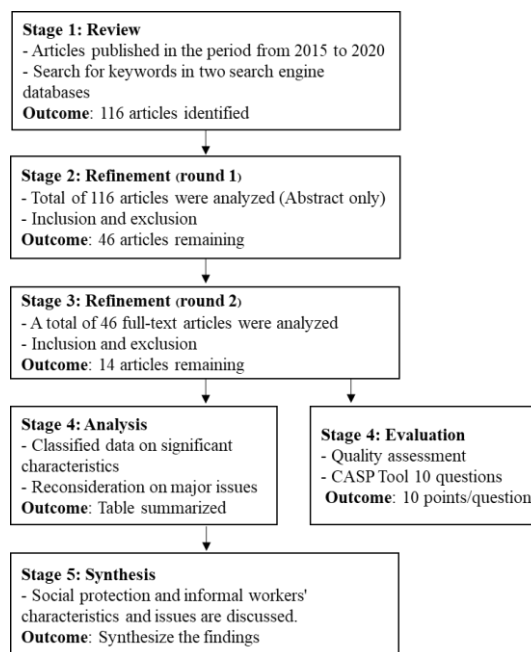
Meta-synthesis is a qualitative research technique that relies on constructing data sets with descriptions and interpretations regarding informal workers and social protection. This method is used to determine the current state of knowledge and is detailed below (Gewurtz et al., 2008; Thorne, 2008; Dawson, 2019). To follow that, this article establishes a conceptual framework for comprehending informal workers' social protection in Thailand.

2.1 Search Strategy

A systematic search for relevant studies was conducted in SAGE Journals and Wiley Online Library on October 31, 2020, both of which were narrowed as much as possible to obtain data that met the criteria. These included the category of research articles written in English, the period, and the abstract keyword search. This enables the download of article citation data to a citation manager that supports the RIS file extension. This data may subsequently be imported into EndNote and classified as document groups. Due to the previously stated restrictions on data access, an alternate database such as Taylor Francis, ProQuest, JSTOR, or Science-Direct was not utilized.

The keywords were classified into two categories: the first included two phrases such as "Social Protection" and "Informal Worker," while the second omitted the term "Informal Economy" owing to its broad reach and lack of specificity. The second group used terms such as "Social Protection" and "Informal Transport Workers". The search period was selected between 2015 and 2020 to coincide with the launch of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, particularly Goal 1.3, which called for social protection to combat and eliminate poverty. Besides, the World Bank and the ILO collaborated on a universal social protection agenda.

Figure 1. Meta-synthesis process



2.2 Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria

The following criteria relate to the four stages of meta-synthesis:

In the first stage of screening, the SAGE search terms found 55 results for (1) social protection of informal workers, and 3 results for (2) social protection of informal transport workers. Wiley-Blackwell's search returned 56 results for social protection and informal workers and 2 results for social protection and informal transportation workers, for a total of 116 results. After excluding three items (books, articles in encyclopedias and books, book reviews, and editorials) and 9 items (duplicate articles across the two databases), the researchers were left with 104 items.

In the second stage and third stage of screening, the researchers loaded 104 items from the RIS file extension into EndNote during the second and third stages of screening. Everything just screened titles, keywords, and abstracts for the presence of one of two keywords: "social protection" or "informal," and identified 33 items. Rethink social protection is an ambiguous term that lacks academic and policymaker consensus as a consequence of international organizations' recommendations to the United Nations in that it is obvious but does not cover or is appropriate for all countries. As a result, this identified additional articles for inclusion of 13 items because the abstracts had terms relevant to the social protection system, such as social assistance, social health protection, and community-based health insurance. There are 46 items in total.

In the fourth stage of screening, this procedure determines inclusion and exclusion criteria, including (1) the states of knowledge that researchers employ to examine different problems are compatible with the standards of international organizations; (2) the social protection knowledge base, social risk management, universal social protection, and other guidelines were taken into account; (3) the study focused on a system, policy, plan, scheme, method, or instrument that might be used to solve a range of problems, such as food, health, education, housing, employment, or migration; (4) study using qualitative and mixed techniques; (5) data collection approaches include secondary data analysis, case studies, participant observation, in-depth interviews, and others; (6) Participants represented a cross-section of informal workers' occupations; and (7) study of issues raised in international cases. There are a total of 14 items.

