South – South Cooperation through Skill Development: A Case Study from Thailand

Abstract: Thailand has been providing skill development training to many countries in the region especially to its neighboring countries, in order to uplift the capacity of the workforce. Taking in the concept of south-south cooperation, the article discusses the skill development activities that are provided by the Department of Skill Development, Ministry of Labour, Kingdom of Thailand, through International Institute for Skill Development (IISD). Key message is that skill development activities that have been given out to all partner countries are in capacity building scheme when considering the idea of Development Compact. The article also reflects key principles of south-south cooperation which are demand-driven cooperation, mutual benefits, and non-conditionality. It also suggests that, in the long run, Thailand needs to put more efforts on research and development in order to strengthen its capacity in new technological skills. Triangular cooperation can also be considered at this point to allow all partner countries to share and learn together.

Introduction

As being one of the fastest growing economies in the world (OECD, 2019), Southeast Asia has been facing many challenges regarding labour issues. Skilled labour shortage is currently at the forefront of those issues, because of which the regional economy is struggling to maintain its competitiveness in Asia, and by extension at the global level (Aring, 2015; Menon, 2019; Takenaka & Suan, 2019). Over the past decades, there have been a number of megaprojects in the region especially in the mainland of Indo-china Peninsular; such as, the Belt-Road Initiatives, Strengthening of Special Economic Zones, ASEAN Highway No.3, and Eastern Economic Corridor, which are
all related to cross-border infrastructures and connectivity. These megaprojects are run by both the government of the initiating counties and by bilateral or multilateral cooperation between the related countries. However, countries in mainland ASEAN have failed in producing sufficient domestic skilled workforce to engage in the emerging industrial sectors to carry out particular type of jobs in these megaprojects (ILO, 2014; Song & Tang, 2016) which in the long run will also lead to the loss of regional productivity. As a result, Thailand, being geographically located at the heart of the Indo-china Peninsular, has come up with the idea of workforce capacity building programmes which aim at assisting its neighboring countries and other countries in the region to produce skilled workforce. Through the International Institute for Skill Development, there have been more than 3,000 skills trainers and officials have been trained since 2017.

Background
The Kingdom of Thailand has the population of 66 million people, 58 per cent of which are in the labour force. Recent studies indicate Thailand, similar to its counterparts in the region, has been affected by skills shortage (Menon, 2019). In addition, as a result of declining total fertility rate and higher life expectancy at birth, the country is now become one of the aging societies in ASEAN, having 18.4 per cent of its population aged 60 and above, lagging behind Singapore which has the highest of 21.3 per cent. Meanwhile, other countries in mainland ASEAN have less proportion of older citizens, particularly Lao PDR and Cambodia which have the proportion of 6.6 and 7.4 per cent respectively (UN, 2017). Given the circumstances, Thailand could no longer be the only country in mainland ASEAN to promote productivity by its few skilled workers. Alternatively, there have been joint efforts in the area of skill development that brings together instructors and trainers from countries; such as, Lao PDR, Cambodia, Myanmar, and Vietnam, to learn technical skills that they perceive to be beneficial to their country and could extend the knowledge to the workers and students in their individual countries.

Geographically situated in the centre of Southeast Asia and Greater Mekong Sub-region (GMS), Thailand has realised its position in the region and its mandate in international cooperation through skill development activities. The Department of Skill Development, Ministry of Labour, which is the main organisation in the country that is responsible for provision of skill training and national skill standard development, established the International Institute for Skill Development (IISD) in 2004 to provide skill and technical training for instructors and skill trainers from countries in the GMS region, namely Lao PDR, Cambodia, Myanmar, Vietnam, and China (only Yunnan province). IISD has been receiving the participants from these targeted countries ever since. The Institute is situated in Chiang Saen district, Chiang Rai province, in the northern region of the country which provides a perfect location for all partner countries in terms of travel distance.

Skill Development Activities Management
As Thai nationals are the first priority for most skill development programmes, provided by Office for Skill Development and Institution for Skill Development nationwide, IISD is the only institute under the Department of Skill Development to provide skill training programmes for trainers from other countries in the region.

The management of the Institute is relatively simple. There is one director who has the roles and responsibilities in the administration process and guiding all training programmes to be in line with the policy given by both from the central unit of the Department and the needs raised by its partner countries. The Institute has approximately 30 staff, 10 of which are instructors and the rest are the administrative staff and technical officers. Despite a limited number of training instructors, IISD has overcome this constraint by drawing internal instructors of the Department from other training institute or seeking cooperation with public sector to engage in the training programmes as external instructors. Every year
Department of Skill Development invites all partner countries to attend a one-day meeting to gather the needs for skill development and area of implementation for the next year. Then they set up a plan and training calendar to be agreed by all parties. In terms of financing, a considerable amount of budget has been allocated to IISD to carry out skill development activities according to the plan that has been set earlier in the year before. Most of the expenditure mainly goes to training materials and compensation to external instructors. IISD normally substitutes the training fees and provides free accommodation to participants, while other costs are born by the organisations of the sending countries. For the process of training, IISD sends invitation letters to the partner countries in accordance with the period of training agreed by all and the recipients nominate their participants 15 days prior to the commencement of training programme. Training activities include both theoretical knowledge lecture and practice. In recent years, skill development programmes are densely in the field of logistics and tourism sector which reflect the needs for regional infrastructure and logistics initiatives; for example, warehouse management, forklift operator, road traffic management, etc. Various types of course are available for these skill areas namely training of trainers, curriculum development, and skill standard development and assessment methods.

To a large extent, the process of implementation of IISD explicitly reflects some of the key principles of south-south cooperation which are demand-driven cooperation, mutual benefits, and non-conditionality (Chaturvedi, 2016; UNOSSC, 2019). This can be seen through the annual meeting among all partner countries to articulate their needs for skill training activities. Additionally, Thailand, as a provider, has given out the assistance to the recipients through skill development programmes without any condition or benefits of its own. Besides, it rather focuses on strengthening the capacity of the workforce in the region which will benefit all countries.

**Overall Achievements**

IISD normally carries out a survey after the training is complete. As part of key performance index of the Institute, the results of the survey have to be reported to the Department of Skill Development to assess the overall performances of the regional training institute. The survey is also a tool to assess the effectiveness and satisfaction of participants of the whole programme through both quantitative and qualitative methods.

According to current results of the survey conducted from 2018 to 2019, around 90 per cent of participants are satisfied with the programmes they have taken. There have been also positive feedbacks in terms of the volume of the impact that they could bring back and transfer the technical knowledge to the workforce in their country. Some respondents further indicated that the programmes could help improve country’s competitiveness by having sufficient skilled workforce to supply particular development projects in their country.

Considering the concept of Development Compact (Chaturvedi, 2016) which consists of six categories, it can be seen that these skill development activities fall into the dimension of capacity building which aims at providing scholarship, training programme, exchange of experts, and deploying volunteers. Based on demand of all partner countries, this modality has achieved its primary objectives of skills and knowledge transfer to the receiving countries which will help enhance the capacity of human capital in the region as a whole.

**Conclusion**

Skill development is one of the key areas of cooperation that Thailand has put its effort for South-South Cooperation which is at the forefront of current foreign policy. Furthermore, Thailand has been providing a wide range of skill training activities that derive from the needs of the recipient countries and which Thailand is specialised in. Mutual benefits and inclusive growth are the ultimate goal that Thailand aims to achieve.
through this cooperation and by extension the achievement of the SDGs of the partner countries especially on goal 4 on quality education and goal 8 on decent work and economic growth. However, a challenge lies ahead. As Thailand still remains a developing country that has limited capacity in terms of developing its own technology, it also needs to learn from other countries as well as invest more on research and development at the national level which in the long run will help accumulate knowledge and experiences that it will be ready to share with all its partners and the world. Therefore, there is a need for joint efforts with other countries to participate in such cooperation. At this point, triangular cooperation can also be considered as an alternative method between global north and global south to allow all parties to learn from one another.

References


Takenaka, A. & Suan, E. (2019). Southeast Asian countries are realising the importance of high-skilled immigration. Retrieve from https://www.weforum.org/agenda/2019/08/southeast-asia-realising-importance-high-skilled-immigration/