2.3 Study Quality Assessment

The Critical Appraisal Skills Programme (CASP)¹ is used as a meta-synthesis method in systematic reviews. This instrument will assess 14 things and then filter them down to 10 questions (Figure 1), with no items being omitted and removal in the process.

Figure 2. Critical Appraisal Skills Programme result



¹ The CASP checklists include the following: (1) Were the study objectives clearly stated? (2) Is it acceptable to use a qualitative methodology? (3) Was the study design suitable for achieving the research objectives? (4) Was the recruiting approach suitable in light of the research objectives? (5) Was data gathered in a manner consistent with the research question? (6) Has researcher-participant interaction been properly considered? (7) Have ethical considerations been made? (8) Was the data analysis rigorous enough? (9) Is the conclusion clearly stated? (10) What is the research value? (Oxford Centre for Triple Value Healthcare Ltd., 2018)

This article split 14 items into four sections, one for each of the ten questions. These were evaluated as 73.57 percent of the 14 items in Figure 2 using the CASP instrument. According to the findings, none of the papers were transparent about research ethics. These were excluded from the study, and just six items were utilized to analyze secondary data, leaving this without target groups or a framework for analyzing research methods. The study's objective and methodology may lead to results and policy recommendations for future research, even though the majority of studies lack clear methods and begin with issue settings. Those who may refer to social assistance programs or the Sustainable Development Goals guidelines, but the overview does not seem to be concerned with the concept of social protection.

2.4 Data Synthesis

Because meta-synthesis methods assess studies, the findings were determined through thematic analysis, one of four potential ways for reciprocal translation)Melendez-Torres, Grant & Bonell, 2015(. Since the first stage of screening, this approach resulted in the determination of a code for each item. The researchers then utilized this to exclude entries from the category throughout the second and third rounds of screening in EndNote and Microsoft Excel. Following that, 14 items were created to categorize article features such as authors, year of publication, research objectives, methodology, analytic method, and brief findings. Subsequent data interpretation reveals themes or concerns regarding the social protection of informal workers.

3. Results and Discussion

The final stage of screening all 14 items and re-screening using the CASP checklist is shown in Figure 2, followed by the classification of study characteristics in Table 1. This section will examine summaries of the studies that were included and will identify themes or issues after the thematic analysis.

Table 1. Characteristics of studies summarized

Code	Authors	Aims	Methodology	Analysis method	Brief Findings
1	Needham and Sarah (2015)	To explore disadvantaged populations in order to increase social assistance and safeguard them	Systematic review of the journal databases between 2000 and 2013	Thematic analysis	Promoting the potential of society and community, social entrepreneurs, and community committees were all encouraged
2	Roelen, Chettri and Delap (2015)	To improve the well-being and quality of care provided to poor children in order to avoid the separation of children from their parents	Fieldwork, participant observation, case studies and group discussion with adults and children	Multiple-stage and inductive procedure	Cash transfers should be extended to cover necessities, since they offer substantial nutritional, educational, and health benefits
3	Thara (2016)	To examine the difficulty of fisherwoman who are members of the association to compete with fish businesses	Interviews and participant observations with fisherwoman and association	Feminist analysis of social and solidarity economy	Fisherwomen's deprivation and lack of protection are marginalized identities that are discriminated against in the industry through the caste system
4	Bonelli (2017)	To explore ways to raise self-employed people's standards of living and incomes in order to rebuild the factory, waste picker cooperatives, and sanitary systems	Documentary analysis, in-depth interviews with stakeholders	Holistic approach	Formalizing waste pickers via the establishment of cooperatives to enable communication among members will result in improved management of sanitary systems and a reduction of conflicts with environmental policy actors
5	Queiroz andVande rstraeten (2018)	To describe the Brazilian sugarcane sector since there is no instability in short-term work arrangements.	Fieldwork and in-depth interviews with sugarcane producers and farmers	Analytical framework at intersection between state and labour perspectives	Formalization through fixed-term agreements and seasonal contracts for precarious work and disregarded due to the risky and insecure nature of the work, in addition to the effect of unemployment benefits
6	Bernales-Baksai and Solar-Hormazáb al (2018)	To examine health policies that have extended coverage to informal workers and related effect on resource allocation	comprehensive review of journal articles on health protection and the informal sector from 2012 to 2017	Comparative analysis	The population in three countries lacks access to health care services and is separated from health coverage, benefit packages, and financial security
7	Hardy and Cruz (2019)	To explore the process of effective trade union organization and the emergence of class consciousness based on sex identity.	In-depth interviews with trade unionist and sex workers, and participant observation.	Data processing software makes advantage of the frequency correlation technique.	Female sex workers shape political identity, prompting the formation of an organization dedicated to demonstrating working-class solidarity and opposing capital ownership

Table 1. Characteristics of studies summarized (cont.)

Code	Authors	Aims	Methodology	Analysis method	Brief Findings
8	Kwon and Keo (2019)	To conduct an examination of the implementation of social health policies and to support Cambodia's recommendations for achieving the UHC.	Documentary analysis and interviews with government officials	None	Extending UHC coverage to the informal economy and examining the complexity of health programs, as well as the national health administration system's reform
9	Samantroy (2019)	To explore the working conditions and employment status of home-based workers in order to obtain access to education and social security	Official documents and reports	None	The majority of home-based workers lack the ability to establish informal agreements. This is the precarious condition of self-employment in the absence of a formal employment contract and social security coverage.
10	Clement (2020)	To describe the social protection system in SSA between democratic and non-democratic state regimes.	Documentary analysis	Latent profile analysis	Social protection systems of African countries are defined by their combined public expenditures on education and health, remittances, and civil society empowerment
11	Cuesta et al. (2020)	To conduct research on the design of social assistance for urban poor and cash transfers for informal workers in Ghanaian cities.	Documentary analysis (China, El Salvador, Chad, Kenya, Ghana Mozambique, and Mexico)	None	Social protection design is critical to ensuring that social assistance is consistent with each country's context and that digital technology is used to enhance the benefits package's mechanism
12	Grossman-Thompson (2020)	To explore the informal workplace mechanism for addressing poor working conditions and job insecurity, even though ethnic and caste barriers to union membership existed	Participant observations, fieldwork, and interviews with female drivers and members of the confederation	Feminist political economy analysis of gender and labour	This union is dominated by gender norms and minorities, which results in a unique culture and sexual harassment by male drivers and clients
13	Kolesar et al. (2020)	To describe Cambodia's social protection system in terms of socio-economic characteristics, mechanisms, gaps, and contribution rates in order to enhance coverage in the informal sector	Documentary analysis and official household survey	None	Extending coverage and ensuring that the most vulnerable have access to health care protection. There is a gap that will exacerbate inequality since the majority of them exclusively cover formal sector workers
14	Sumberg et al. (2020)	To examine the situation of youth employment as a consequence of job losses caused by the global financial crisis as a result of competencies that are incompatible with labor market requirements.	Documentary analysis	None	Skills development that are unrelated to corporate need. On the other hand, it should place a greater emphasis on human capital investment, both in terms of emotional maturation and resource availability through investment in own businesses.

3.1 Characteristics of the Studies Included

The characteristics of 14 studies are summarized in Table 1. Numerous studies used documentary secondary analysis to generate a total of nine articles (Needham & Sarah, 2015; Bonelli, 2017; Bernales-Baksai & Solar-Hormazábal, 2018; Kwon & Keo, 2019; Samantroy, 2019; Clement, 2020; Cuesta et al., 2021; Kolesar et al., 2020; Sumberg, 2020), but two articles used systematic review. Additionally, seven articles discovered techniques for conducting case studies, including interviews, participant observation, and focus groups (Roelen, Chettri, & Delap, 2015; Thara, 2016; Bonelli, 2017; Queiroz & Vanderstraeten, 2018; Hardy & Cruz, 2018; Kwon & Keo, 2019; Grossman-Thompson, 2020).

These studies identified several worker categories, including home-based workers, waste pickers, urban transport workers, fisherwomen, sex workers, sugarcane subcontract workers, and youth workers (Samantroy, 2019; Bonelli, 2017; Grossman-Thompson, 2020; Thara, 2016; Hardy & Cruz, 2018; Queiroz & Vanderstraeten, 2018; Sumberg, 2020; Needham & Sarah, 2015). Social protection encompasses not only social assistance and social services in the form of cash transfers to vulnerable groups (Cuesta et al., 2021; Kwon & Keo, 2019; Kolesar et al., 2020; Roelen, Chettri, & Delap, 2015), but also social insurance, labor market policy, and human capital development, with a particular emphasis on youth workers who require new competencies to meet new challenges (Cuesta et al., 2021; Sumberg, 2020).

Social protection developed into an informal kind of protection as a result of community activities conducted by social care and community-based groups (Needham & Sarah, 2015). Recognize informal workers who hide behind marginal identities such as gender, color, ethnic origin, or class (Needham & Sarah, 2015; Thara, 2016; Samantroy, 2019). Similarly, three significant findings addressing informal workers' social protection are as follows: (1) social inclusion of urban workers (Bonelli, 2017). (2) formalization through seasonal short-term contracts with subcontractors (Queiroz & Vanderstraeten, 2018). (3) establishing informal worker groups for the purpose of fostering social cohesion (Grossman-Thompson, 2020).

Priority is placed on health care and employment as pillars of social protection (Thara, 2016; Queiroz & Vanderstraeten, 2018; Bernales-Baksai & Solar-Hormazábal, 2018; Hardy & Cruz, 2018; Kwon & Keo, 2019; Samantroy, 2019; Clement, 2020; Grossman-Thompson, 2020; Kolesar et al., 2020; Sumberg, 2020), while community development, nutrition (Needham & Sarah, 2015; Roelen, Chettri & Delap, 2015; Bonelli, 2017; Cuesta et al., 2021). Numerous studies have focused on developing countries, most notably Cambodia (Kwon & Keo, 2019; Kolesar et al., 2020), Nepal (Grossman-Thompson, 2020), and India (Thara, 2016; Samantroy, 2019). These countries are particularly concerned with vulnerable groups living in precarity and informality.

3.2 Characteristics of the Studies Included

Thematic analysis is used to analyze five sub-issues of social protection for informal workers in the included research, as described below.

(1) The stage of social protection policy and knowledge

Several academics have misinterpreted social protection and continue to be dissatisfied with theories approaches as a result of the body of knowledge and policy advocacy given by the ILO's Recommendation No. 202 on Social Protection Floors. Few studies included the ILO and World Bank's concept of social protection; however, two publications examined Cambodian social protection, including social protection floors and social risk management (Kolesar, 2020; Kwon & Keo, 2019), and one article incorporated the framework of transformational social protection, with the co-author playing a critical role in the concept (Cuesta et al., 2021).

(2) Social protection as an instrument of international development

Many studies discovered that the UN specialized agencies received guidance for creating the national social protection strategy, specifically Cambodia, based on human rights and needs-based approaches. This approach to social protection prioritizes the poor and vulnerable, as shown by the ID Poor Card, and provides social assistance or social safety nets to means-tested target groups while also empowering communities through selected processes (Kolesar, 2020; Kwon & Keo, 2019). Furthermore, human capital investment influenced the global development agendas of the World Bank, ILO, and UNICEF, which place a premium on youth employment and the importance of competences, as well as their impact on economic growth and poverty reduction (Sumberg, 2020).

(3) Social protection in countries of the Global North and Global South

Numerous studies have found a direct focus on social protection and policy implementation in the area of social assistance. This was found that one article in sixteen research focused on issues facing the Global North in the United Kingdom. Likewise, various articles have been published on problems concerning the Global South, including Asia (Nepal and Cambodia) (Thara, 2016; Kolesar, 2020; Kwon & Keo, 2019; Samantroy, 2019; Grossman-Thompson, 2020), Latin America (Argentina, Brazil, Columbia, Chile, and Uruguay) (Bonelli, 2017; Queiroz & Vanderstraeten, 2018; Bernales-Baksai & Solar-Hormazábal, 2018), and Africa (Ghana and South Africa) (Roelen, Chettri, & Delap, 2015; Cuesta et al., 2021; Sumberg, 2020). These together show a high level of informality. Findings should take into consideration various types of welfare states and political regimes, especially geographic and historical contexts (Clement, 2020). As a consequence of workers participating in the formal economy at a lower rate than in the Global North, the term "social protection" is seldom used in developing countries to refer to social insurance and labor market regulations. Cash and in-kind transfers are included in welfare programs, which is a typical practice in these countries.

(4) Programs and practices relating to social protection

The findings showed that indirectly formalizing social protection through trade unions organization and cooperatives would safeguard rights and enable collective bargaining in order to achieve structural equality (Thara, 2016; Bonelli, 2017; Hardy & Cruz, 2018; Grossman-Thompson, 2020). Each government should expand social assistance through cash transfers to enable access to essential needs such as health, education, employment, and food, with a particular emphasis on expanding coverage of health care schemes for target groups (Roelen, Chettri, & Delap, 2015), as well as legal coverage to diverse groups in order to achieve community empowerment, equitable employment, and social justice (Needham & Carr, 2015; Kolesar, 2020; Kwon & Keo, 2019).

(5) The future direction of social protection

Precarious work will become highly common in developing countries through new kinds of subcontracting employment, such as seasonal short-term subcontracting 3-6 months each year. The reason for this is job instability and a lack of social safety nets to protect workers from insecure work. Although job informalization is a necessary component of the future of work, these jobs may lack permanent employment agreements, transforming informality into precarity (Queiroz & Vanderstraeten, 2018). The things that led to vulnerable groups being stigmatized and exploited by new companies are as follows: the significance of organization for collective bargaining power with stakeholders of the issue. However, social protection design places a priority on gender norms or marginal identities; these are intersections that contribute to the need for differentiation among diverse groups of workers, such as social class and occupational status (Thara, 2016; Hardy & Cruz, 2018; Samantroy, 2019).

4. Conclusion

The importance of policymakers comprehending social protection for informal workers is related to the global development agenda, often known as "Universal Social Protection" (World Bank & ILO, 2016). While policymakers implement the knowledge and understanding raised and coverage recommended by UN specialized agencies, academics seldom use social protection frameworks such as social risk management (Jorgensen & Siegel, 2019) or social protection floors (ILO, 2010). As a result, several studies conducted in Thailand and elsewhere indicate a deficiency in social protection based on rights, needs, and risk (Munro, 2008).

These 14 articles reflect on specific groups of workers and social welfare programs, which is beneficial for conducting high-quality meta-synthesis studies. These studies are critical to look backward on Thailand's social protection background. Prior to 2013, when the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security first utilized review, this then assessed social welfare programs in Thailand rather than improving and upgrading welfare schemes (ILO & United Nations Country Team in Thailand, 2013).

To begin, these articles discuss studying in their respective countries' geographic contexts, focusing on working conditions, employment status, and job instability. Three articles were identified as having a framework of knowledge that used the United Nations' social protection concept for research design (Kolesar, 2020; Kwon & Keo, 2019; Cuesta et al., 2021). Numerous studies develop conceptual frameworks exclusively for their research and employ a variety of analytical methods. For example, two articles utilize feminist political economy analysis to examine issues of exploitation through the use of formalization of unfair employment agreements (Queiroz & Vanderstraeten, 2018) and gender norm dominance in union workers (Grossman-Thompson, 2020).

Second, when research was conducted on Thailand's informal workers, this was discovered that four groups of occupations, including home-based workers, street vendors, domestic workers, and motorcycle taxi drivers, as well as agriculture workers, account for nearly half of the informal economy's total, but agriculture workers are less interested than the other four groups (Orleans Reed, et al. 2019). The significance of these occupations varied according to the specified contexts of each country. For example, in Thailand, motorcycle taxi drivers numbered almost 100,000 licensed drivers and an unknown number of unregistered drivers who rent motorcycle taxi vests for passenger driving with the station. Similarly, research on informal workers in other countries focuses on sex workers,

seafarers, and waste pickers, and several studies address urbanization, poverty, and marginal identity (Thara, 2016; Bonelli, 2017; Hardy & Cruz, 2018)

Finally, after a thorough examination and comparative studies of Thailand's issue of informal worker social protection, the paradox of Thai social governance and policy is the organization and purpose of both the Ministry of Labor and the Ministry of Social Development and Human Security. For instance, the Social Security Office lacks knowledge of how to solve issues relating to the future of work, such as platformization and the COVID-19 pandemic, since that cannot use existing instruments and benefit schemes to address new risks and shocks but must instead develop a social security system that covers all categories of informal workers universally and specifically (Nguyen & Simoes da Cunha, 2019).

To summarize, this article includes suggestions for social governance and policy change, as well as directions for further research. The involvement of linked public sectors is limited in terms of addressing concerns unique to informal workers, owing to the absence of operational units dedicated to data gathering on area-specific difficulties. Thus, this is necessary to comprehend new phenomena and classify workers into occupational groups in order to better grasp the complexity of employment patterns and types of work, as well as to conduct informal worker studies in order to gain a better understanding of country profiles and to improve social protection programs from a structural point of view. Academics from both international and Thai institutions should include the ILO and World Bank's social protection frameworks into their research, except for academics affiliated with WIEGO and other labor expert networks.

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